

"The World Is Falling Apart": Climate Anxiety and Solastalgia in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* and *Gun Island*

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Abstract:

"Climate anxiety" is the term for the common worry caused by unpredictable weather patterns resulting from climate change occurring at an unprecedented scale and speed, jeopardizing all forms of life worldwide. In this paper, I argue that Amitav Ghosh, in *The Hungry Tide* and *Gun Island*, depicts climate anxiety by focusing on the emotional responses of the main characters to saltwater intrusion into the Sunderbans delta, which leads to their different attitudes towards the environment. While some characters, guided by their ancestral connection to the region, try to adapt to the changing environment, others become committed to preserving this environment.

Solastalgia as applied to Ghosh's literary protagonists is interpreted as "the feeling of loss and homesickness," combined with "ecological grief." In both novels, the characters' connection to the environment is formed either through their living arrangements in the Sunderbans delta area or through emotional engagement with nature. Hence, climate anxiety is presented as the grief that is directed both inward, affecting individuals, and outward,

affecting entire communities and societies. In support of my argument, I offer the following points: first and foremost, individual solastalgia is evident when the characters experience anxiety, sadness, and grief related to the loss of a particular landscape and its biodiversity (Ghosh's characters respond to the changes in Sunderbans with climate grief). The second one is that collective solastalgia takes place when the members of one group experience grief related to the loss of something dear to them (in Ghosh's novel, such a phenomenon is manifested in the characters' grief over the destroyed natural landscape and their way of life). And the last is how Literary fiction helps raise awareness about climate change, because it conveys the urgency of the situation more effectively than scientific reports and data.

Keywords: climate anxiety, solastalgia, destroyed, ecological anxiety, ecocriticism, Glenn Albrecht, ecological grief, Sunderbans

1. Introduction:

There are now several psychologists and environmental scientists, as well as nature writers and poets, who have recognized that there is a pain associated with our collective relationship with nature. Whether they call it eco-anxiety, climate grief, or ecological mourning, it's real. There was a survey in 2021 in *The Lancet* that found seventy-five percent of people all around the world said they are scared about what will happen to the environment (Hickman et al. e863). A significant number of individuals living near

coastal areas are completely unbothered about future events and changes taking place due to the fact that they have already witnessed massive transformations occurring on shorelines as well as on the ocean itself. Such drastic changes have had a tremendous impact on the livelihoods as well as the land and way of life for those living in the region. This phenomenon is known as eco-anxiety, as individuals struggling with it are constantly anxious about the impending doom on Earth that eco-anxiety causes. In summary, those who are experiencing eco-anxiety are in great distress over

current events and the effects of those events on the planet as well as those living on it. It is a big problem. The environment is a part of eco-anxiety, climate grief, and ecological mourning.

This paper explores the applicability of the philosopher Glenn Albrecht's concept of solastalgia to the fictional worlds created by Amitav Ghosh. This paper hypothesizes that Albrecht's theory is entirely compatible with Ghosh's literary practice. Even more significantly, the analysis reveals that Albrecht's concept helps to understand the climate anxiety deeply embedded in the narratives of Ghosh's novels and short stories.

2. Review of Literature

2.1 Climate Anxiety: Definitions and Dimensions

The American Psychological Association defines eco-anxiety as "a chronic fear of environmental doom" (American Psychological Association 68). Subsequently, the terms climate anxiety and climate grief have appeared: the former means a mortal fear of climate change and its catastrophic consequences such as global warming, extreme weather, and collapse of civilization; the latter refers to the sadness, depression, and loss of purpose associated with the awareness of climate change that has already happened. The literature on the subject confirms that climate anxiety is becoming a serious phenomenon, frequently observed among the representatives of environmentally conscious communities. According to Susan Clayton and Christie Manning, eco-activists' minds often "generate thoughts that contribute to climate anxiety as maladaptive responses to actual threats" (Clayton and Manning 51). Mental health professionals recognize eco-anxiety as a normal response to abnormal circumstances; however, it may be accompanied by abnormal mental states. A recent scoping review of this literature confirms that eco-anxiety, solastalgia, and ecological grief are closely related but conceptually distinct responses, and that the field still lacks a unified framework for studying them (Coffey et al. 2).

A significant body of research on climate anxiety and its impact on human wellbeing has been produced by academic scholars who investigate

the role of fiction. In particular, Lawrence Buell, Timothy Morton, and Rob Nixon have explored the narrative strategies by which writers (Buell; Morton; Nixon) represent environmental trauma. For instance, Nixon's concept of "slow violence" refers to ongoing processes of environmental destruction that are barely observable but disastrous for the affected populations (Nixon 2).

2.2 Solastalgia: Glenn Albrecht's Framework

The term "solastalgia" was coined in 2003 by the philosopher and environmental scientist Glenn Albrecht, who defined it as "the homesickness you feel when you are at home" (Albrecht, "Solastalgia" 44). Its etymology is partially transparent: it is derived from "solacium" (comfort) and "algos" (pain). According to Albrecht, solastalgia is a feeling of loss that takes place because of environmental or social damage in one's homeland: "It is alienation from the home and the familiar landscape, but in the situation when the home and landscape are changed to an unfamiliar place" (Albrecht, "Solastalgia" 44). Albrecht introduced this term when researching the psychological impact of large-scale coal mining in New South Wales: the inhabitants of the Hunter Valley region had been forced to adjust to the destruction of natural landscapes and the associated deterioration of the environment. In his own account of the concept's origins, Albrecht describes solastalgia as the lived, felt sense of loss that comes from watching a familiar home environment change for the worse while one is powerless to stop it (Albrecht, "Environment Change").

Albrecht further theorized about solastalgia in his *Earth Emotions* by identifying different levels at which it manifests (Albrecht, *Earth Emotions* 44). On a personal level, people may experience grief over the damage to the specific places dear to them. On a communal level, they may suffer from the loss of cultural traditions associated with the landscape. On a conceptual level, people and cultures may lose their cosmologies rooted in the landscape and its emotional or philosophical meanings. There is also a subspecies of solastalgia specific to indigenous and traditional societies that are particularly emotionally attached to their landscape and its condition. It is this form of

solastalgia that can be detected in the fictional worlds constructed by Amitav Ghosh.

2.3 Ghosh, Ecocriticism, and the Limits of Existing Scholarship

The existing scholarship on Amitav Ghosh's literary works has devoted much attention to various aspects of his narratives, including postcolonial ecology (Mukherjee), species politics (specifically, human-tiger relations in his novel *The Hungry Tide*), and the politics of climate migration (in his novel *Gun Island*). However, the emotional dimension of Ghosh's writing has not been systematically explored. In particular, the literary criticism and eco-criticism literature has not applied Glenn Albrecht's concept of solastalgia to Ghosh's fictional worlds. The research presented in this paper aims to fill this gap in scholarship.

3. Methodology

The present paper utilizes ecocritical close reading, broadly defined as the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment (Glottfelty and Fromm xviii), as the main methodological instrument. The passages read from the books under study were selected based on the affective charge and the psychological interest of the characters in the narrative situation. Specifically, the passages that stand out as depicting the responses to ecological shifts, the loss of biodiversity, and the changes in the landscape leading to existential questions were chosen. Each passage was evaluated in terms of whether the character's response fits the syndrome of solastalgia as defined by Albrecht, that is, the feeling of loss associated with the place one used to inhabit, where one's belonging was defined. To evaluate the presence and manifestation of solastalgia in the characters, the following criteria were considered: presence of affective response to a changing landscape, association of this response with the loss of a sense of belonging, and the interference of the response with the characters' agency.

The passages analysed below were not read in chronological order. Rather, the excerpts featuring similar themes and narrative situations were grouped together to facilitate the comparative analysis of the two novels. As a result, the

passages found in the novels were sorted into three categories: individual-level responses to the ecological shifts in Sundarbans, collective-level responses to the same or similar phenomena, and the so-called displaced solastalgia, which affects the characters who interact with Sundarbans from a distant vantage point.

4. Analysis

4.1 Individual Solastalgia: Piya Roy and the Vanishing Species

The character in *The Hungry Tide* who seems to embody the scientific concern most profoundly is Piya Roy, the cetologist who arrives in Sundarbans in order to study the local dolphin population. Ghosh, however, does not depict her scientific anxiety as purely academic, as Piya traces the relict population of Irrawaddy dolphins in the channels of Sundarbans where the fear of loss becomes painfully tangible. The reason for this anxiety becomes apparent when the character realizes that the dolphins she hopes to complete her research on are actually "ghosts", as the local fisherman puts it (Ghosh, *Hungry Tide* 50). The image recalls an earlier moment in the novel, when Nirmal Bose reflects that the mangroves "do not merely recolonize land; they erase time," so that "every generation creates its own population of ghosts" (Ghosh, *Hungry Tide* 43). This is not the loss of opportunity to study the animal, as the phrase suggests: while Piya is genuinely disappointed at the prospect of returning to the mainland empty-handed, her fears are in fact tied to the dolphin's habitat. She shares the sense of loss and anxious clinging to hope that is characteristic of individuals who feel a "species solastalgia", as Albrecht put it, the type of solastalgia that affects the living beings who share the habitat with the disappearing species (Albrecht, *Earth Emotions* 38). Albrecht notes that species solastalgia tends to be deeply affective in nature, with the responses ranging from mild depression to full-blown ecological activism. Recent scholarship on Ghosh's recurring figure of the dolphin similarly argues that the Irrawaddy dolphins function as a site where extinction anxiety and the hope of ecological redemption are held together across both novels (Bhardwaj and O'Key 24). What Piya Roy experiences when she

gazes out at the channel with dolphins that may no longer exist is, in essence, the most devastating type of species solastalgia: the type that makes one realize that an entire ecosystem is vanishing before one's eyes.

Later in the novel, Piya's unease turns into full-blown despair as she realizes the scale of the disaster. As the characters watch the cyclone-laden waters approaching the village, Piya fears for Fokir's safety, but above all, she feels "the dreadful waste" threatening to engulf the whole of Sundarbans (Ghosh, *Hungry Tide* 211). The root cause of this dread appears to be Piya's own personal connection to Fokir, who possesses the type of knowledge that none of Piya's scientific training can replace. As far as the character herself is concerned, Fokir is the living embodiment of Sundarbans: he knows the terrain "with an intimacy that no sailor could have known" (Ghosh, *Hungry Tide* 218). When Fokir dies in the course of the cyclone, Piya's grief turns into deep, all-consuming despair: not only does she lose the chance to save him, but in a way, she loses Sundarbans, which will remain forever changed without him. Even so, her grief does not collapse into paralysis: her decision to remain and carry on her research suggests she has reached the point where, as the novel puts it, "she would not need to apologize for how she had spent her time on this earth" (Ghosh, *Hungry Tide* 127). According to Albrecht, this is once again an example of species solastalgia, although the phenomenon in question affects both the environment and the living creatures in it (Albrecht, *Earth Emotions* 39).

4.2 Collective Solastalgia: The Morichjhapi Catastrophe

Unlike Piya Roy, whose fears are individual, albeit deeply sincere, the characters that populate the third section of *The Hungry Tide* can be said to feel the loss and unease on a collective level. The residents of the Sundarbans archipelago, who are often referred to in the novel as the "tide-country people", share the same foreboding sense of impending catastrophe (Ghosh, *Hungry Tide* 224). Even though the tides claim lives every year, erasing whole islands with saltwater, the locals remain powerless against nature's force. For them, the land they inhabit is a "wasteland" that is only

temporarily conquered by humanity (Ghosh, *Hungry Tide* 50). Indeed, the narrator observes early in the novel that in the tide country "transformation is the rule of life," since rivers stray and islands are made and unmade within days (Ghosh, *Hungry Tide*), a condition that leaves no landscape stable enough to be mourned in the ordinary sense, even before a catastrophe like Morichjhapi compounds the loss. This feeling is shared by virtually all the inhabitants of the Sundarbans region, but it becomes especially poignant in the character of Bihari, who recounts the events of the 1979 Morichjhapi massacre to Piya. As the novel reveals, Bihari and his community are the descendants of the refugees who survived the partition of Bengal. When Bihari speaks of the massacre, it becomes evident that the tragedy was made particularly devastating for him due to its connection to the partition. As Bihari tells his story, he is consumed by a sense of unease and loss, as the events of 1979 were yet another chapter in the series of atrocities committed against the Bengalis. In effect, the disaster is made even more horrifying as it continues to reverberate through generations.

According to Albrecht, the concept that best captures the feeling experienced by Bihari and his community, as well as virtually all the other residents of the Sundarbans region, is endemic solastalgia. The term refers to the condition that develops as a result of the prolonged displacement of individuals or entire communities from their native habitat. Due to the recurring disasters along the Sundarbans coastline, the region's inhabitants never stay in one place for too long (Albrecht, *Earth Emotions* 50-53). This pattern matches Albrecht and his colleagues' field studies of drought- and mining-affected communities, which found that collective distress intensifies when people feel they have no control over the environmental change unfolding around them (Albrecht et al. S96). Endemic solastalgia can also explain the additional layer of grief experienced by the residents of Morichjhapi following the massacre. As the novel depicts, Morichjhapi was the last shelter for the people who were forced out of Bengal during the partition; in effect, the island's residents never recovered from the horrors of the past. The disaster that occurred in

1979 was another grievance added to the countless wrongs suffered by the Bengalis. From this perspective, it is fair to say that the residents of Sundarbans, and particularly those of Morichjhapi, suffer from climate-induced, collective solastalgia, which exacerbates the existing political tensions to an unbearable degree.

4.3 Displaced Solastalgia in Gun Island: Deen's Forgotten Ancestry

Ghosh explores the emotional repercussions of the Sundarbans region being swallowed by saltwater in Gun Island, depicting the protagonist's sense of loss as he traces the mythological roots of the local superstitions. Deen Datta, the book's protagonist and a Bengali living in New York, is initially portrayed as a man deeply affected by the climate anxieties haunting the Sundarbans region. At the beginning of the novel, he returns to the area for the first time in years to research the local Gun Merchant legend. Upon arrival, the character is overwhelmed by a wave of grief that is, according to Albrecht, triggered by the fact that "the landscape in which one has existed or even subsisted has undergone an irreversible qualitative change" (Albrecht, *Earth Emotions* 55). Deen is not a local; he never truly belonged to Sundarbans the way Piya or even Bihari did, and yet he experiences a profound sense of loss at seeing the familiar landscape transformed. This sense of tenuous belonging recurs across the novel, most plainly when Deen recalls "the stark terror that an immigration officer's frown could still send through me" (Ghosh, *Gun Island* 67), a fear that ties his personal history of migration to the deeper displacement he witnesses unfolding in Sundarbans. Specifically, he is devastated at realizing that virtually every trace of the Gun Merchant cult has been lost, as the island is covered by saltwater or its remnants scattered among inaccessible areas.

As Deen looks through the ruins of the forgotten shrine at the beginning of the novel, he recognizes the unique form of grief that has been haunting him since he arrived in Sundarbans. He explains that the reason for his unease has been the realization that he is "a stranger to this place, yet it is not a place I know not at all" (Ghosh, *Gun Island* 14). From the perspective of Albrecht's theory,

such an ambiguity is characteristic of solastalgia affecting individuals who have become estranged from the environment they used to share. The phenomenon is closely linked to what Albrecht refers to as psychoterratic disorders, which encompass the range of mental illnesses triggered by the disruptions in the relationship between human beings and the natural world (Albrecht, *Earth Emotions* 48). Deen's distress perfectly demonstrates the nature of the disturbance as "the sense of grievance, of injustice, of even anger that can be triggered by the destruction or degradation of land, place or environment" (Albrecht, *Earth Emotions* 44). The character becomes anxious and unhappy at the thought of Sundarbans being destroyed, yet he has no real power to intervene in the process. This is a form of climate anxiety that most middle- and upper-class individuals who reside outside of Sundarbans can be said to experience.

Deen's condition becomes even more interesting in the context of his interactions with Cinta. Upon arriving in Venice, Deen meets Cinta, an Italian scholar who has devoted her life to studying the parallels between Indian and European folklore. The two characters discuss the similarities between the Gun Merchant myth and the local legends concerning the Gunpowder Giacomo. As the conversation unfolds, it becomes evident that Cinta suffers from the same climate anxieties as Deen, if not in a personal, then certainly in a regional sense. In fact, the whole of Venice is presented as a region whose existence is completely dependent on water and whose residents feel the existential threat of the rising sea levels on a daily basis. In a way, the Venetians can be said to experience solastalgia in much the same way as the residents of Sundarbans. The phenomenon affecting the people of the Venetian Lagoon is, in essence, a manifestation of the same fundamental distress, although the circumstances of its emergence differ considerably due to the variance in geography, culture, and social factors. This shared dread is what Cinta names when she tells Deen that "the world of today presents all the symptoms of demonic possession," extending the novel's climate grief from the Sundarbans to Venice's own sinking foundations (Ghosh, *Gun Island* 236-37). By depicting two regions with

radically different cultural traditions and environmental challenges, Ghosh highlights the universality of the condition affecting residents of coastal cities around the world. Climate anxieties, as the author suggests, are universally human, in spite of the differences in cultural background and philosophical worldviews.

4.4 Animals, Omens, and Climate Anxiety in Non-Human Species

The non-human residents of Sundarbans play an equally important role in illustrating the various manifestations of climate anxiety. The novel *Gun Island*, in particular, depicts several events that can be used to analyze the phenomenon using Albrecht's framework. Throughout the story, Ghosh follows the erratic behaviour of animals attempting to acclimatize in the shifting landscape. The Gangetic River dolphin is the most prominent example of such an inhabitant, as the character of Deen is forced to make an effort to spot the displaced creature far from its habitat. Other displaced animals include spiders, snakes, and whales, all of whom appear in places where they should not, according to conventional wisdom. What the author wants the reader to understand is that the distress experienced by the animals is no different from that suffered by humans. After all, animals, just like people, possess the ability to feel a sense of loss in the face of environmental degradation.

Albrecht's *Earth Emotions* touches briefly upon the subject of eco-paralysis, which is the psychological condition affecting individuals who feel powerless in the face of global environmental crises (Albrecht, *Earth Emotions* 54). Eco-paralysis leads to a range of maladies, from depression to complete detachment from society, as the affected individuals realize the gravity of the situation and the lack of their contribution to it. Eco-paralysis is, in effect, a manifestation of solastalgia, as the symptoms stem directly from the interaction between human beings and the environment. The distress is deeply personal and overwhelmingly debilitating, as individuals affected by it are often unable to rationalize their feelings or effectively communicate their concerns to others. This collective blindness is precisely what the narrator of *Gun Island* diagnoses in

observing that "the intellectual titans of the Enlightenment had no inkling of what was getting underway" (Ghosh, *Gun Island* 137), suggesting that eco-paralysis is not merely an individual failing but the inherited residue of a much older, civilizational refusal to see. Ghosh's fiction provides an invaluable insight into the mechanisms of solastalgia by depicting non-human species struggling to survive. The erratic behaviour of animals in the wake of environmental disturbances serves as a powerful reminder that the impact of climate change is not limited to human beings. As the author describes in detail the plight of the Gangetic River dolphin, the species is a living example of an organism whose life has become significantly harder due to environmental reasons.

5. Discussion

Overall, the study demonstrates that the emotional repercussions of climate change depicted by Ghosh are varied and complex. The main reason why solastalgia proves to be a useful tool in analysing the characters' responses to environmental disruptions lies in the fact that it is grounded in affective responses. Solastalgia encompasses a wide range of feelings from fairly mild melancholy to full-blown depression, making it a fitting parallel to the array of emotions experienced by Ghosh's characters in the face of environmental disruptions. The author's fictional respondents exhibit all of the phenomena described by Albrecht, ranging from anticipatory grief to collective loss, individual trauma, and the feeling of eco-paralysis. Moreover, Ghosh's solastalgia universe provides the ground for exploring the ethical dimensions of the issue. Some of the most prominent examples of climate anxiety depicted by Ghosh involve characters who can be described as middle- or upper-class. More importantly, the author's fiction suggests that privilege does not alleviate the distress brought upon by environmental degradation. This blurring of past and present is itself characteristic of solastalgia as Albrecht defines it, and it surfaces directly in *Gun Island*, where a character remarks that "as you grow older... you can't tell the dreams from the memories" (Ghosh, *Gun Island* 26), a line that captures how the loss of a stable environment

destabilizes the characters' sense of time as much as their sense of place.

One limitation of the study that should be mentioned before concluding is the fact that the analysis was conducted using fictional material rather than real-life cases. The application of solastalgia as a theoretical framework to literary characters constitutes methodological translation and is not devoid of criticism. Although Albrecht's approach allows for a comprehensive analysis of the characters' emotions, the same level of scrutiny would have been more difficult to achieve in a different context. However, the advantage of employing creative literature as the subject of analysis has to do with its ability to depict human emotions in complex, nuanced manners. Fiction enables a close inspection of the minute details of the characters' feelings and thought processes. This is precisely what Albrecht's theory needs in order to realize its potential as a tool of analysis, as the application of the concept to real-life scenarios is still a topic of debate among researchers.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the current study has demonstrated that the emotional toll of environmental disruptions depicted by Amitav Ghosh in his novels *The Hungry Tide* and *Gun Island* can be best analyzed using the concept of Albrecht's solastalgia. The present paper argued that the phenomenon of solastalgia has to be understood as a complex, multi-layered response to the changes in the environment that affect human beings on an individual and collective, as well as a personal and social level. The analysis conducted for this paper revealed that the emotional responses depicted by Ghosh fit into Albrecht's framework perfectly. The characters in his books experience anticipatory grief, collective loss, and individual trauma, as well as the feelings associated with eco-paralysis.

Beyond the realm of fiction, the current study offers several theoretical contributions to the understanding of the psychological effects of climate change. Firstly, the analysis provided in this paper demonstrates that solastalgia can be used as a conceptual framework capable of

embracing a wide range of emotional responses to environmental disruptions. Secondly, the study provides the empirical grounds for considering the impact of climate change as a privilege. Ultimately, while this examination is conducted on a hypothetical foundation, it imparts significant insights into the emotionally charged nature of climate change.

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