

Amitav Ghosh's *Countdown*: A Crusade against Nuclear Proliferation

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Abstract

This paper explores Amitav Ghosh's *Countdown* (1999) and foregrounds his reactions to the testing of nuclear weapons in India on 11th May 1998, followed instantly by the Pakistani tests. The travelogue follows the extraordinary journeys of Ghosh to search for people's impression about the tests. He is apprehensive about the complexities of the nuclear issues and interconnectedness of the fate of both India and Pakistan. He forewarns that the tests will engender fatal consequences and give rise not only to geo-political tension between the two neighbouring countries but also precipitate horrendous and hair-raising disaster on humans, environment and the world itself. He prognosticates impending dooms lurking around in the world on the brink of environmental ruination, human genocide, and ravages of human civilization. Nuclear test, for Ghosh, is a symbol of mutually assured destruction, and therefore, he appeals for addressing the crises to be caused by the testing of nuclear devices. The objective of this paper is to gauge the trepidation and insidious effects of nuclear proliferation, and to unmask the hidden motives behind the nuclear tests. The research is effectuated by means of close textual analysis of the text.

Keywords: *Nuclear Tests, Weaponisation, Catastrophe, Radioactive, Geo-political Hostility*

Introduction

Ghosh's writings are sincere expression of the voice of the society, the country, and the world around him. He bears the moral responsibility to address the urgent issues — war, terrorism, violence, climate change, nuclear tension, and more — of the world. Shubha Tiwari's observation that "The thought content of his [Ghosh's] books is mighty" (2) is a testimony to the fact that Ghosh views literature as a tool to spread his notion, and make public aware of global issues. He uses literature as a means of altering society and people. In this regard, he agrees with Stauffer, who believes that literature is a "catalyst, guide, or mirror of social change" (qtd. in Senthil, 894). He suggests that writing should persuade its spectators, over a common understanding of some issues and this initial acknowledgment brings forth change in the society or individual. Ghosh's writings reflect his *zeitgeist* (the Time-Spirit). His writing does not "create a sort of palace of art or ivory tower, where it isolates itself from the freshening current of life" (Goodman, 13).

Amitav Ghosh's *Countdown* is a social phenomenon, for it is a means of creating environmental and political awareness on the one hand and to warn us against nuclear proliferation on the other hand. It is a polemic questioning of justification of the nuclear programmes in India and other countries. After the testing of five nuclear devices by India on 11 May, 1998 and thereafter by Pakistan in the summer of same year, Ghosh visits various places in India, Pakistan, and Nepal to talk, interview and discuss with the politicians, military officers, journalists, and common people. He collects their impression of the aftermath of the recent nuclear tests. He prewarns that the tests will generate lethal effects on the world and eventually it will be a threat to human existence. He asserts that India's testing of nuclear devices for status-enhancing and its wish to be a global player will ultimately prove to be suicidal. In a prescient manner, Ghosh points out that if the aggressive nuclear policy is not dealt with humility and global solidarity, the nuclear apocalypse will pose existential threat to the planet and the humanity. This angst and anguish is interspersed throughout the text.

Since its publication in 1999, Amitav Ghosh's *Countdown* has remained relevant in discussion. It is deeply packed with information on South Asian issues, and therefore, it has been analysed and interpreted variedly. Some critics concur that *Countdown* exposes the social reality of Indian politics and politicians. In this context, Mekha Mary Reji writes that, "By pointing out the political game in the name of defense security, Ghosh invites readers to call for peace and prosperity out of love and not by warfare" (434). She justifies her stand arguing that testing of nuclear devices is meant only for politicising the government's agenda. It has nothing to do with social welfare of the common people. Sangeeta Rani analyses the text as a travelogue, and asserts that "*Countdown*, a travelogue deals with a panorama of things – the author's visit to Pokharan, Pakistan and Siachen; his conversation with many people in India [...] the social, political, economic and religious drawbacks of Pakistan" (198). Some other critics like Suman and Gyanabati view the novel through the lens of subaltern studies. They note that, "In Ghosh's non-fictional work *Countdown*, through the description of people in that area, the existence of voiceless people comes forth" (1015). In the same line, some critics regard the text as a plea for maintaining international peace and prosperity.

In sum, the extensive body of criticism on *Countdown* reflects its richness and relevance in modern world. Despite the fact that there exist abundances of criticism on the text under discussion, it is still to be explored in the light of the impact of nuclear tests on human life, ecosystem, and the civilisation. And this research paper is centered on these impacts, justifying *Countdown* as a crusade against nuclear proliferation.

This study exclusively employs qualitative research approach to explore the unanticipated impact of nuclear proliferation on the earth. The text scrutinises the lived experiences of the interviewees with critical attention. Thus, the research is predominantly based on the textual analysis of the primary source to identify the themes related to the aftermaths of nuclear tests both by India and Pakistan. The secondary sources like scholarly research articles on the text and book reviews are read and analysed with particular attention, and then used to support the thesis.

Additionally, the concept of environmentalism, eco-criticism, and apocalypticism will also be used as theoretical tools to achieve the research goal.

Analysis of the Text

Amitav Ghosh, as he himself confesses, visited the site of nuclear tests in Pokharan three months after the test. His visit was occasioned by the celebration of India's fifty-first Independence Day and the then Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee's addressing to the nation. Ghosh winced and stood aghast as he was told of the B.J.P.'s cadres and supporters celebrating the successful test of nuclear devices. The celebration was conducted on epic scale. He writes:

They organized festivities and handed out celebratory sweetmeats on the streets. There was talk of sending dust from the test site around the country so that the whole nation could partake in the glow of the blasts. Some of the B.J.P.'s leaders were said to be thinking of building a monument at Pokharan, a 'shrine of strength' that could be visited by pilgrims. (6)

Ghosh is censorious of such outpourings of joy and he severely reproaches the government for nuclear euphoria. The term 'shrine of strength' satirises the scenes of jubilation in the country. His note of sarcasm and derision is further attested when he writes, "A celebration was organized on the crater left by the blasts. The Prime Minister was photographed standing on the crater's rim, throwing flowers into the pit. It was as though this were one of the crowning achievements of his life" (6). Ironically, these celebrations and exaltations that were supposed to win the common public's heart left different and detrimental marks on their mind. People in the neighbouring villages were not happy with the tests because the tests had harbingered serious threats and damages to them. They fell victim to the immense health issues and insufferable pain. Reji comments that "He [Ghosh] satirically criticizes the arrogance and dominance of politics and explains they never care for the peace and prosperity of people instead they aim to attain a global status as a powerful nation" (435). One of

the villagers, Manohar Joshi, recalls the first testing of nuclear device during the tenure of Indira Gandhi in 1974, and narrates that:

There was so much illness in here that people didn't have money to buy pills. We had never heard of cancer before in this area. But people began to get cancer after the test. There were strange skin diseases. People used to scratch themselves all the time. There were sores on their skin. (8)

This description reminds the readers of the horrific situation observed in Hiroshima and Nagasaki after the detonation of atom bombs in 1945 by the USA. John Hersey writes, "The flash burn presented several distinctive features. Marked redness of the affected skin areas appeared almost immediately, according to the Japanese, with progressive changes in the skin taking place over a period of a few hours" (86). He further writes that "the Japanese estimate that 75%, and most of the reports estimate that over 50%, of the deaths were due to burns" (87). The report validates the danger and fear of nuclear tests on the life and the psyche of the people in the affected area. Ghosh is very critical of the disparity between what the leaders and their followers promulgate about the tests and what the common public really experience. The government's celebratory activities and its indifference towards the suffering of their public caused by the tests remind us of Shakespeare's King Lear when he says, "As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods, / They kill us for their sport" (4.1.38–39).

The tests of nuclear devices caused serious damages to the villagers and their settlement, too. In a village called Khetoloi, the impacts of the test could easily be seen. The "walls had been split by the tests of 11 May" (9). There were "cracks opened up in the walls of some of their houses. . . . The blasts split the tanks, emptying them of water" (11). But all these troubles meant nothing to the government. Contrary to the expectations of the people, the political activists wanted to celebrate in the village by erecting colourful awning. The small prosperous village settled by the Bishnois, members of a small religious sect, is under threat due to the impact of the tests. One of the villagers says:

Before the tests of 1974, cancer was unknown to Khetoloi. Since that time some ten to fifteen people had died of the disease. Many had suffered from inexplicable skin rashes...Sores and boils appear on the skin. Even cows and camels get sores on their hide. It is as though the grass itself is covered with radioactivity... Some twenty children had been born with deformities in the limbs. Cows had developed tumours in their udders. Calves were born blind, and with their tongues and eyes attached to the wrong parts of their faces. (11)

It is the collective voice of the people residing in that area. There are many shocking and grasping tales by the villagers of the 1998 tests and the horrifying details of the long-term impacts of the blasts that brought hellacious pains of cancers, rashes, and natal deformities both in men and animals. Ghosh is aware of the fact that the prevalence of radioactivity in air and water has put the lives of the people, animals and vegetation in danger. This fateful situation is parallel to the harmful ecological consequences foretold by Arundhati Roy in her famous book *The End of Imagination* (1998):

Our cities and forests, our fields and villages will burn for days. Rivers will turn to poison. The air will become fire. The wind will spread the flames when everything there is to burn has burned and the fires die, smoke will rise and shut out the sun. The earth be enveloped in darkness. There will be no day. Only interminable night.

Temperatures will drop to far below freezing and nuclear winter will set in. Water will turn into toxic ice. Radioactive fallout will seep through the earth and contaminate groundwater. Most living things, animals and vegetables, fish and fowl, will die. Only rats and cockroaches will breed and multiply and compete with foraging, relict humans for what little food there is. (5)

Like Roy, Ghosh is against nuclear weapons that are to destroy the very essence of natural world. He vehemently criticises the government for masking the sufferings of the people in the affected area in the name of

glorification of the tests. He has his great sympathy for the people living there with all turbulence and torment, and becomes their voice for anti-nuclearisation. He warns of the dangerous consequences of nuclearisation, and scathingly denounces the government for the tests. In this sense, he supports *The Environmental Justice Movement* which is a "collective term for the efforts of poor communities to defend themselves against the dumping of toxic waste, the harmful contamination of their air, food, and water, the loss of their lands and livelihoods, and the indifference of governments and corporations" (Kerridge, 530).

Ghosh, an ambassador of peace, challenges the Government's decision of nuclear weaponisation on economic ground, too. He suggests that the tremendous euphoria that the explosions had caused was limited only to the handful of elites. Majority of the Indians had nothing to do with the explosions and their prestigious glorification because they had their own problems to ponder at. Ghosh believes that nuclear testing in India is absurd, for the expenses done on them would have uplifted the lives of the common people. He charges the Government of neglecting the poor folks' tenacious struggle for survival, education, and justice. He quotes Mr Ram Vilas Paswan, a Dalit leader of great eminence, saying:

And this in a country where ordinary citizens don't have food to eat. Where villages are being washed away by floods. Where prices are touching the skies. Of the country's six hundred thousand villages, one-third don't have arrangements for safe drinking water. Fifty percent of our people live below the poverty line...we could open one hundred primary schools. (20)

Here Mr Paswan is vociferously critical of the Government for the explosions. He accuses the Government for being indifferent and insensitive to the need of the poor people. The act of explosions is a kind of mockery to the poor people, whose money the Government spent in weaponisation, but they are denied justice and education.

Ghosh picturises India ironically for spending billions of rupees for armament instead of fighting against mass starvation, injustices, and

detering natural calamities. People in the village Khetoloi were enraged at the tests, and they vehemently ventilated the agony saying that "The only people who benefit from these tests are the politicians (10). Their exasperation was evident when they said, "But now we are fed up. What benefits do we get from these tests? We don't even have a hospital here - all we have got is a health centre with one nurse" (11). On the basis of his interviews and visits to different persons and places, Ghosh concludes that such testing exposes the visionless leadership of India. Contextualising the situation, Acharjee and Khuraijam befittingly opine that "Political elites in a particular nation determine dos or don'ts of its subjects. Their decision is upheld through various mediums like newspaper, television, radio etc. and within this propagation of their ideology the voice of the common people is subdued" (1015-1016).

Nuclear Tests and Geo-political Hostility

India's testing of nuclear weapons is fundamentally based on the theory of 'deterrence', a concept that using of force by one party can convince another party to refrain initiating some other course of action. The theory of "Deterrence presumes a complete, sophisticated understanding of the psychology of the enemy that nuclear bombs are only for the fear of annihilation" (Umarani and Anamica, 2). Tom Sauer agrees that "Deterrence in general (in contrast to coercion, see further) aims to convince another actor not to do something that he has not yet started to do" (195). The then Indian Government and its allies justified the nuclear tests and India's Nuclear-weapon Policy on that very ground. But there are people who anticipate what will happen if a country is not deterred because "One of the conditions for an effective nuclear deterrent is that the enemy is a rational actor in the sense that he understands the threat"

(Sauer,195). Ghosh resolutely considers these nuclear tests as nationalist propaganda to raise popular support for the elites in power, risking peace and other social priorities in the name of political opportunism. He makes a field visit to different parts of India, Pakistan and Nepal, and has meetings and conversations with political leaders and key figures in regard to the

nuclear explosion. He dwells upon the debates and political stances, scrutinises the expert commentary on the need of nuclear test, and furnishes his perception on the justification of each country's stand to possess nuclear power.

Ghosh's acidic satire is manifested when he comments on the pictures hung in the corridors of the royal palace of Bikaner, "This was what nuclearists wanted: to sign treaties, to be pictured with the world's powerful, to hang portraits on their walls, to become ancestors. On the bomb they had pinned their hopes of bringing it all back" (13). In other words, Ghosh implies that the nuclear test is nothing but a strategy adopted by the elites to regain the lost 'great power status' (13). When interviewed, K. Subrahmanyam, the strategic mastermind behind India's nuclear policies, said that, "Nuclear weapons are not military weapons" (13). He further added that "The international system of security has been progressively brought under a global nuclear order...India wants to be a player and not an object of this global nuclear order" (13). There are many Indians who believe "A nuclear weapon acts like a million pound note" (14) or "a minting of false coin in the hope of purchasing worldwide influence" (14). They think that there is no danger in the deployment of nuclear weapons because those bombs are merely a counter in the game of global power politics. Some people go to the extent of acquiring nuclear weapons as an icon of empowerment. Chandan Mitra, a historian with an Oxford doctorate, sees the explosion "as the global currency of self-esteem" (16), and asserts, like many Indians, "tests as a primal scream of self-assertion" (17).

There are many politicians, armies, historians and journalists, however, who are aware of the annihilatory violence of the nuclear weapons and the impending tension skulking behind. Mr Ram Vilas Paswan does not view the tests "in the favour of Indian national interest...[but] done in the interests of a party, to keep the present government from imploding from within" (20). This act of Indian Government, according to Paswan, will further heat up the animosity between India and Pakistan. In the same line of disapproval and disagreement, Mr George Fernandes, the then

Defense Minister of the country and who had also signed off on the tests of 11 May, went through deep anguish and stated that an atom bomb was not morally acceptable to him. He even made a prophecy that due to the corrupt leadership India would sink one day. Ghosh travels also to the military camps in Kashmir, Leh and Siachen to size the Generals and the army staffs' views on the recent tests. He comes to know that India's nuclear explosion was solely a civilian affair, and the role of the Defense Ministry was nominal.

In his attempt to measure the threat perception resulting from the possession of the nuclear weapons, Ghosh even visited Pakistan and interviewed eminent Personalities like I.A. Rahman, Quazi Hussain and Asma Jahangir. In a conversation with Ghosh, Quazi Hussain Ahmad, the leader of the Jam'aat-e-Islami, said that, "We are not for nuclear weapons...But we don't accept that five nations should have nuclear weapons and others shouldn't" (55). To be precise, he justifies the possession of nuclear weapons in Pakistan if other countries have them. He accepted that amidst the prevalence of ill-will and long enmity between the two countries the possibility of a nuclear war existed. He adds, "In situations of war people become mad. When a nation feels that it is going to be defeated it can do anything to spare itself the shame" (55). Like Hussain, everyone Ghosh met "thought that nuclear war almost certainly lay ahead, somewhere down the road" (62). The long history of wars and the escalating hostility between the two countries are sure to fuel up the tension. According to Ghosh, the real danger lies in the difference in perception between Indian and Pakistani elites. He writes:

The prevalent attitude among Indian nuclearists is that the worst has never happened and so it never will - and if it did, the last place it would happen in is India...In Pakistan, on the other hand, the idea of historic catastrophe appears not in the least unreal: the country has been circling the eye of storms for decades, almost without interruption. (61)

An eminent lawyer and Human Rights activist, Asma Jahangir was also alarmed by the possibility of war. She believes that the irrational

international policies, corrupt leadership, orthodox Islam in Pakistan and extreme Hindutva in India, and disinformation will materialise the threat perception into reality. She dismisses the argument that nuclear weapons might act as deterrent. Weighing up the differences in viewpoint of India and Pakistan on the issue of nuclear hazards, Sangeeta Rani writes, "Equally chilling is the difference in how the two countries perceive their nouveau nuclear status. While nuclear-bombs appear to be 'harmless icons of empowerment' for many Indian experts, their Pakistani counterparts fear a nuclear conflagration" (201). Ghosh, in a very cautionary manner, appeals the concerned body for considering the long term consequences of nuclearisation. He apocalyptically winds up:

There is a deepening crisis in India and Pakistan and the almost mystical hopes and beliefs that have come to be invested in nuclear technology are a symptom of this. The pursuit of nuclear weapons in the subcontinent is the moral equivalent of civil war: the targets the rulers have in mind for these weapons are, none other than their own people. (106)

Ghosh brings out the simmering geo-political hostility between India and Pakistan. He warns the stakeholders of the aftermaths of the shared hostility and appeals for the denuclearisation of the nations. Appreciating Ghosh, Sandip Ain aptly remarks that, "His [Ghosh] standpoint, like many other illustrious predecessors upholding peace such as Gandhi, Iqbal Ahmad and M.V. Ramanna, is extremely clear: this culture of bomb can only increase tension in the region" (155). In simpler terms, Ghosh demands the disarmament of anti-human and anti-civilisation nuclear weapons for the peace and prosperity of the neighbouring countries. The horrifying and horrendous crisis and dismay of nuclear explosion looming around "can be killed not by indulging in warfare but through love, harmony and peace" (Rajalakshmi and Kalaivani, 9).

Fear of Nuclear Catastrophe

Ghosh fears the indiscriminatory accumulation and possession of nuclear arms and weapons. He is aware of the apocalypse - a belief in the

likely or impending destruction of the world, usually associated with upheaval in the social, political, and religious order of human society - that will be engendered by the rat race of augmentation of nuclear weapons. In this sense, Ghosh's *Countdown* is an apocalyptic piece of writing. Moslemy and Pishkar write:

Apocalypse is a Greek word meaning 'revelation', an unveiling or unfolding of things not previously known and which could not be known apart from the unveiling. As a genre, apocalyptic literature details the authors' visions of the end times as revealed by an angel or other heavenly messenger. (140)

Ghosh acts like a messenger of peace, foretelling the doom awaiting us in the form of nuclear weapons. He raises his voice against nuclearisation for the sake of humanity.

Ghosh is alarmed at the possession of ballistic missiles by both India and Pakistan and their capability of hitting each other's major cities. He writes that, "Several major cities in India and Pakistan are within a few hundred miles of each other. Once launched, missiles would take approximately five minutes to reach their target" (88-89). Kanti Bajpai, a doctorate in strategic studies, sees a real and pressing danger of nuclear war in the Indian subcontinent. Along with a number of friends, he makes an assessment of possible consequences of a nuclear war in South Asia. The denotation of nuclear weapon releases a burst of high- energy x-rays, causing the temperature of the local area rise very suddenly. The text reads, "It will be enough to kill every living thing within several hundred feet of the point of explosion. Those caught on open ground would evaporate: those shielded by the buildings' thick walls would be incinerated" (97). On the basis of assessment made by M. V. Ramanna, Ghosh believes that the nuclear weapons owned by India and Pakistan have almost the same destructive potential that were dropped in Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1947.

The randomly picked lines like "The facades of the two Blocks would probably melt like candle wax" (97), "This pressure in turn can generate winds...Human beings will become projectile" (98), "Everyone

here would either be incinerated or killed by the radiation" (98), and "If you were here your internal organs would rupture, even if you had survived the initial blasts and flying objects" (99) are clear signals of apocalypse, beyond which no existence could be imagined and articulated. The radiation emitted from the explosion can set off fires for long distance; the death tolls in Bombay would be between 150000 to 800000 and nearly 200000 in Delhi over a period of a few weeks. All the infrastructures will disappear and every sort of services will be in total chaos. Ghosh warns us that the Pakistani cities of Karachi and Lahore would meet the same fate. With Kunda Dixit, Ghosh assesses the immense impact that Nepal can undergo. He says, "The mushroom clouds would shoot so high into the atmosphere that the effect of the earth's rotation would carry the radioactive plumes eastwards, over the high Himalayas...In Nepal, you would have radioactive snow" (91). In a nutshell, the impact of nuclear explosion would be so high that apart from fatalities of high numbers, several hundreds of thousands of people would suffer burn injuries. Dr Srivastava's statement "The ones who will be alive will be jealous of the dead ones" (102) aptly summarises the post-apocalyptic situation that would result from the war.

Ghosh compares the imagined post-war situation with that of *pralay* — the mythological chaos of the end of the world. He foresees the world after the nuclear war full of dead bodies, burnt human beings, animals and vegetation. There would be the howling and crawling of the few survived. They would be without food and water, waiting for death. The environment would be echoing a blood-curdling scream. He concludes that, "The explosion ...would not constitute an apocalyptic ending: it would be a beginning" (104), and therefore, there is an urgent need for challenging 'nuclear proliferation' i.e. "a quantitative and qualitative increase in the nuclear weapons and their spread to various countries" (Khan, 140).

Conclusion

Countdown by Amitav Ghosh is a persuasive and powerful scanning of the 'bomb-cult.' A telling socio-political narrative on the nuclear tests by India on 11 May, 1998 and the tremors actuated by them, *Countdown* has remained prophetic since the issues of nuclearisation have become a universal issue. This text establishes Ghosh, on the universal scale, as a stalwart disarmar. He condemns nuclearisation and makes an appeal for the denuclearisation of the nations for the existence of the life on the earth. He visits people of different levels from all around the Indian subcontinent and appraises the damage that the world would suffer if a nuclear war takes place. He exhaustively examines the concurrent issues related to nuclear explosions and contrasts with what is preferred as a matter of nationalistic pride and self-esteem with what is actually the situation. Through this evocative piece of travelogue, Ghosh makes a last shout to wake humanity from its willed slumber. Having gauged the polygonal consequences like socio- economic, geo-political and climatic calamities of the nuclear race, Ghosh calls for rational discourse, responsible leadership, and global awareness to prevent catastrophic consequences.

Put another way, Ghosh implies that the possession of nuclear weapons is nothing but an act of suicide, and therefore, he shrilly vituperates nuclear proliferation. This invincible fight against nuclear proliferation and appeal for planetary consciousness establishes Ghosh as an untiring pacifist and his *Countdown* a timeless manifesto of anti-nuclearisation.

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