

Article

Unthinkable Realities: Climate Disruption in Amitav Ghosh's *The Great Derangement*

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Abstract: In *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (Ghosh) Amitav Ghosh challenges the limitations of modern realist novels in addressing the urgency of climate change. Ghosh critiques the novel's historical entanglement with bourgeois individualism, colonial modernity, and statistical plausibility. These factors collectively constrain its capacity to portray the forces of the Anthropocene. He contends that conventional narratives, constrained by explanations at the human scale of plausibility and the agency of a principal protagonist or antagonist, do not accommodate these "unthinkable" aspects of climate disruption events. The realist novel, meanwhile, cannot "fit" catastrophism. The idea of large-scale, sudden environmental catastrophes that occur outside of gradualist or human-centered contexts is important to address. Amitav Ghosh's work suggests a profound dissonance between the traditional architecture of the novel and the urgent demand for newer forms of narrative in response to climate change. The paper explores, from an ecocritical perspective, how Ghosh's thesis has the potential to shift the onus of a reconceptualized narrative-as-background that accounts for thinking environmentally and embracing catastrophic planetary crises. Amitav Ghosh vents his spleen by demonstrating the historical and formal constraints of the novel, as if deliberately seeking to confine literature's ability to respond to what the Anthropocene represents for it.

Keywords: Ecocriticism; Catastrophism; Climate Crisis; Anthropocene

Introduction

For the last two centuries, literary fiction has been dominated by the formal logics of realism, a mode characterized by plausibility, character-driven events, and gradual historical movement. In the context of climate change, widely recognized as the Anthropocene, this model seems not only increasingly unfit to describe the consequences of turmoil on an environmental level. Amitav Ghosh's *The Great Derangement* (2016), for example, contends that the novel of modernity – particularly in its realist mode – is structurally unsuited to engaging with climate catastrophe. The novel's failure, according to Ghosh, lies in its historical development at the same time as that of bourgeois modernity. So it favors human-scale agency and statistical predictability over the part that things play in those formulations." This article analyzes Ghosh's critique in *The Great Derangement*, and specifically its privileging of realist narrative forms in the representation of climate-induced calamities. The argument posits that the Anthropocene necessitates novel storytelling methods that move away from modern literary conventions and embrace ecocritical and catastrophist perspectives. This study employs an ecocritical framework and qualitative methodology to examine Ghosh's reimagining of narrative form in relation to ecological thought.

Literature Review

In *The Great Derangement*, Ghosh critiques the modern novel's evasion of environmental themes, especially those that challenge anthropocentric assumptions. Eco-criticism is defined as an interdisciplinary mode of literary analysis that interrogates human relationships with nature. (Garrard). Western literary realism systematically excludes the unpredictable and the nonhuman in Ghosh's work. (Ghosh). Gilson writes, demonstrating how magical realism and non-Western narrative traditions offer a more effective discourse for addressing environmental crises. (Gilson). Similarly, Sen argues that postcolonial ecocriticism allows writers like Ghosh to critique both ecological devastation and colonial legacies simultaneously. (Sen).

In the study on the ecological agency in Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*, (Ağır) Notes that environmental elements often act as characters in their own right, undermining the anthropocentric realism of traditional narrative. Parmar and Mishra further explore how Ghosh's novels stage ecological justice concerns, particularly in the context of developing nations. (Parmar and Mishra). The concept of "slow violence," which is characterized by delayed, invisible, and dispersed effects, also resonates strongly with Ghosh's concerns about narrative form and climate change. (Nixon).

Theoretical Framework

This paper adopts an ecocritical theoretical lens, focusing particularly on how literary forms reflect and respond to ecological crises. Ecocriticism, as Garrard outlines and explores the relationship between literature and the environment, considering how texts represent or overlook ecological realities. Ghosh's critique in *The Great Derangement* adopts this tradition but extends it by interrogating the formal constraints imposed by realism. Ecocriticism is also increasingly engaged with the Anthropocene, a term proposed by atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen to designate the current

geological epoch in which human activity has become a dominant planetary force (Steffen, W. et al.). Clark argues that the Anthropocene disrupts literary scales and challenges the coherence of anthropocentric narrative forms (Clark). Amitav Ghosh echoes this disruption, arguing that the novel, in its traditional Western structure, cannot contain the planetary dimensions of environmental upheaval (Khan).

Unthinkable Realities

Amitav Ghosh's *The Great Derangement* is more than a critique of literary realism. It is a provocative meditation on modern culture's failure to imagine climate change. His central contention is that the literary forms of our recent past, notably the realist novel (with its emphasis on character and self), have been "deranged" in their refusal or failure to capture the types of environmental disasters now encroaching upon us. Ghosh claims that this rejection is coincidental only in a deep structural sense. (Ghosh). Climate change, by contrast, is marked by improbability. (Ghosh) Moreover, nonhuman agency makes it unfit for representation.

Ghosh sets contradiction as a crisis of the imagination, arguing that "the broader imaginative and cultural failure that lies at the heart of the climate crisis" (10). According to him, fiction has deliberately refrained from addressing environmental disasters, not due to their irrelevance, but because they appear implausible for serious literary works. This avoidance leads to what he terms "narrative blindness", which represents an aesthetic and ethical deficiency in contemporary literature. Ghosh contends that this limitation signifies a broader epistemic failure, emphasising a preference for human-scale temporality and agency at the expense of planetary processes. Timothy Clark supports this view in his discussion of "scale disorder", where human narratives are insufficient to encompass planetary realities. (Clark). Ghosh advocates not merely for an increase in novels addressing climate change but for a fundamental transformation of narrative structure that can encompass both the statistical improbability and the existential inevitability of climate disruption. Importantly, mythic and epic forms, frequently regarded as premodern or unliterary, may possess distinctive capabilities to articulate the unprecedented events of the Anthropocene. In Amitav Ghosh's *The Great Derangement*, the author figures out the following:

The trouble, however, is that the contagion has already occurred everywhere: the ongoing changes in climate and the perturbations they will cause within nations cannot be contained by reinforcing man-made boundaries. We are in an era when the body of the nation can no longer be conceived of as consisting only of a territorialized human population (Ghosh 193).

Ghosh provides examples from his fiction, notably *The Hungry Tide*, where a tidal surge and a tiger act as significant narrative agents. The novel blurs the line between human and nonhuman agency, emphasising ecological interdependence, just as his nonfiction does. Ghosh thus models a form of storytelling that does not domesticate or aestheticise nature but instead allows a chaotic, disruptive force to enter the narrative as a legitimate actor.

The discussion of “unthinkable” events also intersects with Rob Nixon’s idea of “slow violence”, a form of environmental harm that is gradual, cumulative, and often invisible. (Nixon). Ghosh emphasises spectacular catastrophes, yet thinkers address the challenges of articulating environmental violence. Literature must broaden its narrative techniques to address these emerging forms of experience. Ghosh’s critique encompasses a postcolonial aspect. The literary norms of realism, he argues, emerged concurrently with imperial ideologies that emphasised the distinction between the human and the nonhuman. (41). The structure of the modern novel inherently integrates the epistemologies of modernity and empire. The relationship is both historical and contemporary in nature. The extractive logics that legitimised imperial domination persist in supporting the global systems that contribute to climate change today.

Amitav Ghosh contends that realism as a literary genre did not arise in isolation. Instead, it evolved alongside the ascendance of empire and industrial capitalism. The norms of realist literature frequently mirror and uphold the epistemological limits and principles of modernity. In colonial discourse, the nonhuman realm, comprising forests, rivers, animals, and the climate, was regarded as passive. It should be an inert resource to be examined and classified. These extractive principles were fundamental to the rise of empires, wherein nature was perceived as a resource to be exploited for the advancement of human civilisation. Ghosh contends that realist literature assimilated and mirrored these ideas by emphasising the individual, the home sphere, and the human-scale environment. Ghosh believes the form of the contemporary novel has consequently legitimised a perspective that closely corresponds with the objectives of imperialism and capitalism. Realist novels emphasized character-driven stories, credible events, and chronological progression, thereby avoiding the bizarre, disastrous, or unrealistic. This makes climate change difficult for literature and culture to comprehend. Ghosh believes the climate disaster challenges modern fiction because its causes are broad, its effects are nonlinear, and its ethical implications involve historical injustices and current systems.

Ghosh’s study is significant for its historical and present dimensions. He further says exploitative practices like colonisation cause climate change. Colonial logics still shape the fossil fuel industry and the natural monetization of resources. These institutions limit our cultural and imaginative capacities, making it more challenging to comprehend the climate catastrophe. Thus, Ghosh’s work inspires a reassessment of Anthropocene literature. He encourages artists and thinkers to transcend literary realism and investigate empire, ecology, and climate through fictional genres. *The Great Derangement* challenges the literary canon and cultural preconceptions that have rendered climate change a narrative, as well as a political and scientific calamity. Ghosh’s *The Great Derangement* is a multi-layered critique of literary form, cultural imagination, and epistemic bias. A radical revision of narrative conventions is necessary to address the unpredictable aspects of climate change. As Ghosh explains, “the great, irreplaceable potentiality of fiction is that it makes possible the imagining of possibilities” (Ghosh 172). His work is not only a diagnosis of literary failure but also a

proposal for aesthetic renewal, an invitation to imagine otherwise in an era of ecological crisis.

Conclusion

The above discussion examined Amitav Ghosh's *The Great Derangement* as a critical intervention into the literary failures of the Anthropocene. Ghosh argues that modern realist fiction, shaped by colonial modernity and bourgeois ideology, is structurally incapable of representing the scale and suddenness of ecological catastrophe. Through an ecocritical and postcolonial lens, Ghosh reveals the need for new narrative forms that embrace myth, unpredictability, and nonhuman agency. It is concluded that climate change is not only a political or scientific problem but a profoundly literary one.

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