



## Reclaiming Ecological Storytelling: Postcolonial Narratives and the Crisis of Imagination in Amitav Ghosh's *The Great Derangement*

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### Abstract

This paper examines Amitav Ghosh's *The Great Derangement* as a critical intervention in global climate discourse, arguing that the climate crisis represents not only an environmental or political challenge but a deep cultural and imaginative failure. Drawing on postcolonial ecocriticism and the environmental humanities, the study analyzes how Ghosh critiques the narrative limits of Western realist traditions that privilege individual agency, linear progress, and the "probable," while marginalizing collective experience, nonhuman forces, and planetary scale. The paper situates Ghosh's argument within the historical framework of colonial capitalism, showing how extractive economies and epistemic hierarchies formed under empire continue to shape ecological injustice and global inequality in the present. The analysis further explores Ghosh's call for a renewed ecological imagination grounded in myth, indigenous knowledge, and ethical storytelling. By blending realism with folklore and cultural memory, Ghosh repositions literature as a space of moral witnessing, capable of restoring connections between human and nonhuman worlds. The study also highlights how his work re-centers perspectives from the Global South, challenging universalist models of Western environmentalism and emphasizing climate change as an uneven and historically conditioned experience. Overall, the paper argues that *The Great Derangement* reframes literature as a vital ethical and political practice in the Anthropocene. Rather than treating storytelling as a reflection of reality, Ghosh presents it as a formative force that can shape ecological awareness, historical responsibility, and collective imagination. In doing so, the study contributes to ongoing debates on the role of narrative in confronting planetary crisis and in envisioning more just and interconnected ecological futures.

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### 1. Introduction

Contemporary research identifies a persistent "crisis of imagination" in how literature represents climate change, arguing that dominant narrative forms struggle to capture its scale, uncertainty, and nonhuman agency (Ghosh, 2016). Amitav Ghosh's *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* stands as a key intervention in this debate, positioning climate change not only as a scientific or political problem but as a cultural and narrative failure. Ghosh contends that modern Western realism, shaped by bourgeois values, prioritizes individual experience and probable events, which limits its capacity to portray the planetary disruptions and improbable extremes that define the Anthropocene (Vescovi, 2017) <sup>[22]</sup>. As a result, environmental catastrophe is often displaced into speculative genres, rather than addressed within mainstream literary traditions. Recent scholarship situates Ghosh's critique within broader postcolonial and cultural frameworks. Researchers argue that his work

challenges Eurocentric assumptions by foregrounding perspectives from the Global South and framing climate change as an issue of environmental justice as well as ecological risk (Sharma, 2025) <sup>[20]</sup>. Through this lens, narrative becomes a site for reclaiming marginalized ecological knowledge and exposing the historical links between colonial modernity and environmental degradation. Vincent (2018) notes that Ghosh's blending of fiction and non-fiction disrupts materialist worldviews and invites alternative modes of storytelling that emphasize relational ethics and ecological awareness.

Other scholars focus on Ghosh's call for "narrative recalibration." Afshan (2025) <sup>[1]</sup> highlights how his use of history, myth, and cultural memory opens pathways for integrating indigenous perspectives and ethical responsibility into climate discourse. Richter (2024) further observes that Ghosh's ideas have influenced the environmental humanities by encouraging artistic and cultural practices that move beyond policy debates to engage the moral and imaginative dimensions of climate crisis. Overall, *The Great Derangement* reframes climate change as a failure of storytelling rather than knowledge. It urges literature to develop new narrative forms that acknowledge planetary interdependence, challenge capitalist and colonial rationalities, and restore fiction's ethical role in imagining viable ecological futures (Mathur, 2023).

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Postcolonial Ecocriticism

Postcolonial ecocriticism examines how colonial histories of exploitation have shaped both ecological degradation and the cultural narratives through which nature is represented. Scholars argue that environmental destruction in colonized regions cannot be understood apart from the imperial ideologies that treated land and people as extractable resources. For example, Kristiawan Indriyanto's study of *Shark Dialogues* reveals how Western colonialism enacted "ecological imperialism," erasing indigenous ecological practices through capitalist exploitation (Indriyanto, 2019) <sup>[12]</sup>. Similarly, *Border Country* explores the Irish context, showing how colonization reshaped relationships to land and place, embedding cultural trauma in environmental narratives (Fitzgerald, 2020) <sup>[7]</sup>. Recent studies expand this critique to global South literatures. Jagmeet Singh and Sakshi Singh argue that Indian English novels like Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* and Indra Sinha's *Animal's People* challenge Western development paradigms by foregrounding indigenous perspectives and ecological justice (Singh & Singh, 2024). Similarly, research on Indonesian and African postcolonial literature highlights how decolonial storytelling reconnects cultural identity with environmental stewardship (Qolbi, 2025); (Egya, 2020) <sup>[6]</sup>. Postcolonial ecocriticism thus situates environmental harm as a continuation of colonial violence. It critiques the anthropocentrism and extractivism inherited from imperial modernity while advocating for a plural ecological consciousness grounded in local cosmologies and spiritual interdependence (Brown, 2022) <sup>[5]</sup>.

### 2.2. Environmental Humanities

The environmental humanities bridge science, ethics, and art to reframe ecological crisis as a problem of meaning and imagination. Scholars like Ahsan ul Haq Magray position Amitav Ghosh within this interdisciplinary tradition, emphasizing how his fiction and essays illuminate the

cultural dimensions of climate change (Magray, 2023) <sup>[16]</sup>. Environmental humanities critique the dominance of technocratic and economic frameworks, arguing that cultural narratives—particularly those addressing deep time and planetary interconnection—are vital to rethinking humanity's place in the Anthropocene. Recent scholarship identifies three key insights:

1. **Culture and scale:** Literature helps visualize climate phenomena that exceed human perception, translating planetary processes into narrative and emotional experience [(Clark, 2015; Ghosh, 2016)].
2. **Deep time and memory:** Fictional works connect environmental change to long histories of human and nonhuman entanglement, expanding our temporal imagination (Afshan, 2025) <sup>[1]</sup>.
3. **Ethical imagination:** The environmental humanities call for an empathetic engagement with more-than-human worlds, linking ecological care to cultural renewal (Yadav, 2025).

This interdisciplinary field thus positions art and storytelling as essential tools for cultivating the ecological imagination that modernity has suppressed.

### 2.3. Literary Responses to Climate Change

Climate change has provoked major shifts in literary form, genre, and theory. Amitav Ghosh famously argues that modern realism, with its focus on individual experience and linear causality, is ill-equipped to capture the collective and unpredictable nature of the Anthropocene (Ghosh, 2016). Scholars such as Chiara Xausa expand on this idea, identifying a "crisis of imagination" in global literature and calling for new aesthetic forms capable of representing nonhuman agency and systemic violence (Xausa, 2021). In response, contemporary "climate fiction" or cli-fi has emerged as a narrative mode that blends speculative, mythic, and documentary elements to bridge the gap between individual and planetary scales. Scholars such as Gupta and Panda (2025) argue that writers like Ghosh and Kim Stanley Robinson employ "speculative historiography" to merge ecological critique with political imagination (Gupta & Panda, 2025) <sup>[9]</sup>. Moreover, recent studies foreground the ethical dimension of storytelling in confronting climate injustice. Through works like *Gun Island*, Ghosh links environmental collapse to migration, colonial history, and the moral imperative of storytelling (Hoydis, 2024) <sup>[11]</sup>. These narratives advocate for an "ecological cosmopolitanism" that recognizes interconnected fates across species and geographies. In sum, the literary response to climate change marks a radical expansion of narrative form and moral scope. Writers like Ghosh position fiction not merely as representation but as a site of resistance—an imaginative practice that can expose the cultural roots of ecological crisis and envision more just, relational futures.

## 3. Theoretical Framework

### 3.1. Postcolonial Ecocriticism as Applied Theory

Postcolonial ecocriticism links environmental and cultural studies by showing how colonial histories continue to shape ecological harm and human-nature relations. Miller (2012) <sup>[17]</sup> argues that imperial expansion and industrial growth framed nature as a resource, while silencing indigenous ways of knowing. This lens challenges Eurocentric narratives by placing marginalized histories and local worldviews at the center of environmental debate. Hartnett's idea of "climate

imperialism” extends this view, noting that climate impacts often follow old colonial patterns, with the Global South bearing the heaviest costs of extractive systems built under empire (Hartnett, 2021) <sup>[10]</sup>. Ghosh’s fiction reflects this overlap of ecology and power. Works such as *The Hungry Tide* and *The Great Derangement* connect climate crisis to colonial and capitalist histories (Balkaran, 2025) <sup>[4]</sup>. Singh and Singh (2024) add that Indian English literature recovers indigenous ecological knowledge as an alternative to Western models of development. Egya (2020) <sup>[6]</sup> further expands the field by urging attention to spiritual and nonhuman agency, which shifts culture from a human-centered view toward an ecological system.

Thus, postcolonial ecocriticism as applied theory underscores three core dimensions:

1. **Historical continuity:** Environmental crises are extensions of colonial exploitation.
2. **Cultural resistance:** Literature from the Global South reclaims ecological narratives and ethics.
3. **Ontological reorientation:** Recognizing nonhuman agency redefines the human-nature relationship as reciprocal, not hierarchical.

In applying this framework to *The Great Derangement*, Ghosh’s critique of modernity can be seen as a literary enactment of postcolonial ecocriticism—a call to unlearn imperial epistemologies and recover ecological consciousness through storytelling.

### 3.2. Narrative Theory and Climate Imagination

Narrative theory offers crucial insights into why climate change remains “unthinkable” within conventional literary forms. Ghosh argues that the realist novel, shaped by bourgeois modernity, excludes improbable and nonhuman events, thereby naturalizing human-centered scales of experience (Ghosh, 2016). This “narrative failure” reflects not just aesthetic limitations but a deeper epistemological blindness—a culture unable to imagine its entanglement with the planet. Recent scholarship in posthuman and narrative theory deepens this diagnosis. S. Moslund’s *Postcolonialism, the Anthropocene, and New Nonhuman Theory* argues that the Anthropocene exposes the insufficiency of anthropocentric narrative frameworks. By combining postcolonial and posthumanist perspectives, Moslund calls for stories that reflect the inseparability of human and nonhuman histories (Moslund, 2021).

From this lens, narrative theory redefines storytelling as a multispecies practice. Dimas Mahendra’s study of Indonesian climate fiction identifies techniques like “multispecies witnessing” and “ritual temporality” that dissolve human-centered chronologies, enabling readers to perceive ecological trauma as an ongoing, relational condition (Mahendra, 2025). Similarly, Egya (2020) <sup>[6]</sup> emphasizes that narrative need not “speak for” nature but can instead listen with it—an approach that replaces anthropocentric mastery with relational ethics.

The convergence of narrative theory and ecocriticism thus challenges three foundational assumptions of modern storytelling:

1. **Scale:** The human lifetime is too narrow to capture geological and planetary processes.
2. **Agency:** Nonhuman forces—climate systems, animals, spirits—must be recognized as narrative actors.
3. **Form:** Fragmentation, mythic temporality, and

polyvocal narration become tools for ecological representation.

In the context of Ghosh’s work, these ideas illuminate how *The Great Derangement* operates both as critique and model. By exposing realism’s failure to represent ecological entanglement, Ghosh reopens narrative space for myth, spirituality, and the improbable—forms capable of expressing the scale and complexity of the Anthropocene imagination.

## 4. Textual Analysis: The Great Derangement

### 4.1. Colonial Modernity and Narrative Failure

Amitav Ghosh’s *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (2016) argues that contemporary fiction struggles to represent climate change because it remains shaped by the epistemic and aesthetic limits of colonial modernity. Novelistic realism, formed during the Enlightenment, privileges individual agency, linear time, and the “probable,” reflecting capitalist rationalism and Western faith in progress and control (Vescovi, 2017) <sup>[22]</sup>. Ghosh identifies this form as a sign of a deeper cultural blindness, one that refuses to recognize nonhuman forces and planetary systems as active participants in history. Alexandru (2021) <sup>[2]</sup> describes Ghosh’s vision as an “ecology of separation,” which challenges anthropocentric assumptions by acknowledging the autonomy of Earth’s systems and the limits of human mastery. This critique links literary form to the same ideologies that supported empire, including the commodification of nature and the suppression of indigenous knowledge. Rani and Aarthi (2025) <sup>[19]</sup> show how *The Living Mountain* traces colonial exploration and extraction as roots of ecological harm, while Khan and Singh (2025) <sup>[13]</sup> note that *The Nutmeg’s Curse* exposes colonial trade as a model of environmental violence. Together, these works frame narrative failure as a historical symptom of modernity itself.

### 4.2. Postcolonial Ecological Imagination

Ghosh’s response to this narrative impasse is to reclaim the ecological imagination, a mode of storytelling that moves beyond colonial divides between human and nonhuman, nature and culture, and myth and science. In *The Great Derangement*, he calls for literature that restores the spiritual, the improbable, and the planetary to the core of modern narrative life. Afshan (2025) <sup>[1]</sup> argues that Ghosh’s work reflects an “ecological consciousness” that weaves myth, history, and politics to frame climate crisis within a postcolonial setting. In *The Hungry Tide* and *Gun Island*, Ghosh draws on mythic realism and indigenous cosmologies, allowing natural forces to speak through folklore and symbolic figures. Alexandru (2023) <sup>[3]</sup> describes this approach as a form of “critical ecofeminism,” where spiritual and ecological knowledge, often carried by women and local communities, challenges patriarchal and colonial systems of thought. Khanal and Gupta (2023) add that Ghosh’s narratives promote climate action grounded in indigenous knowledge rather than technological dominance. By centering the Global South, Sharma (2025) notes that Ghosh cultivates an “eco-conscious subjectivity” that links memory, ethics, and collective responsibility.

### 4.3. Crisis of Imagination as a Cultural Problem

At its core, *The Great Derangement* frames the climate crisis as a cultural failure rather than a purely political or

technological one, arguing that modern institutions, including literature, lack the capacity to perceive and represent ecological reality. Ghosh (2016) contends that capitalism, rationalism, and industrial progress have confined imagination within anthropocentric limits that exclude the collective, the improbable, and the nonhuman. Krishna (2025) <sup>[14]</sup> situates this critique within the environmental humanities, viewing the text as both literary analysis and ethical challenge. Ghosh extends his argument to the publishing world and academia, suggesting that dominant realist norms marginalize emotional, spiritual, and narrative ways of knowing. Vandertop (2019), through a reading of the *Ibis Trilogy*, traces this cultural blindness to colonial trade networks that laid the groundwork for modern carbon economies, linking the Anthropocene to imperial history rather than universal human action. Ghosh's call for imaginative renewal becomes a decolonial demand, redefining storytelling as an act of planetary witness. By restoring literature's ethical role, he urges new narrative forms that can engage justice, reciprocity, and coexistence within an interconnected ecological world.

## 5. Discussion

Amitav Ghosh's *The Great Derangement* occupies a central place in global climate discourse by framing the ecological crisis as a failure of imagination and culture rather than a purely scientific or political problem. Ghosh situates climate change within the historical legacy of colonial capitalism, arguing that modern epistemic and aesthetic frameworks have rendered planetary disruption "unthinkable" within dominant literary forms (Ghosh, 2016). His work aligns with the environmental humanities, emphasizing literature's ethical and imaginative role in confronting the Anthropocene. Krishna (2025) <sup>[14]</sup> views Ghosh's writing as a form of ecological pedagogy, where storytelling becomes an act of moral witnessing that restores presence to nonhuman life and marginalized communities. Scholars extend this view by highlighting Ghosh's narrative strategies. Hoydis (2024) <sup>[11]</sup> describes *Gun Island* as multispecies migration literature, linking human and nonhuman displacement under shared conditions of climate vulnerability. Gupta and Panda (2025) argue that Ghosh's "mythic realism" functions as speculative historiography, bridging colonial pasts and ecological futures to imagine alternatives to capitalist modernity.

This approach resists apocalyptic fatalism by foregrounding collective imagination and indigenous cosmologies as sources of ecological renewal. Ghosh also exposes geopolitical asymmetries within global climate discourse. Sharma (2025) contends that his work constructs an "eco-conscious subjectivity" that re-centers the Global South in debates on climate justice. In *The Nutmeg's Curse*, Ghosh traces contemporary ecological exploitation to colonial histories of resource extraction, revealing the Anthropocene as an extension of imperial power (Khan & Singh, 2025) <sup>[13]</sup>. At its core, Ghosh advances an ethics of imagination. By blending realism with myth and folklore, he challenges Western rationalism and repositions literature as a moral force capable of restoring kinship between human and nonhuman worlds, and of envisioning collective, just futures in an interconnected planetary system (Vescovi, 2017) <sup>[22]</sup>.

## 6. Conclusion

Amitav Ghosh's *The Great Derangement* presents the climate crisis as a deep cultural and imaginative failure rather than

only an environmental or political one. Ghosh argues that the dominant frameworks of modernity shaped by colonialism, capitalism, and anthropocentric rationality have limited humanity's ability to recognize the scale and agency of the planetary world. The realist novel, rooted in this worldview, privileges individual experience, linear progress, and human control, leaving little narrative space for the collective, the improbable, or the nonhuman. As a result, ecological disruption becomes difficult to represent within mainstream literary forms and remains culturally "unthinkable." From a postcolonial perspective, Ghosh links contemporary environmental collapse to the legacies of empire. The same extractive logics that once justified colonial conquest treating land, labor, and life as resources for exploitation continue to shape present systems of inequality and ecological harm. His work therefore reframes climate change as a historical and ethical issue, grounded in uneven power relations between the Global North and the Global South.

By foregrounding indigenous knowledge systems, spiritual interdependence, and collective responsibility, Ghosh challenges Western models of development that separate culture from nature and human from nonhuman life. Ghosh also identifies the crisis of imagination as a crisis of storytelling. He calls for a renewed ecological imagination that embraces myth, memory, and multiple ways of knowing as valid narrative tools. This approach allows literature to connect local experience with planetary awareness and to bridge cultural history with environmental urgency. Storytelling becomes a moral practice, capable of cultivating empathy, humility, and care in the face of global ecological risk. In conclusion, a postcolonial reading of *The Great Derangement* reveals Ghosh's call for a relational imagination that views the world as an interconnected system rather than a hierarchy of dominance. His work urges new narrative forms that acknowledge historical responsibility and envision futures rooted in justice, reciprocity, and coexistence. Such an approach positions literature as a vital space for reimagining humanity's place within the living world.

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