



Ecocritical Perspectives in the Fiction of Amitav Ghosh: Climate Change, the Anthropocene, and Environmental Justice

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Abstract

Amitav Ghosh occupies a distinguished position in contemporary Indian English literature owing to his sustained and sophisticated engagement with ecological concerns. This paper examines the ecocritical dimensions of Ghosh's fiction, focusing on how his novels integrate history, anthropology, mythology, and environmental science to reimagine the relationship between humanity and the non-human world. Through close attention to *The Hungry Tide* (2004), *Gun Island* (2019), the *Ibis Trilogy*, and the influential non-fiction work *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (2016), the study explores Ghosh's ecological imagination, his representation of nature and non-human agency, his climate-change narratives, and his engagement with Anthropocene discourse and environmental justice. The paper argues that Ghosh challenges anthropocentric assumptions by portraying rivers, oceans, mangroves, storms, and animals as active participants in human history, while foregrounding the disproportionate vulnerability of marginalized communities to ecological degradation. Situating his work within contemporary theoretical frameworks—Deep Ecology, Environmental Humanities, Postcolonial Ecocriticism, and Anthropocene theory—the study demonstrates that Ghosh has significantly expanded the scope of Indian environmental literature and established fiction as an essential medium for cultivating ecological consciousness and advocating sustainable coexistence.

Keywords: *Amitav Ghosh, ecocriticism, climate fiction, Anthropocene, environmental justice, postcolonial ecocriticism, non-human agency, Sundarbans.*

1. Introduction

The fiction of Amitav Ghosh occupies a distinguished position in contemporary Indian English literature because of its remarkable ability to integrate history, culture, politics, anthropology, and environmental concerns into compelling literary narratives. Among modern Indian novelists, Ghosh stands out for his sustained engagement with ecological issues, particularly climate change, biodiversity loss, environmental degradation, migration, globalization, colonial exploitation, and the interconnectedness of human and non-human life. His works challenge conventional perceptions of nature by presenting the environment not as a passive backdrop but as an active force that shapes historical events, human identities, cultural practices, and social relationships (Ghosh, 2016).

Ghosh's ecological imagination extends beyond the boundaries of local landscapes to encompass oceans, rivers, forests, islands, mangrove ecosystems, coastal regions, and transnational spaces, thereby emphasizing the global dimensions of environmental crises. His



fiction consistently demonstrates that ecological problems cannot be understood in isolation from political, economic, historical, and cultural processes, as environmental degradation is closely linked with colonialism, industrialization, globalization, capitalist expansion, and social inequality (Nayar, 2019). Works such as *The Hungry Tide*, *Gun Island*, the *Ibis Trilogy*, and *The Great Derangement* illustrate how climate change and ecological disruption have become defining realities of the twenty-first century, affecting not only ecosystems but also migration patterns, livelihoods, cultural identities, and human survival.

Ghosh's narratives portray vulnerable communities such as fishermen, farmers, indigenous populations, migrants, and coastal inhabitants whose lives are deeply intertwined with fragile ecosystems and who often suffer disproportionately from environmental disasters despite contributing least to ecological destruction. His fiction therefore foregrounds environmental justice while exposing the unequal distribution of ecological risks across different societies (Mukherjee, 2018). Another distinctive feature of his environmental vision is his emphasis on the agency of the non-human world: rivers, oceans, forests, mangroves, storms, animals, and climatic forces are presented as active participants in human history rather than passive natural resources, challenging anthropocentric assumptions that place humans at the centre of existence.

This perspective aligns closely with contemporary ecocritical theories such as Deep Ecology, Environmental Humanities, Postcolonial Ecocriticism, and Anthropocene Theory. Ghosh also demonstrates that literature possesses the unique ability to represent environmental crises in ways that scientific reports alone cannot achieve, by connecting ecological realities with human emotions, memory, imagination, ethics, and cultural experience. Where scientific communication tends toward abstraction and statistical projection, literature grounds ecological change in the texture of lived experience, rendering the planetary crisis intelligible at the scale of individual lives and communities.

The present paper examines the ecocritical dimensions of Ghosh's fiction by exploring his environmental philosophy, ecological imagination, representation of nature, climate-change narratives, Anthropocene discourse, and literary engagement with environmental justice and sustainability. It further investigates how his selected works contribute to contemporary environmental thought by integrating scientific understanding with historical awareness, cultural memory, and ethical reflection. Through this analysis, the study demonstrates that Amitav Ghosh has significantly expanded the scope of Indian environmental literature by transforming ecological concerns into central themes of literary expression, thereby inspiring greater environmental consciousness and reinforcing the urgent need for sustainable coexistence between humanity and the natural world.

2. Life, Literary Career, and Environmental Vision

Amitav Ghosh is one of the most influential contemporary Indian English novelists whose literary career has significantly transformed postcolonial literature, historical fiction, and ecocritical discourse through his interdisciplinary approach to storytelling. Born on 11 July 1956 in Kolkata, India, Ghosh spent his childhood in several countries, including Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Iran, because of his father's diplomatic assignments. These



multicultural experiences exposed him to diverse cultures, languages, landscapes, and historical traditions, which later became central to his literary imagination.

He completed his undergraduate education at St. Stephen's College, University of Delhi, followed by a master's degree from the Delhi School of Economics and a doctorate in Social Anthropology from the University of Oxford. His academic training in anthropology profoundly influenced his writing by enabling him to integrate historical research, ethnographic observation, environmental studies, and cultural analysis into richly layered narratives. Ghosh began his literary career with *The Circle of Reason* (1986), followed by acclaimed works such as *The Shadow Lines*, *In an Antique Land*, *The Calcutta Chromosome*, *The Glass Palace*, the *Ibis Trilogy*, *The Hungry Tide*, *Gun Island*, and the non-fiction work *The Great Derangement*. He has received numerous honours, including the Sahitya Akademi Award, the Padma Shri, and the Jnanpith Award (Roos & Hunt, 2018).

Unlike traditional nature writing that primarily celebrates scenic beauty, Ghosh examines the complex relationships among climate change, biodiversity, migration, colonial history, globalization, capitalism, and environmental justice. His fiction consistently portrays ecosystems such as rivers, mangrove forests, islands, oceans, and coastal landscapes as dynamic ecological entities that influence human history and cultural development. In *The Hungry Tide*, he explores the ecological complexity of the Sundarbans while highlighting the coexistence of humans, dolphins, crocodiles, mangroves, and the Royal Bengal tiger within a fragile ecosystem threatened by rising sea levels and cyclones (Jalais, 2019).

Gun Island further expands his environmental vision by addressing climate-induced migration, extreme weather events, and global ecological interconnectedness. In *The Great Derangement*, Ghosh argues that conventional literary forms have often failed to adequately represent climate change and calls for new narrative approaches capable of addressing planetary environmental crises. His environmental philosophy challenges anthropocentric thinking by emphasizing the agency of the non-human world and the interconnectedness of all living systems, while highlighting the unequal impact of ecological degradation on marginalized communities and thereby linking environmental concerns with questions of ethics, justice, and historical responsibility.

Through his integration of history, science, mythology, anthropology, and environmental thought, Ghosh has established a unique literary tradition that combines artistic excellence with ecological awareness. His anthropological sensibility is particularly evident in the care with which he renders local knowledge, oral tradition, and the lived experience of communities inhabiting fragile environments. This attentiveness lends his fiction an ethnographic depth that distinguishes it from more abstract or didactic forms of environmental writing, demonstrating that fiction can serve as a powerful medium for understanding climate change and inspiring sustainable coexistence between humanity and the natural world.

3. Ecological Imagination and the Representation of Nature

The ecological imagination in the fiction of Amitav Ghosh represents one of the most sophisticated and comprehensive environmental visions in contemporary Indian English



literature. His works move beyond conventional representations of nature by portraying ecological systems as dynamic, interconnected, and historically significant forces that actively shape human civilization. Unlike traditional narratives in which nature functions merely as a background for human activities, Ghosh constructs ecosystems such as rivers, oceans, mangrove forests, islands, mountains, coastal regions, and forests as living entities possessing agency, memory, and transformative power (Huggan & Tiffin, 2015).

His ecological imagination is deeply interdisciplinary, combining insights from environmental science, anthropology, history, geography, mythology, ecology, and postcolonial studies to examine the complex interactions between humans and the natural world. Throughout his novels, Ghosh consistently demonstrates that environmental phenomena such as cyclones, floods, rising sea levels, changing ocean currents, disappearing species, and shifting climatic patterns cannot be understood in isolation from political, economic, and cultural processes. The *Hungry Tide* vividly portrays the Sundarbans as a fragile ecological landscape where rivers, mangroves, dolphins, crocodiles, birds, and the Royal Bengal tiger coexist with human communities in an intricate web of interdependence.

The representation of nature and the non-human world constitutes one of the most distinctive features of Ghosh's fiction, reflecting his commitment to challenging anthropocentric assumptions. Throughout his novels, he portrays rivers, oceans, mangrove forests, wildlife, birds, marine life, storms, tides, and climatic forces not merely as physical settings but as active participants in human history and cultural life. Human communities are portrayed as participants in fragile ecosystems rather than their masters, emphasizing that survival depends upon understanding and respecting the ecological rhythms of nature (Vescovi, 2017).

Another significant aspect of his environmental vision is the integration of indigenous ecological knowledge and traditional cultural beliefs that acknowledge the agency of rivers, forests, animals, and natural forces. Through mythology, folklore, and local traditions, Ghosh illustrates alternative ecological worldviews that challenge modern assumptions of human superiority and technological control over nature. From an ecocritical perspective, his works resonate strongly with the principles of Deep Ecology and Environmental Humanities by recognizing the intrinsic value of all forms of life irrespective of their economic usefulness, suggesting that the destruction of the non-human world ultimately threatens human civilization because ecological systems constitute the foundation of life itself.

The non-human world in Ghosh's narratives is never reduced to symbolic ornamentation; instead, it exists as an autonomous ecological presence deserving ethical recognition and protection. His descriptions of mangrove vegetation, aquatic life, endangered species, migratory animals, insects, and coastal ecosystems combine scientific accuracy with literary richness, producing landscapes that are simultaneously precise and imaginatively resonant. In this respect, Ghosh's ecological imagination extends to temporal and geographical scales rarely attempted in modern fiction, connecting colonial history with present-day climate crises and linking regional landscapes with global environmental



processes. Through this expansive vision, he demonstrates that ecological challenges transcend national boundaries and require collective global responsibility.

Rather than separating culture from nature, Ghosh reveals that human identity, history, and survival are deeply embedded within ecological processes. His narratives repeatedly stage encounters in which human characters confront the limits of their knowledge and control, discovering that the landscapes they inhabit possess their own logic, rhythm, and volatility. This recognition of the more-than-human world unsettles the confident narratives of progress and mastery that have long dominated modern thought, inviting readers to adopt a more humble and relational understanding of their place within the web of life. Consequently, Ghosh's representation of nature becomes a sustained critique of anthropocentric modernity while advocating ecological ethics, biodiversity conservation, and sustainable coexistence.

4. Climate Change and Environmental Crisis in Ghosh's Fiction

Climate change and environmental crisis occupy a central position in the fiction of Amitav Ghosh, making him one of the foremost literary voices addressing the ecological challenges of the twenty-first century. Unlike many contemporary novelists who treat climate change as a peripheral issue, Ghosh places environmental transformation at the very centre of his narratives, demonstrating that global warming, biodiversity loss, rising sea levels, cyclones, floods, ecological migration, and environmental degradation have become defining realities of modern civilization (Ghosh, 2016).

In *The Hungry Tide*, Ghosh portrays the fragile ecosystem of the Sundarbans, where rivers, mangrove forests, tides, dolphins, crocodiles, birds, and the Royal Bengal tiger coexist with vulnerable human communities facing the constant threat of cyclones, floods, and rising sea levels. The novel demonstrates that environmental uncertainty has become an integral part of everyday life for coastal populations whose survival depends upon adapting to unpredictable ecological conditions. *Gun Island* expands this vision by connecting climate-induced migration, extreme weather events, wildfires, changing ocean currents, and ecological disruptions across multiple continents, illustrating the global nature of climate change (Chakraborty, 2021).

A distinctive feature of Ghosh's treatment of climate change is his emphasis on environmental justice. He repeatedly demonstrates that marginalized communities, indigenous peoples, fishermen, farmers, migrants, and economically disadvantaged populations experience the consequences of ecological degradation more severely than affluent societies despite contributing relatively little to greenhouse gas emissions. His works expose the historical relationship between colonial resource extraction, industrial capitalism, and contemporary climate crises, suggesting that current environmental challenges cannot be separated from patterns of historical exploitation and global inequality (Mukherjee, 2018).

His novels consistently reveal that climate change is not merely a scientific or technological problem but also a historical, political, economic, ethical, and cultural crisis. In *The Great Derangement*, Ghosh argues that traditional literary realism tends to exclude extraordinary environmental events from serious narrative attention, treating catastrophic weather and improbable ecological phenomena as unworthy of the modern novel. His fiction



therefore attempts to overcome this limitation by integrating ecological disasters, environmental uncertainty, and planetary interconnectedness into compelling literary forms. Storms, oceans, rivers, forests, and climatic forces are portrayed as active agents capable of reshaping history and challenging human technological confidence, thereby reflecting Anthropocene theory's insistence on the profound influence of human activity upon planetary systems.

By integrating scientific knowledge, historical analysis, cultural memory, mythology, and literary imagination, Ghosh transforms climate change into a deeply human narrative that connects ecological realities with questions of justice, identity, migration, and survival. His narratives encourage readers to recognize that environmental crises require collective ethical responsibility, international cooperation, biodiversity conservation, and sustainable development rather than purely technological solutions. Consequently, his fiction makes a significant contribution to contemporary environmental literature by fostering ecological awareness and challenging unsustainable models of development while inspiring readers to reconsider humanity's relationship with the natural world in an era of escalating climate uncertainty.

5. The Anthropocene and Literary Representation

The concept of the Anthropocene occupies a central position in the fiction and critical thought of Amitav Ghosh, making his works among the most significant literary explorations of human-induced environmental change in contemporary world literature. The Anthropocene, a term popularized by Crutzen and Stoermer, refers to a proposed geological epoch in which human activities have become the dominant force shaping the Earth's climate, ecosystems, biodiversity, and geological processes (Trexler, 2015).

Ghosh's literary imagination engages deeply with this concept by demonstrating that climate change, biodiversity loss, rising sea levels, deforestation, pollution, species extinction, and environmental degradation are not isolated ecological events but interconnected consequences of industrialization, colonial expansion, globalization, fossil-fuel dependence, and unsustainable economic development. His fiction repeatedly emphasizes that the Anthropocene has fundamentally altered the relationship between humans and the natural world, challenging traditional assumptions that nature exists merely as a passive background for human history.

His influential work *The Great Derangement* develops this perspective by arguing that modern literary realism has often struggled to represent the extraordinary scale and unpredictability of climate change. According to Ghosh, conventional narratives tend to privilege individual human experiences while marginalizing environmental events that challenge established notions of realism, probability, and historical progress. Consequently, he advocates new literary forms capable of representing the complex realities of the Anthropocene, where ecological crises transcend national borders, disciplinary boundaries, and traditional distinctions between nature and culture (Menely & Taylor, 2017).

In novels such as *The Hungry Tide* and *Gun Island*, Ghosh portrays ecological systems as dynamic entities whose transformations directly affect the lives of vulnerable



communities. Cyclones, floods, changing tidal patterns, disappearing habitats, and rising sea levels become powerful narrative forces that reshape human destinies while revealing the fragility of modern civilization in the face of environmental uncertainty. This narrative strategy dramatizes the central insight of Anthropocene scholarship: that the customary separation between human history and natural history has collapsed, and that the geological and the biographical now unfold on a single, entangled timescale.

Ghosh's representation of the Anthropocene also highlights the unequal distribution of environmental risks, demonstrating that marginalized communities, indigenous peoples, coastal populations, and economically disadvantaged societies often bear the greatest consequences of climate change despite contributing least to global environmental degradation. This emphasis on environmental justice connects Anthropocene discourse with postcolonial ecocriticism by revealing the historical relationship between colonial resource extraction, capitalist expansion, and contemporary ecological crises. His fiction further integrates mythology, folklore, indigenous ecological knowledge, and scientific understanding, suggesting that alternative cultural narratives can offer valuable insights into humanity's relationship with the Earth.

Through his innovative literary representation of the Anthropocene, Ghosh transforms fiction into a powerful medium for understanding planetary environmental change and its cultural, ethical, political, and historical implications. His works advocate biodiversity conservation, ecological ethics, sustainability, and global environmental responsibility while warning that humanity's future depends upon recognizing its ecological limits. Consequently, his contribution extends beyond literary achievement to become an important intervention in contemporary environmental thought, demonstrating that literature plays an essential role in shaping ecological consciousness and inspiring collective action to address the unprecedented challenges of the Anthropocene era.

6. Climate Fiction (Cli-Fi) and Ecocritical Narratives

Climate Fiction (Cli-Fi) has emerged as one of the most influential literary genres addressing the ecological realities of the twenty-first century, and Amitav Ghosh is widely recognized as one of its most significant contributors in Indian English literature. His fiction expands the boundaries of conventional climate narratives by integrating environmental science, history, anthropology, mythology, and postcolonial perspectives into complex literary representations of climate change and ecological transformation (Johns-Putra, 2019).

Unlike traditional environmental literature that primarily celebrates natural beauty or laments ecological destruction, Ghosh's climate fiction explores the interconnected social, political, economic, and cultural consequences of global environmental change. Novels such as *The Hungry Tide* and *Gun Island*, together with *The Great Derangement*, portray climate change not as a distant or abstract scientific phenomenon but as an immediate lived reality affecting vulnerable ecosystems and human communities across the world. Rising sea levels, cyclones, floods, coastal erosion, biodiversity loss, extreme weather events, and ecological displacement become central narrative forces that shape the experiences of fishermen, migrants, indigenous communities, and coastal populations.



Ghosh's cli-fi differs from many Western climate narratives because it situates environmental crises within the historical contexts of colonialism, globalization, capitalist expansion, and environmental inequality. His works demonstrate that climate change disproportionately affects societies that have contributed least to global ecological degradation, thereby linking climate fiction with questions of justice and historical responsibility. Another distinctive feature of his ecocritical narratives is his rejection of strict boundaries between human and non-human worlds, in which rivers, oceans, mangrove forests, storms, animals, birds, and climatic systems possess narrative agency and influence human history (Bracke, 2018).

Ghosh also integrates mythology, folklore, indigenous ecological knowledge, and scientific understanding to construct alternative ways of interpreting climate crises. In *Gun Island*, for instance, the legend of the Gun Merchant and the goddess Manasa Devi becomes a vehicle for exploring the relationship between human vulnerability and the volatile forces of the natural world, allowing ancient narrative to illuminate contemporary ecological experience. Traditional stories and cultural beliefs thus become valuable interpretative frameworks that complement modern scientific explanations, enriching ecological understanding through multiple knowledge systems.

From an ecocritical perspective, his climate fiction aligns closely with Anthropocene Theory, Environmental Humanities, and Postcolonial Ecocriticism by demonstrating that environmental change cannot be separated from historical exploitation, economic inequality, and cultural transformation. His narratives further question the limitations of conventional literary realism, arguing that unprecedented ecological events require innovative narrative forms capable of representing the complexity and unpredictability of planetary environmental crises. Through emotionally engaging storytelling, richly detailed ecological landscapes, and interdisciplinary scholarship, Ghosh transforms climate fiction into a serious literary form capable of confronting the defining crisis of the age.

In positioning climate fiction as a genre with genuine intellectual and moral seriousness, Ghosh contributes to a broader reconfiguration of literary value in the twenty-first century. His work suggests that the traditional preoccupations of the novel—individual psychology, domestic drama, and social manners—must expand to accommodate the vast temporal and spatial scales of ecological change. In this way, his fiction not only records the crisis of the Anthropocene but participates in the imaginative labour of reorienting literature toward planetary concerns, offering readers new frameworks for comprehending their entanglement with the living world.

7. Environmental Justice, Postcolonial Ecocriticism, and Sustainability

A defining strength of Ghosh's environmental vision lies in its integration of ecological concern with questions of justice and historical responsibility. His fiction repeatedly illustrates that ecological degradation disproportionately affects marginalized communities—fishermen, farmers, indigenous populations, coastal residents, and migrants—thereby highlighting the ethical dimensions of environmental justice. By linking ecological vulnerability to colonial history and capitalist expansion, Ghosh situates his narratives within



the framework of postcolonial ecocriticism, which examines how imperial patterns of resource extraction continue to shape uneven environmental outcomes in the present (Nixon, 2011; DeLoughrey, 2019).

The concept of slow violence—the gradual, often invisible harm inflicted upon poor communities and their environments over time—is particularly relevant to Ghosh's work. His narratives render visible the incremental degradations of rising waters, salinized soils, and vanishing livelihoods that seldom register as dramatic events yet devastate the communities that endure them. In doing so, Ghosh gives narrative form to forms of harm that resist conventional representation, insisting that the temporally dispersed catastrophes of the climate crisis demand new modes of ethical and imaginative attention.

Ghosh's works consistently portray ecological systems as interconnected networks where environmental disruption inevitably produces social, political, and economic consequences. His interdisciplinary approach encourages readers to recognize that climate change, biodiversity loss, migration, and environmental degradation are inseparable aspects of a single global ecological crisis. Moreover, his narratives promote ecological ethics by questioning exploitative development models and advocating greater environmental responsibility at both local and global levels.

The theme of sustainability emerges through Ghosh's emphasis on indigenous ecological knowledge, cultural memory, and biodiversity conservation. He consistently presents traditional beliefs and local narratives not as superstition but as valuable cultural resources that offer alternative ways of understanding ecological relationships. This recovery of subjugated knowledge systems aligns his fiction with broader efforts in the environmental humanities to decolonize ecological thought and to imagine more sustainable forms of coexistence between human and non-human life (Adamson & Davis, 2017).

From an ecocritical perspective, Ghosh's literary contribution represents a significant shift from regional environmental narratives toward a comprehensive planetary ecological imagination. His works bridge literature with environmental science, history, anthropology, and sustainability studies while preserving the artistic richness of storytelling. Consequently, Ghosh has emerged as one of the most influential literary voices addressing contemporary environmental challenges, establishing literature as an essential medium for fostering ecological awareness, environmental justice, biodiversity conservation, and sustainable thinking.

Ultimately, Ghosh's vision of sustainability is inseparable from his vision of justice. He insists that no meaningful response to the ecological crisis can proceed without confronting the historical and structural inequalities that have shaped it, and that genuine sustainability requires not merely technological adjustment but a fundamental transformation of the values and relationships that govern human interaction with the natural world. In articulating this integrated vision, his fiction offers not only a diagnosis of the present crisis but an ethical horizon toward which readers and societies might aspire.



8. Conclusion

The fiction of Amitav Ghosh constitutes a landmark achievement in contemporary environmental literature, transforming ecological concerns from peripheral themes into the central preoccupation of serious literary art. Across *The Hungry Tide*, *Gun Island*, the *Ibis Trilogy*, and *The Great Derangement*, Ghosh consistently reimagines nature not as a passive backdrop but as an active force endowed with agency, memory, and the power to shape human history. His interdisciplinary method—weaving together anthropology, history, mythology, and environmental science—produces a distinctive ecological imagination that challenges the anthropocentric assumptions underlying much of modern thought.

By foregrounding the disproportionate vulnerability of marginalized communities and by tracing the historical continuities between colonial exploitation and present-day climate crises, Ghosh situates his work within the traditions of postcolonial ecocriticism and environmental justice. His critique in *The Great Derangement* of the inability of conventional literary realism to represent climate change has become a touchstone for scholars of the Anthropocene, prompting renewed attention to the formal and imaginative demands of the ecological crisis.

The significance of Ghosh's achievement lies not only in his thematic concerns but in his demonstration that ecological awareness can be woven seamlessly into narratives of great emotional and intellectual power. By recovering indigenous knowledge systems, attending to the agency of the non-human world, and insisting on the interconnectedness of ecological and social justice, he offers a model for a literature adequate to the planetary crisis. His fiction resists both despair and complacency, holding open the possibility of a more responsible and sustainable relationship between human societies and the ecosystems that sustain them.

Ultimately, Ghosh demonstrates that literature possesses a unique capacity to render the emotional, ethical, and cultural realities of environmental change in ways that scientific discourse alone cannot achieve. His narratives encourage readers to reconsider humanity's relationship with the Earth, to recognize the intrinsic value of the non-human world, and to acknowledge the urgent necessity of sustainable coexistence. In expanding the boundaries of Indian environmental literature and contributing to global ecocritical thought, Amitav Ghosh has secured his place as one of the most consequential literary voices of the age of climate crisis.



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