

Storytelling in the Eye of the Storm: the Pandemic Through the Lens of Environmental Breakdown

An interview with Amitav Ghosh, Jamie Kendrick

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With travel restrictions ruling out international flights in 2020, many airlines began selling flights to nowhere. For the price of a ticket and a flight's worth of emissions, passengers could sit back with a drink at 35 000 feet and pretend that everything was normal before landing exactly where they took off. In *The Great Derangement* (2016), acclaimed novelist Amitav Ghosh argues that future generations will look back on the failure to grasp the scale of environmental breakdown as folly. We spoke to the author about the parallels between the climate crisis and the pandemic, and imagining alternatives for our interconnected world.

Jamie Kendrick: “Unprecedented” is a word that has been used a lot in 2020. You have argued that modern society’s inability to prepare for the unprecedented makes us vulnerable. What parallels do you see between the health crisis and climate breakdown?

Amitav Ghosh: There are many continuities between the two, even if the relationship is not causal. The most obvious connection is that the climate crisis and the pandemic are both effects of the world’s steady acceleration. Since the 1990s, rates of production, consumption, travel, and the destruction of our habitats and deforestation have sped up to a point where a tiny entity can bring the world to a sudden, screeching halt from a small market in China.

In other senses, of course, they are completely different. The pandemic is a disease, while the climate crisis manifests itself in incredible weather events, from astonishing wildfires to the multiple hurricanes brewing in the Atlantic. The way the world has responded is an important difference, too. During the pandemic, most governments, if not all, have been quick to take advice from experts and willing to consult with scientists. For China, New Zealand, Vietnam, and other countries, this strategy has worked.

In *The Great Derangement*, you use the word “uncanny” to describe extreme weather events because it captures a strangeness but also a recognition. The pandemic has been similar: strange but also familiar, recalling collective memories of plagues and quarantines. Is the pandemic forcing us to remember something about ourselves?

I hope that this pandemic has at least some of the effect of the Great Lisbon Earthquake in the 18th century. Prior to the earthquake in 1755, Europeans had begun to think that they had mastered nature, as if nature was something apart that humans could conquer. The Great Lisbon Earthquake was a moment in the Enlightenment when suddenly people realised that, far from mastering nature, nature has complete mastery of human existence.

The European conception of nature holds that it is regular, that it has its own pace, and that natural processes unfold in predictable ways. Now we see that this is not the case. I wrote *The Great Derangement* in 2015. Back then, I never could have imagined that these catastrophic impacts would be upon us with the suddenness that they have

displayed in 2020. When I first began working on climate change and literature, friends and publishers were astonished, asking, “What has that got to do with writers and writing?” I no longer hear this. Everybody recognises that climate change is a crisis that is enveloping us. The turning point was 2018. People realised that this is not about the future; it is about now, and 2020 is the year it struck with full force.

The head of the UN Environment Programme, Inger Andersen, said that the earth is sending us a message with the coronavirus crisis and climate change. Would you agree?

I absolutely agree, except that saying the earth is sending us a message implies that somebody out there is trying to communicate with us. The reality is that the earth is utterly indifferent to us. It simply responds to stimuli that we put out there. Talking about the earth sending us a message is what our ancestors did. They watched the earth and everything around them, and tried to understand what it was saying. That is what we have forgotten.

Over the past few years, as these terrible crises have unfolded, in the United States at least more and more people are moving to areas that will be submerged by rising sea levels and threatened by wildfires. Phoenix, Arizona, is one of the hottest places in the US. Its only source of water is the Colorado River. Life is possible in Phoenix only because of mass air conditioning, which was invented in the 1940s. The entirety of Arizona was built from the 1940s onwards and, in the last five years, it has been growing at an incredible pace. Just imagine the madness of that – a completely unsustainable city, expanding relentlessly. People are moving to places that will almost certainly be unliveable within our lifetimes.

Why are they doing this? They are not listening to the messages that are being put out. What are they listening to instead? They are listening to 18th-century forms of reason which tell them that humans will always overcome nature. That science and reason will always prevail. That technology will take care of them. And that this entire earth of ours is supine and conquered. That is what is critically and profoundly uncanny about this moment: all of these 18th-century ideas, that we live in a society governed by reason, are just falling apart in front of our eyes.

Science offers unproven technology as a potential escape route from the climate crisis. But climate science is also critical in understanding global heating. What should be the place of science in helping us confront climate change?

We must guard against thinking of science as a unitary entity. The relationship that climate scientists have with society is quite different from that of epidemiologists and biologists, for example. Many climate scientists are extremely humanist in their approach to politics and concerned about climate justice. But a significant number of climate scientists would respond like Matt Damon in *The Martian*: “Let’s science the hell out of this”. Their idea is, fundamentally, to intervene through geoengineering, and elite institutions such as Harvard and Yale are increasingly pushing its normalisation.

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Geoengineering will benefit the Global North but may be disastrous for the Global South. For that reason, the climate crisis is a geopolitical problem. Greta Thunberg, whom I very much admire and completely support, constantly reiterates, “Listen to the scientists”. But putting all scientists in the same box is a mistake. Science can recognise a problem but there is never only one possible solution. Industrial and scientific solutions to climate change will mean more of the same. It is mistaking the disease for the cure.

How has India experienced the pandemic?

The pandemic has been hard everywhere, but India has had it worst of all. The numbers are terrible. The only bright spot is that the mortality rate seems to be relatively lower, but the gross number of deaths in India will probably surpass any other country. Even during the Great Flu Pandemic of 1918, a large percentage of the victims were from South Asia.

The Covid-19 pandemic has turned into an all-out class war in India. The government's response has destroyed the lives of poor migrant labourers. Millions of precarious people have had the legs cut out from under them. Unable to work, they were forced to walk home along highways in the terrible May heat. In India, the urban working classes and migrant workers in the relatively prosperous West are almost all from Bengal or East India. These regions are already badly hit by climate change and many people have been displaced because of sea-level rise. As these people were walking home, a horrific storm – Cyclone Amphan – brewed up in the Bay of Bengal before hitting the mainland. It was a perfect example of what we are seeing now – multiple disasters interacting with each other in catastrophic ways.

***The Great Derangement* argues that culture and literature have failed to grapple with climate change and the ecological crisis. How do you explain that failure?**

The argument was not so much about writers but the literary and artistic ecosystem: what is considered serious literature today? Serious literature is almost always about identity in one sense or another, and that has been the case for a long time. Anyone who writes about climate and environmental matters is automatically regarded as a genre writer. But writing about the climate is not science fiction; it is not about the future and it is not speculative. It is the reality that we are living in right now.

Writers pride themselves on looking at the world in an unvarnished way. But the very practice of writing has tended to guide people away from the most pressing issues that surround us. Many incredibly innovative writers have addressed environmental topics, such as Ursula Le Guin. Then again, Ursula Le Guin was marginalised as a science fiction writer, even though her books remain relevant to our present. That is why she is far more widely read today than many so-called serious writers. However, the literary and arts communities have changed noticeably since 2018, and there has been an outpouring of writing and art on the climate. People have woken up to the catastrophe around us.

How have you sought to address the changing environment in your fiction? In many of your novels, floods, storms, and other weather events play a major role.

One thing I don't want to be doing is writing fiction about an issue as such. I see my writing now as no different from my earlier writing. I want to be writing about the realities of the world we live in. Issues of climate and pandemics are germane to this world – they are not something apart. My writing is very much moulded by my origins in Bengal. Bengal is one of the most threatened areas on the planet. Because I write about Bengal, and especially about the Delta and its mangrove forests, I am keenly aware of how these regions are impacted, perhaps more so than any other place except the Poles.

What role do culture and fiction have in allowing us to imagine alternatives to the course that we are currently on?

It is hard to say. I would like to make large claims for literature, but those claims are no longer credible. When I started writing in the 1980s, literature and novels were central to culture. When people gathered around office water coolers, they would talk about books. Now people talk about television and Netflix. The literary world has shrunk into the background.

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problem.*

Modern literature as we know it emerged in the late 18th century. It was a Western practice of a certain kind and was rooted in, let's admit it, Western white supremacy and the ideas connected to that: a subdued Earth, and subdued, colonised human beings across the planet. Those stories were at the heart of modern bourgeois culture. If we are to adjust to today's world, we will have to tell ourselves different kinds of stories, ones that diverge from those told before and that are not just about human beings. The rise of modern literature cancelled out all other beings. Its stories were fundamentally about humans. But that wasn't always the case; not in Europe and certainly not in Africa, Asia, or Latin America. Before the rise of modernity, people always told stories in which there were other beings – animals, or even climate phenomena speaking in personified voices like Aeolus, the Greek god of the wind. Ways of storytelling that incorporate other beings have existed everywhere throughout history. How to give a voice to non-human entities – a virus, for example – is the fundamental literary issue of our time. We do not know if a virus is alive, but it is certainly interacting with our lives in a way that appears so. What modernity has made us forget is that our lives are enmeshed in a multitude of other things, from diseases to fossil fuels.

The pandemic has shown how interconnected we are in a globalised world. Your *Ibis* trilogy is a series of novels tracing the stories of characters whose fates become intertwined through the Opium War, the conflict that tied together the peoples of India, China, and Europe. What is the legacy of empire in today's environmental problems?

Always foregrounding capitalism when talking about climate change creates a disastrous misreading of the real problem. Capitalism was preceded by European empires. Empire made capitalism possible. At every stage, it was empire, slavery, and indentured and unfree labour that made capitalism possible. The only reason why it is possible to forget this is because Black, indigenous, and people of colour have been so marginalised. Back in the 1980s, the Black radical thinker Cedric Robinson argued this point about racial capitalism. The Marxist idea that capitalism was somehow endogenous to Europe papers over the realities of power that made it possible in the first place.

Looking at the world today, the geopolitics of fossil fuels is fundamental to Western power. Whether it is the petrodollar or strategic dominance in the Indian Ocean, the climate question is essentially about geopolitics, about empire. A few fixes in corporate law and the price structure of capitalism cannot solve it.

The Great Acceleration after 1945 coincided with decolonisation. Independent India and Communist China went on to pursue the same development model as the West. Even if the roots of environmental breakdown lie in empire, it is hard to see how the world will get off this trajectory.

To an uncanny degree, India, China, and Indonesia have adopted settler-colonial policies, as seen in the Indian government's environmental policies concerning indigenous people and forests. The United States, from the 1930s and 1940s but especially since the Washington Consensus of the 1990s, has pushed its particular model of development as the universal ideal. This transition really took off in the 1990s in India, Indonesia, and China, which is the decade the climate crisis began to accelerate. Western discourse asks, "How can we solve the problem?" But who is "we"? The solution no longer lies in the West. The solution lies in the Indian Ocean Pacific Region, which today accounts for a far larger part of the world economy than the US and Europe. The 19th-century dominance of the Atlantic world is a historical anomaly. The world is reverting to a system in which the majority of the world's economic activity takes place around the Indian Ocean.

The climate movement often warns that the Global South will be worst affected by the climate crisis. The pandemic hit industrial centres such as Wuhan, northern Italy, and New York first, and wildfires have ravaged the West Coast of the US. Will the increasingly universal reach of climate impacts create greater impetus for action in the coming years?

The sorts of disasters that we in India and the Global South are accustomed to living through are now manifesting themselves elsewhere. I remember that in the 1970s and 1980s, every time we were hit by disasters, floods, or heatwaves, our friends in the West would be concerned. Now the traffic is the other way around. Britain has been swamped by floods, and strange weather affects northern Italy and Germany; this would have been unimaginable 30 or 40 years ago. The disasters and political catastrophes that we were used to are now increasingly normal in the most stable of democracies.

I never believed the story that climate activists in the West like to tell, that the poorest parts of the world will be hardest hit. Many poor regions will indeed be hard hit: the Sahel for example. But vulnerability to climate change, just as with the pandemic, does not correlate with GDP. The climate crisis will play out in unpredictable ways. Vietnam has had the best Covid-19 outcomes with a tiny per capita income. Some of the best-performing countries are in Africa. Early in the pandemic, American philanthropists like Melinda Gates were wringing their hands saying, “Africa will be devastated!” In fact, Somalia sent doctors to Italy. GDP is not a good predictor for the climate crisis, either. We are seeing something much more counterintuitive: the climate crisis is hitting those parts of the world where ecological interventions have been most intensive, like California and south-eastern Australia where ecologies have been re-engineered to look more European. The climate movement made a mistake in pushing the idea that it will hit the poorest in the world hardest. Far from creating a moral response, it led many Westerners to think, “Well, that’s okay then”.

Recent years have seen groups like Youth for Climate and Extinction Rebellion emerge. What do you make of the new climate movement?

What has happened with Greta Thunberg, Extinction Rebellion, and the Sunrise Movement is incredibly hopeful. These movements have caught the public imagination because they are doing an alternative kind of politics. A politics that appeals to something very visceral, not just ecological awareness. Ultimately, they appeal to our sense of the Earth as a living entity. Storytelling is fundamental to these movements. That is why they join hands with writers and storytellers.



Amitav Ghosh was born in Calcutta and grew up in India, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka. He is the author of two books of non-fiction, a collection of essays, and ten novels. In 2018 he became the first English-language writer to receive India’s highest literary honour, the Jnanpith Award. His most recent publication is *Gun Island*, a novel.



Jamie Kendrick is editor-in-chief of the *Green European Journal*.

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