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## Reimagining Climate And Colonial Ecologies In Amitav Ghosh's: The Great Derangement

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### Abstract

This article investigates how Amitav Ghosh's *\*The Great Derangement\** critiques the entangled legacies of colonialism and climate change. Situating the text within eco-critical and postcolonial frameworks, the study explores how Ghosh challenges the literary and cultural silence surrounding the Anthropocene. The paper argues that Ghosh critiques not only the failures of modern politics and literature to engage with ecological crisis, but also exposes how colonial systems of extraction and epistemology have shaped contemporary environmental degradation. Through his call for imaginative courage and narrative rethinking, Ghosh envisions a form of literary engagement that reclaims silenced ecological histories and advocates for a decolonial environmental ethics.

**Keywords:** eco-criticism, postcolonialism, climate change, Anthropocene, Amitav Ghosh

### 1.Introduction

Amitav Ghosh has emerged as one of the most influential voices at the intersection of postcolonial thought and environmental literary studies, offering a unique and critical perspective on the global ecological crisis. His body of work, which includes both fiction and non-fiction, is notable for its thematic complexity, historical richness, and intellectual depth. Through sweeping novels like the *Ibis Trilogy*—comprising *Sea of Poppies*, *River of Smoke*, and *Flood of Fire*—Ghosh has deftly interwoven stories of colonial commerce, migration, and resistance, exploring how global capitalist systems and imperial forces shaped individual destinies and ecosystems across the Indian Ocean world.

However, it is in his landmark non-fiction work, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (2016), that Ghosh makes his most direct intervention into the discourse on climate change. In this provocative and multidisciplinary text, Ghosh confronts the intellectual and imaginative failures of our time, particularly those within the fields of literature, history, and politics. He argues that the climate crisis is not merely a matter of scientific concern or policy reform, but a profound cultural and narrative failure—what he calls a “derangement” in our collective modes of thought. The text challenges the ways in which the literary world, especially the modern realist novel, has systematically excluded environmental catastrophe from its imaginative purview, treating it as improbable, fantastical, or unworthy of serious literary treatment.

Born in Calcutta, a city marked by colonial history and ecological vulnerability, and academically trained as an anthropologist, Ghosh brings a rare transdisciplinary sensibility to his work. This background allows him to traverse disciplinary boundaries and integrate insights from history, anthropology, literature, and environmental science. In *The Great Derangement*, he critiques the Eurocentric frameworks that dominate both literary production and climate discourse, calling attention to how colonialism has not only shaped political and economic structures but also our very ways of seeing and narrating the world. Ghosh contends that colonial modernity—with its emphasis on industrial progress, rational order, and human dominion over nature—has profoundly altered humanity’s relationship with the nonhuman world, contributing to the ecological crises we now face.

This paper seeks to explore how *The Great Derangement* brings together postcolonial critique and environmental humanities in order to examine the cultural and historical roots of the Anthropocene—a term often used to describe the current geological epoch shaped by human activity. Ghosh interrogates the colonial and imperial histories embedded within the Anthropocene narrative, questioning its presumed universality and drawing attention instead to the uneven ecological and historical responsibilities borne by different regions and peoples. Furthermore, he calls for a new literary ethics—one that can account for the complex entanglements between humans and the environment, and one that refuses to remain silent in the face of planetary crisis.

By situating climate change within a broader cultural and historical matrix, Ghosh’s work opens up critical possibilities for rethinking literature’s role in times of ecological precarity. His appeal for imaginative courage—to think beyond the familiar frameworks of nation, progress, and realism—offers a vital intellectual resource for scholars, writers, and readers grappling with the enormity of the climate emergency. In synthesizing ecological urgency with the legacies of colonialism, *The Great Derangement* not only diagnoses a narrative crisis but also points toward more inclusive, ethical, and responsive ways of storytelling.

## 2.Theoretical Framework: Postcolonial Eco-Criticism and the Anthropocene

The emerging field of postcolonial eco-criticism has significantly transformed the ways in which we understand environmental degradation and climate change, offering a nuanced lens that foregrounds the historical and geopolitical entanglements between colonialism and ecological transformation. Unlike mainstream environmental discourse, which often treats climate change as a recent, universal, and purely scientific phenomenon, postcolonial eco-criticism insists on the necessity of historicizing the crisis within the structures of empire, global capitalism, and cultural hegemony. This perspective is crucial in unpacking how ecological devastation has been unevenly distributed across the globe and disproportionately inflicted upon the Global South—regions that were subject to centuries of colonial exploitation and resource extraction.

Leading scholars in this field, such as Rob Nixon and Elizabeth DeLoughrey, argue that any serious understanding of climate change must account for what Nixon terms “slow violence”—a form of environmental harm that is incremental, delayed, and often invisible, yet deeply damaging to ecosystems and communities over time. This form of violence typically affects the poor, the displaced, and the colonized, whose suffering is rendered peripheral or altogether invisible in dominant narratives of environmental crisis. Elizabeth DeLoughrey further emphasizes the epistemic violence inherent in the ways colonial and scientific discourses have dismissed or suppressed indigenous knowledge systems, land relations, and cosmologies, contributing to both ecological destruction and cultural erasure.

A particularly contentious concept within postcolonial eco-criticism is that of the Anthropocene—a term that denotes the current geological epoch in which human activity has become the dominant force shaping the Earth’s ecosystems. While widely accepted in environmental science, the term has been problematized by postcolonial scholars for its universalizing implications. Framing the Anthropocene as the result of undifferentiated “human” activity obscures the specific histories of industrialization, colonialism, and capital accumulation that originated in the Global North. It erases the differentiated culpability and vulnerabilities of various populations, and in doing so, reproduces colonial logics by failing to acknowledge that much of the environmental degradation attributed to “humanity” was, in fact, orchestrated by imperial powers for the benefit of a minority elite.

Amitav Ghosh’s *The Great Derangement* aligns closely with this critique, as he challenges dominant cultural and literary narratives that have rendered colonialism’s environmental violence invisible. Ghosh is particularly concerned with the role of literature in shaping public consciousness around climate change. He points out that the modern novel, especially in its realist form, has systematically excluded large-scale ecological catastrophes from its thematic repertoire. This exclusion, he argues, reflects a deeper cultural inability to conceive of the nonhuman—weather systems, animals, geological forces—as active agents within

narrative structures. Realism, with its emphasis on individual psychology, social dynamics, and quotidian events, is ill-equipped to address the vast scales of time and space that characterize climate phenomena.

To extend this argument, Ghosh invokes Linda Hutcheon's concept of historiographic metafiction, which challenges conventional historical narratives by foregrounding the constructedness and ideological underpinnings of historical representation. While Hutcheon's work is situated in the context of postmodernism, Ghosh adapts this idea to interrogate literary conventions that marginalize the nonhuman and ignore planetary crisis. In *The Great Derangement*, metafiction becomes not just a narrative technique but an ethical imperative: a way of rethinking literature's responsibility to engage with the real—and the more-than-human—world.

Ghosh's critique thus moves beyond an aesthetic or formal concern; it becomes a call to reimagine the function of narrative itself in the age of ecological collapse. By revealing how literature has been complicit in normalizing a worldview that separates humans from nature, privileges rational progress, and marginalizes indigenous voices, Ghosh advocates for a literary turn toward interconnectedness, spiritual cosmologies, and decolonial imagination. His work underscores that climate change is not simply a technical or scientific problem—it is also a cultural crisis that demands a profound transformation in the stories we tell and the values we uphold.

### 3.Colonialism, Modernity, and Environmental Crisis

A central argument of Ghosh's text is that the climate crisis is not merely a technological or economic failure, but a deep cultural and historical derangement rooted in colonial modernity. He points out how European colonial regimes restructured landscapes across Asia, Africa, and the Americas through deforestation, plantation agriculture, and the commodification of nature. These interventions were justified through ideologies of progress and civilization, which Ghosh links to Enlightenment rationality and capitalist expansion.

The steamship, railways, and the plantation are not merely technological milestones but represent what Ghosh calls "tools of empire" that reorganized ecosystems for imperial benefit. This historical insight allows Ghosh to situate climate change within a genealogy of colonial extraction, rather than treating it as an unprecedented rupture. He critiques how mainstream climate discourse often ignores this genealogy, thus perpetuating epistemic injustice against formerly colonized societies that continue to bear disproportionate burdens of ecological degradation.

## 4.The Crisis of Imagination: Literature and the Unthinkable

One of the most provocative claims in *\*The Great Derangement\** is that contemporary literature—particularly the realist novel—has failed to adequately respond to the climate crisis. Ghosh argues that literary fiction has largely relegated environmental catastrophe to the genres of science fiction and fantasy, treating climate events as improbable or sensational rather than integral to the real. This "crisis of imagination," he claims, is symptomatic of a broader cultural inability to grapple with non-human agency, deep time, and planetary interdependence.

This critique resonates with Fredric Jameson's view that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism. Ghosh's intervention, however, is not merely pessimistic. He calls for a return to narrative modes that can accommodate wonder, the uncanny, and the collective—features often dismissed in modern literary aesthetics. In doing so, he challenges writers, especially those from the Global South, to reclaim older storytelling forms that recognize the agency of monsoons, animals, and forests alongside humans.

## 5.Toward a Decolonial Environmental Ethics

Beyond critique, Ghosh advocates for an imaginative and ethical reorientation that connects environmental justice with historical memory. He suggests that indigenous epistemologies, religious cosmologies, and precolonial land practices offer alternative frameworks for thinking about nature and responsibility. This is not a call for romantic primitivism, but for what Walter Dignolo terms "epistemic disobedience" —a refusal to think solely within Eurocentric rationality.

Ghosh's invocation of myths, spiritual traditions, and intergenerational storytelling resists the secular, linear temporality of modernity. In doing so, he opens up space for what Dipesh Chakrabarty calls "planetary thought": a way of thinking that is grounded in local histories but responsive to global ecological entanglements. This ethics does not separate environmentalism from questions of race, class, and history—but insists on their intersectionality.

## 6.Conclusion

*The Great Derangement\** is a landmark text that pushes the boundaries of both postcolonial critique and environmental humanities. Amitav Ghosh dismantles the ideological and narrative architectures that have naturalized ecological destruction while silencing its colonial roots. His call for literary, political, and spiritual re-imagination urges scholars and writers alike to confront the climate crisis not as a purely scientific or policy issue, but as a cultural and historical challenge. In synthesizing ecological urgency with historical accountability, Ghosh paves the way for a more just and decolonial environmental future.

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