

Asian Perspectives on Climate Change

In the book you pointed out that poetry has long had an intimate relationship with climatic events, why?

A. Actually the point I was trying to make is that poetry is not subject to the same expectations of probability and plausibility as prose fiction (which is, almost by definition, more prosaic). So in that sense it is easier to approach the highly improbable events that are characteristic of climate change through poetry.

Last year I interviewed a scholar who told me that one of the challenge for novelists to deal with climate change is that it's hard to form a connection with a weather event that is so far away, is that also the case for you?

A. I do not think proximity has anything to do with it. The weather events of our era of climate change are no longer 'far away'. Just think of the wildfires in California; or the hurricanes that have hit New York and Houston. There is no place in the world that is 'far away' from these events.

But at the same time, the vastness of the scale of climate change does indeed pose a difficult problem for novelists. It's interesting to read Ian McEwan's novel *Solar* (2010) in that context because in fact it's the very vastness of the subject that ultimately pushes the book into satire. You can see that McEwan is concerned about climate change, yet the very form of the novel pushes the book in a certain direction. *Solar* becomes a satirical novel. You might call it "the revenge of the bourgeois": from a certain perspective to take on or even to contemplate climate change becomes absurd.

I notice that you have an upcoming novel on climate change, do you think you have successfully responded to the challenges you mentioned in *The Great Derangement*? If so, how?

A. I do indeed have a novel coming out this year, but I would not describe it as a 'novel about climate change'. It is just a novel about the times we live in. Whether it responds successfully to the challenges of writing about these times is for readers to decide.

I think climate change challenges our notions of realism, surrealism and magical realism, like what you proposed that the issue of climate change are often dealt with in sci-fiction rather than serious literature (it also challenges the boundary between genre novels and serious literature). Would you please elaborate more on this?

A. We are teetering on the edge of a new era in which many of our past habits of thought and practice have become blinders which prevent us from perceiving the realities of our present situation. Writers, artists and thinkers everywhere are still struggling to find the concepts and ideas that will make it possible to engage with the unprecedented events of this new era. But to discover such modes of engagement takes time – and that is exactly what we don't have.

In one of the interviews you mentioned what is considered serious fiction is exactly one that has retreated into the bedroom, into the individual psyche. I think here a broader issue of bourgeois mentality or bourgeois aesthetics should be held accountable. And it relates to your questioning our preference for residence close to water and sea. But paradoxically it is the middle-class who are hit most heavily and voice their loudest concerns in the wake of extreme events such as tornado, tsunami. So do you think we have to get rid of the bourgeois mentality if we are to tackle the climate change issue?

A. The general thrust of bourgeois culture has been towards a kind of triumphalism, a sense that the external world had been overcome and tamed. These attitudes are of course, intimately connected with issues of race, colonialism and conquest – for 'Nature' too was seen as a domain to be conquered, dominated and used. The prevalence of such attitudes is an obvious barrier to effective action on climate change.

I'm quite impressed with the way you extend your analysis of climate change writings (the uncanny and improbable events) to a more broader issue, that is, climate change challenges the existing epistemological framework around human and non-human agency, and how the downgrading of non-human agency lies at the core of our imaginative failure of writing climate change.

A. In the course of the 20th century, all the arts became increasingly centered on the human mind and the human sensibility, and increasingly decoupled

from the material world. If you think of all the major literary and art movements of the past century you'll see that they all tended towards an increasing abstraction. Countervailing movements like 'social realism' etc invariably came to be marginalized and discredited. There were some major political factors in this, of course, like the ideology of the Cold War, but the cumulative effect, in any case, is that we have lost a sense of connection with our surroundings. Human-centeredness in this sense seems to be largely an effect of 'modernity'. In other words, the very processes that pump greenhouse gases into the atmosphere seem also to blind us to the consequences by making us ever more closely focused on the human

It's a very inspiring point you've made in this book that the so-called modern novels that is aligning with the avant-garde in their downgrading plots are actually laggard, from a climate change perspective, so are you suggesting modern novels have evolved too far?

A. One notable feature of 20th century modernism was the idea of the avant-garde – a conception of the artist/ writer as being in the vanguard of culture and/or history. And it is certainly true, as I have noted in *The Great Derangement*, that artists and writers did indeed lead the way in many of the 20th century's most important social and political movements. Yet I think it is demonstrably the case that writers and artists have not been similarly responsive to climate change. This is a real puzzle, and *The Great Derangement* represents my attempt to grapple with it.

On Asia and China

You emphasized the conceptual centrality of Asia in the issue of global warming and further pointed out the the existing discourse on global warming remains largely Eurocentric, why Asia's centrality fails to be reckoned with?

A. The discourse on climate change continues to be deeply Eurocentric. But we Asians bear some of the blame for this because we do not pay enough attention to this subject.

I am actually quite confused about the fact that there is a huge amount reporting on the climate change in western media, but why? The developed western world seems to be the least affected regions compared with Asian countries.

A. The Western world is by no means unaffected by climate change. To take just two examples, the US and Italy have been very badly hit by climate events in the last few years. The hurricanes that have hit Houston, the Florida panhandle, and Puerto Rico have caused billions of dollars in damage, as also the wildfires in California. In Italy too weather anomalies have caused huge suffering.

You strongly object to the carbon economy and by quoting Gandhi, you seem to hold the idea that Asia should cease to embrace their developmentalism-oriented approach. Your idea would be met with strong criticism in countries like India and China, I suppose. How would you respond to people's concern like "we have to get rich, anyway"?

A. I think we have to question the meaning of 'rich'. If you can't breathe the air, drink the water, or sleep peacefully at night for fear of extreme weather events then you are not rich. In fact your quality of life is very poor.

You argued that the poor may well be more resilient, is that the major reason why global warming is not framed as such a serious issue in India ?

A. There are many in India who say "oh it's the poor who are going to suffer." But in India too it's quite possible that the people who will suffer the most, are the middle classes. Look at the extreme downpours ('rain-bombs') that have hit Mumbai and Chennai in recent years. They certainly did not spare middle class people. In India the urban poor are often very mobile. They have rural connections, they constantly go back and forth to villages, and they know how to use the trains. They can move at a moment's notice. In a city like Mumbai, the urban poor will be able to leave in the event of a major storm surge, but that's not the case with the middle classes. Not only will they not be able to leave, they won't want to leave. For many middle class people their house or flat is their largest asset. They can't just abandon that and go away. Their whole life is based on a certain kind of stability. That's what bourgeois life is. But that stability is no longer available

anywhere. The basic guarantees that the modern state offers – stability, security, safety – have all gone up in smoke.

Speaking of identity politics, do you think an identity politics approach is necessary if we are to ignite people's passion towards climate change?

A. Whether you look at India or you look at the US, the left or the right, this is the discourse of politics today. It's actually not about politics at all – if we consider "politics" to be, in the first instance, about issues of survival, collective betterment and so on. When we look at politics, or what politics has come to mean, we see that it is now largely about issues of identity. These issues have completely eclipsed global climate change which concerns our collective survival.

You mentioned that climate change has not resulted in an outpouring of passion in India, instead, people's political energy has increasingly come to be focused on issues that relate to questions of identity : religion caste · ethnicity, gender right. I think it's also the case in China, though in a different way. For example, in China, people are worried about the haze, but we tend to think it's more of an issue for the Beijing residents and people elsewhere tend to adopt a mocking attitude towards Beijing (say, for example, ah, Beijing is such an unlivable city!). I mean, more often we are laughing at the issue and getting used to it, I think that's another form of inertia.

A. I don't know about the situation in China but in India it is simply a fact that climate change hardly ever figures in political discussions. We have only to open a newspaper, or turn on the TV, to see that dozens of issues receive more attention than, say, the droughts, or the agrarian crisis more generally. Within the Indian political class there is a terrible indifference to climate change.

You argue that you differ with those who identify capitalism as the principal fault line on the landscape of climate change. And you think empire is another important prism. You said" even if capitalism were to be magically transformed tomorrow, the imperatives of political and military dominance would remain a significant obstacle to progress on mitigatory action." would you please elaborate more on this?

A. Climate change is often framed as an economic problem, caused by consumption, production, distribution and the emissions that these processes entail – ‘capitalism’ in other words. The dominance of this framework may be a consequence of the fact economic ways of thinking have come to pervade every sphere of contemporary life. But in my view these economic framings of the issue frequently serve to mask other, equally important aspects of it, such as military competition, relationships of domination and subordination between and within countries, and indeed, the dynamics of Empire, broadly conceived. This masking happens at multiple levels and in many different ways. Consider, for example, the idea of capitalism as the principal driver of climate change – a view articulated by Naomi Klein and many others. The trouble is that capitalism is not one thing: we know now that East Asian capitalism for instance, was labor intensive, rather than resource-intensive, and it had a much smaller ecological footprint than the version of capitalism that was prevalent in Britain and the United States. Yet, it was the Anglo-American version of capitalism that became dominant around the world – and this cannot be understood without considering the history of imperialism and global conquest.