

“Ours was a time when most forms of art and literature were drawn into the modes of concealment”:

An Ecological-literary Study between *The Return of the Native* and *The Great Derangement*

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Abstract:

With reference to Thomas Hardy's *The Return of the Native*, the paper attempts to examine the authenticity of Amitav Ghosh's claim in *The Great Derangement* that the 'modern novel' conceals the occurrences of 'improbable' incidents, strictly ecological or not, to keep the myth of uninterrupted progress in capitalist lifestyle intact. To attempt the same, the paper applies the concepts of probability-improbability of events, flow of Time, the Uncanny; the genre of Epic and 'serious fiction'; all of which have been employed by Amitav Ghosh to critique the modern novel for the afore-claimed characteristic.

Keywords: Modern novel; climate crisis/crises; great derangement; concealment; the Anthropocene; human and non-human relationship; ecology; British Industrial Revolution; Carbon Economy; Capitalism; probability and improbability; Time; geology; Egdon Heath; the Uncanny; universal; Epic; Serious Fiction; fossil fuel.

In Part One of *The Great Derangement* (2016), titled 'Stories', Amitav Ghosh claims that the "modern novel" (22) is a reason behind the "broader imaginative and cultural failure that lies at the heart of the climate crisis" (10). Although he does not mention any specific period as the origin of what he terms as the 'modern novel', and just laments that the practice has still been continuing in our contemporary time; but his use of Franco Moretti's exemplification of Jane Austen (22) in this regard clarifies that it was in practice by novelist(s) during the first part of the Nineteenth Century. Ghosh further foretells that the humans of "a substantially altered world", following the climate-apocalypse, would be retrospectively calling our "era" (therefore, starting at least as early as early nineteenth Century and continuing now) as the "time of the Great Derangement", "when most forms of art and literature were drawn into the modes of concealment" (15). He further elaborates that the literary "concealment[s]" have "prevented [and have still been preventing] people from realising the realities of their [ecological-climatic] plight" (15) in the first place, and therefore to seek preventions from and solutions to the problems, as applicable.

This paper will examine the veracity of Ghosh's claims about the modern novel's influences on the human ignorance and disregard regarding the unavoidable importance of the human-non-human relationships (the sole reason behind the contemporary climate crises), by the novelistic application of "conceal[ers]" (Ghosh 15); by making a comparative study between Thomas Hardy's *The Return of the Native* (1878) and the Part I, i.e. 'Stories' of Amitav Ghosh's *The Great Derangement* (2016). For the precision of the paper, the character of Mrs Yeobright, the direct victim of a comparatively uncommon ecological-climatic phenomenon at the heath, is in focus.

A handful of reasons make Hardy's *The Return of the Native* a fitting novel to make a comparative study with *The Great Derangement*. Firstly, as already explained, 'modern novel' was already composed during the early Nineteenth Century. *The Return of the Native* first got published in instalments in 1878. Therefore, no doubt regarding its identity as a 'modern novel' arises.

While trying to date the beginning of the Anthropocene, a geographical era which makes possible the current Climate Crises, Will Steffen et al conclude, "... it is clear that in 1750, the Industrial Revolution had barely begun but by 1850 it had almost completely transformed England and had spread to many other countries in Europe and across the Atlantic to North America. We thus suggest that the year AD 1800 could reasonably be chosen as the beginning of the Anthropocene" (849). Hardy himself revealed that this "historical novel" represents "my father's time [born in 1811 (Millgate 12)] rather than my own [born in 1840 (Millgate 20)]" (Gibson 197). Therefore, the novel depicts the early half of the nineteenth century- the early phase of the British Industrial Revolution; therefore the beginning of the Carbon Economy. The comparative study thus has the chance to expose the mentalities of the novelist (writing

at some time post-1850) and the characters he portrayed (pre-1850) towards of the carbon economy of their respective times and their contribution to the “culture of concealment” (Ghosh 15) that would increase and lead to our contemporary Climate Crises.

Beside these generic and spatio-temporal significances, thematically also the novel is appropriate for the comparison. *The Return of the Native* introduces the Egdon Heath before the human characters, through the whole first chapter of Book One. The focus given to the heath’s ecosystem in this introductory chapter of the book prepares the readers for one of the dominant themes of the novel: relationship between the human and the non-human world and the impact of Capitalism (i.e. the Anthropocene) on the same. The third person narrator calls the wedding of Clym and Eustacia as a “domestic drama” (Hardy 217). The sub-titles of Book One, Chapter Two; Book Three, Chapter Three and Book Four, Chapter Seven also suggest that Hardy imagined the heath as a stage to represent the dramas of human lives. But, it is chiefly through its interactions with human consciousness, desires and expectation, and its “en[mity]” (Hardy 5) with the human civilization, that the heath reveals itself to be “demonstrably alive” as both the stage for and a “protagonist” (Ghosh 7-8) in the dramas.

The first chapter of *The Return of the Native* gives descriptions of the usual yearly ecological and climatic features of the Heath: a mood of “gaiety” in summer; “solemn” rather than “brilliant” intensity during the “winter darkness, tempests, and mists” when it would “reciproc[ate]” with the storm, its “lover”, and wind, its “friend” (Hardy 5). About the “drought” (Hardy 277), that features in Chapter V of Book Five and is of vital thematic importance, it says nothing. The month of July, featured in Book Four, Chapter One, also seems to be as usual in Egdon that year: “[i]t was the one season of the year, and the one weather of the season, in which the heath was gorgeous” (Hardy 241). The absence of its mention, except when it has “set in” (Hardy 277) suggests that the drought was an unexpected climatic event (or, at least not yearly recurrent) at Egdon Heath. And in Ghosh’s claims, the absence of the “improbable” (Hardy 21) events in modern novels, precisely, is what has been resulting in the “broader imaginative and cultural failure that lies at the heart of the climate crisis” (10). Even if not as improbable (and unprecedented) as the current climatic phenomena owing to the climate breakdown, the inclusion of the drought and the thematic importance of its uncommonness in that heath’s ecology, makes Hardy’s novel, from the early Anthropocene period, worth a comparison with Ghosh’s book.

Also, this particular novel is related to the emergence of Amitav Ghosh as a historian and his subsequent publication of *The Great Derangement*. “[D]ispirited by a series of lectures” (Shah N.P.) on *The Return of the Native* itself, Amitav Ghosh developed “a pathological dislike” (Tejpal N. P.) for Thomas Hardy; ultimately changing his graduation subject from English Literature to History. Interestingly, Hardy’s *The Return of the Native* was first published in instalments in 1878, exactly hundred years before Ghosh experienced the tornado in Delhi in 1978, the essence of which incident gradually inspired him to critique, in *The Great Derangement* (2016), about the genre of modern novel itself with reference to the concept of probability.

Quoting Ian Hacking’s idea of probability as “a manner of conceiving the world without our being aware of it”, Ghosh adds “improbability is a gradient in a continuum of probability” (21). He extends, although the principle of probability and “modern novel” are “born from the same people in the same time”, and probability has “everything” to do with the novel; this “mathematical idea” is not included in novels (21-22). He shows, the reason is what Franco Moretti calls the necessary inclusion of “fillars”; to offer the “narrative pleasure compatible with the new regularity of bourgeois life” (qtd in Ghosh 25). Ghosh also claims that these “fillars” make the novels as “world[s] of few surprises, fewer adventures, and no miracles at all” (25). This absence of improbable events in novels, according to Ghosh, is what gradually erases from the minds of the readers the truth that the true tune of the cosmos, of the human and non-human world altogether, is the conglomeration of probabilities and improbability. That is to say, humans cannot always keep the “narrativity” of life and of ecological events “under control” (qtd in Ghosh 22).

Repeated and quick failures of the “schemes” (Hardy 202) of the characters, because of “improbable” (Hardy 21) human and/or nature-induced events (Clym uses the phrase “not likely” at other time [Hardy 209]), are abundant throughout the novel. “Just when his mother was beginning to tolerate one scheme, he had introduced another still bitterer than the first” (Hardy 202); observes the third person narrator after Clym, who has already permanently returned to Egdon Heath from Paris at the frustration of his mother, decides to marry Eustacia and settle at Budmouth as a schoolmaster. About Mrs Yeobright’s authority upon her son, Clym remarks: “you try to thwart my wishes in

everything” (Hardy 204). Co-incidences of the train of events that lead to the death of MrsYeobright also seem quite “unlikely”: she starts her journey to reconcile with Clym at noon of the same day when Clym starts for the same reason, in the afternoon; Wildevé also comes to visit Eustacia just before MrsYeobright knocks at the door; Eustacia mistakenly perceives Clym to have opened the door and have welcomed MrsYeobright; MrsYeobright mistakes Eustacia’sbehaviour and concluding that she has been turned out.

When the geology of the heath is claimed to give “ballast to the mind adrift on change, and harassed by the irrepressible New”, where everything, except the aged highway and the aged barrow, “remained as the very finger-touches of the last geological change” (Hardy 6); it seems to echo the Gradualist Theory of the nineteenth century- “nothing could change otherwise than the way things were seen to change in the present” (qtd in Ghosh 26).According to which” nature does not make leaps” (qtd in Ghosh 26). The novel does not register any climatic phenomenon that is/was commonly considered as ‘improbable’. However, through the unpredictability of the normal changes in the climate patterns of the heath, the irregular advent of drought (at least not a yearly recurrent phenomenon, even if not utterly improbable), the heath folks’ awareness that the heath has been influential “everywhere and nowhere” (Ghosh 37) in the lives of its inhabitants, the narrative proves that the heathen people of the Egdon Heath do not forget that humans cannot stand victorious against all ecological and climatic phenomena. This is the realisation that is at the core of AmitavGhosh’s arguments. Also, since “...nature does certainly jump, if not leap” (Ghosh 26), and these jumps do leave impacts on human lives, therefore, literaryrepresentations of these ‘jumps’ also help the readers across time and space, to acknowledge the play of ‘probability’ and ‘improbability’ in Natural schemes and that Nature is the superior and mightier force, and humans cannot keep every natural phenomenon “under control” (Ghosh 22). The novel represents this wisdom without any ‘concealment’ (Ghosh 15).

But MrsYeobright has not any obeisance for these natural ‘jumps’.A curate’s daughter who once dreamt of doing “better things” (Hardy 30) than be “obliged” (Hardy 117) to become a farmer’s wife on the heath, a man who was “weary of doing well” (Hardy 178); she always keeps a distance from the heath folks: “[a]t moments she seemed to be regarding issues from a Nebo denied to others around” (Hardy30) and maintain disdainful indifference towards the heath, its inhabitants, its ecology and climate. Doing ‘better things’ for her is to be part of the culture of the urban society, that is “intimately linked with the wider history of imperialism and capitalism”, and “generates desire” for “artefacts and commodities”, that are “among the principal drivers of the carbon economy” and are “at once expressions and concealments of the cultural matrix that brought them into being” (Ghosh 12-13).

For her, “respect” can only be given to people who are successfully related to the aforementioned ‘culture’. Despite having “a certain well-to-do air” (Hardy 8), the reddlemanDiggory Venn is considered not “[g]entleman enough” by MrsYeobright to marry Thomasin. Since, his financial excellence comes from manually procuring reddle from earth of the heath by himself; and because his is a very heathen lifestyle, far away from the urban culture she preferred. She is “astonished” that Clym left his managerial “post of trust and respect!” in the “large establishment” of a diamond merchant in Paris that would have fetched him the dignity of a “gentleman”, and returned home to be a “poor-man’s schoolmaster” (Hardy 176-178). “I hadn’t the least idea that you meant to go backward in the world... Of course I have always supposed you were going to push straight on as other men do” (Hardy 177); laments MrsYeobright at Clym’s decision. This comment unmistakably refers to Ghosh’s allusion to Bruno Latour, the “acceleration in carbon emission and the turn away from the collective, are both,... effects of that aspect of modernity that sees time as ‘an irreversible arrow, as capitalization, as progress’”,(106). And MrsYeobright, belonging to the early years of carbon economy, disregardful towards the heathen community she is part of, and an admirer of the emerging Capitalist urban social cultures, already does “see” (Ghosh 106) that way!It is unlikely to her that her son will choose to live at a place where there is “no absolute hour of the day” and “the time at any moment was a number of varying doctrines professed by the different hamlets” (Hardy 130). Here people, who had once been part of the capitalist and imperialist society or who desire to be so in the future, alone possess tools to measure the progression of the hours: Grandfer Cattle, who had been a soldier (Hardy 404) possesses a watch; and Eustacia who is ambitious about settling in Paris, has her “grandmother’s hour-glass” (Hardy 68), the latter having had resided in the “fashionable” (Hardy 65) seaside resort of Budmouth and whose husband was “naval officer” (Hardy 7). Unaccepting towards the inclusion of “improbable” (at least to her) (Hardy 21) events in her plans, she tries to reorient Clym towards the capitalist way of life, with utter disregard to his mental peace or happiness. Having recognisedClym in the manner and costume of a furze-cutter, just like her husband, “[s]he is scarcely able to familiarize herself with this

strange reality”, and keeps “schem[ing]” on how to “preserve Clym and Eustacia from this mode of life” (Hardy 279).

Her tendencies to disregard the possibility of the improbable and the unexpected (at least to her), to regard herself valorous over Nature (which in her eyes lacks the glory of urban capitalist culture), to adamantly try to “push straight” (Hardy 177) the flow of events only in her preferred way, all of these originating from the Capitalistic confidence on the uninterrupted progress of human life towards abundant development, surface also in her interaction with the heath. What Eustacia remarks about the heath, who shares the same “inflammable nature” (Hardy 250) and “luxurious” (Hardy 200) ambitions with her mother-in-law (“...you and my mother should be of one mind about this” [Hardy 199]); may also be considered as MrsYeobright’s unsaid observation about the heath: “[w]hat could hurt me on this heath, who have nothing?” (Hardy 266).

The Egdon heath is a place where even the most efficient travellers of the place sometimes get “pixy-led” (Hardy 31). But, MrsYeobright does not wait for a companion to start her journey across the heath from Blooms-End to Quite Woman’s Inn, following Thomasin and Damon Wildev’s supposed marriage in the “very lonesome” night of fifth November, when “the winds dohuffle queerer... than ever” (Hardy 31). On thirty-first August, she journeys through the heath for Clym’s house at Alderworth without knowing its exact position; yet hoping to be “well-advanced in her walk before the heat of the day was at its highest” (Hardy 277). While the scorching heat exhausts her en route, and she recognises the mightier nature disrupting her plan, that it “[is] not to be done” (Hardy 277), she can only lament in vain for not having asked Fairway beforehand to drive her “at least a portion” (Hardy 277) of the whole path. Because, from her current position, it is “as easy to reach Clym’s house as to get home again” (Hardy 277). Her utter disinterest towards the heath community has kept her ignorant of their general wisdom about the inescapable acceptance of the improbable, unexpected and unwanted ‘jumps’ of Nature. Even though she is driven by maternal emotion to meet her son and then returns again due to emotional humiliation, but the fountain of the disturbance in relationships in Clym’s rejection of the Parisian life, his choice of this heathen life and his marriage against his mother’s approval- a train of unexpected decisions and events disrupting his mother’s progressive Capitalist dream.

Even though the drought was an uncommon climatic-ecological condition in the heath, and even if MrsYeobright has missed the signs of extreme heat on the thirty-first August when “cracks appeared in clayey gardens”, “stinging insects haunted the air, the earth, and every drop of water that [is] to be found”; and “large-leaved plants of a tender kind fla[g] by ten o’clock in the morning; rhubarb ben[d] downward at eleven” in her garden; she still must have felt the unusual heat and water scarcity during the “series of days” since the “drought had set in” (Hardy 277). It is clear that she demises in the drought-ridden heath as a result of her characteristic unyielding nature and disrespect towards Natural events, both emerging from her Capitalist ambitions. The aforesaid instances of her unconcern towards Egdon heath’s climate and ecology suggest that she is one of the representatives of those earlier generations of the Anthropocene, who themselves might have failed to notably contribute to the carbon economy actively, but kept on influencing others to actively participate in the same. The continuation and proliferation of such views of human lives have been the reasons behind the rapidly broadening breach between the human and the non-human world, ultimately leading to the contemporary Climate Crises.

However, the act of recognition about the “something[s]” in the “things” of the cosmos, that are not “propert[ies] of the things” themselves but of “the manner in which [they] intersec[t] with life”; can arise in the mind of MrsYeobright if she acknowledges the superiority of Nature over her intentions and her life, at a moment of “beholding [the ‘things’] and being beheld [by the same]” (Ghosh 19). Such moment is overshadowed by her anthropocentrism and her inclination towards Capitalism. After having departed from Clym’s house, she comes across some ant colonies on her way to home and perceives them as “city street from the top of a tower” (Hardy 291). But the next comment by the third person narrator suggests that instead of perceiving the tininess of individual and species intentions in the whole schemes of the cosmos, she has contemplated the “domestic drama” (Hardy 217): “the track of her next thought... have descended to the eastward upon the roof of Clym’s house” (Hardy 291).

Appropriating the Freudian and Heideggerian term, the “uncanny”, Ghosh opines that it occurs at the moment when the humans “recognise something we had turned away from... the presence and proximity of non-human [inanimate and animate] interlocutors” (40). And as a result of this realisation of the “uncanny”, the humans feel that “the earth

seems to have been toying with humanity by allowing it to assume [through the “emergent bourgeois order”] that it was free to shape its own destiny” (Ghosh 29). Such feeling of the “uncanny” is now arising in the mind of the contemporary people of today who have recognised the causality and casualty resulting from the interactions between the planetary ecology and the fossil-fuel-based civilizations. Even though MrsYeobright had not faced any climatic phenomenon that the contemporary humankind has been facing when “the wild has become the norm” (Ghosh 10); but her singular and unyielding reverence for Capitalism and dislike for rural lifestyle makes her blind to those moments of ‘jumps’ in natural events, which could have inspired her to stop pursuing the myth of uninterrupted progress in bourgeois lifestyle, through Clym.

“The waters invading the Sundarbans are also swamping the Miami Beach” (83), writes Ghosh. He further suggests that within the “finitude and distinctiveness” of a novelistic world, it is impossible to incorporate the sense of universality of the presence and impact of the phenomena of climate change; as opposed to the epic form, that “embraces the inconceivably large [‘expanses of time and space’] almost to the same degree that the novel shuns...” (82); which is indispensable to portray the impact of Climate Change. *The Return of the Native* is not a contemporary climate fiction that is expected to represent the aforementioned incorporation. Even if not incorporating how “continents were created” (Ghosh 82), this “serious fiction”(Ghosh 32) not only does use as its background the epically “grand” and “solemn” (Hardy 4-5) Egdon heath that has remained unchanged since the prehistoric time, but also shows the heath to create ‘much of the momentum’ as well as “the resolution that allow the narrator to move forward” (Ghosh 86) through the narrative. The result is the realisation of the superiority of Nature over human acts, irrespective of time and place. It is also mentionable that through rare co-incidences, disruption of expected progress, uncommon natural event, the applications of the idea of probability and of “surprises” (Ghosh 25) have been maintained in the novel. And that has not degenerated the novel from the higher pedestal of ‘serious fiction’ to the “lower” spheres of “the Gothic”, “the romance”, “the melodrama”; now called “fantasy”, “horror”, “science fiction” (32), or the “surrealist” and “magic realist novels” (36), as Ghosh fears.

To conclude, the representation of MrsYeobright and her interactions with ‘improbable’ constellation of co-incidences, of the ‘jumps’ of Nature, without any conceal[er]; her repeated attempts to reorient the unexpected turns in plans, her death, these all seem to be a critique of the “European Enlightenment’s predatory hubris in relation to earth and its resources” (Ghosh 75) by Hardy. This could not be possible if Hardy himself was infested with the same cultural ‘hubris’. Referring to his novelistic effort, it can be concluded that even though the “crisis of culture, and thus of the imagination” (Ghosh 12) among the lion’s share of the individuals, which hides the awareness that humans share “agency and consciousness” with “other beings and even perhaps with the planet itself” (Ghosh 85), indeed has led to the increasingly severing climate breakdown of the recent time; but, it is not the genre of modern novel, but rather the misreading of the novels by readers (sharing MrsYeobright’s wisdom, perhaps), that had failed the attempts of novelists like Thomas Hardy, to retreat from the path of anthropocentric capitalist fossil-fuel-based civilization.

Lastly, this paper does not claim to have provided the ultimate review on AmitavGhosh’s claim. This paper rather hopes to initiate the act of re-reading the novels since the early years of the Anthropocene and to continue examining AmitavGhosh’s claim about the ‘modern novel’, and to trace the reasons behind the misreading of the novelist’s/novelists’ intentions on part of their contemporary readers; so that the literary sphere can also effectively contribute to the necessary decrease in the Carbon Economy.

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