



Environmental Concerns in Amitav Ghosh's "The Great Derangement": Climate Crisis, Literary Imagination, and the Failure of Bourgeois Realism

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Article information

Received: 23rd April 2025

Received in revised form: 2nd May 2025

Accepted: 19th June 2025

Available online: 7th July 2025

Volume: 1

Issue: 3

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15812866>

Abstract

Amitav Ghosh's "The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable" presents a profound critique of contemporary literary culture's inadequate response to the climate crisis. This paper examines how Ghosh articulates environmental concerns through his analysis of the "great derangement" – the collective failure of imagination that prevents modern society from comprehending and addressing climate change. Through close textual analysis grounded in ecocritical theory, this study explores Ghosh's argument that the bourgeois realist novel, dominant literary form of the modern era, is structurally incapable of representing the unprecedented nature of climate change. The paper argues that Ghosh's work reveals the urgent need for new narrative forms and imaginative frameworks to confront environmental crisis, while demonstrating how colonial history, capitalist modernity, and literary aesthetics intersect in perpetuating ecological destruction. Ghosh's environmental concerns extend beyond traditional nature writing to encompass questions of justice, temporality, and the very foundations of modern consciousness, offering a decolonial perspective on climate discourse that challenges Western-centric approaches to environmental crisis.

Keywords:- Climate Change, Environmental crisis, Ecological destruction, Decolonial, Justice, Cultural form.

Introduction

The twenty-first century has witnessed an unprecedented convergence of environmental crisis and cultural critique, as scholars and writers grapple with representing the seemingly unrepresentable scale of climate change. Amitav Ghosh's "The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable" (2016) stands as one of the most significant contributions to this emerging discourse, offering a devastating critique of modernity's failure to confront environmental destruction. Ghosh's central thesis – that we are living through a "great derangement" characterized by the collective inability to comprehend and respond to climate change – reveals profound environmental concerns that extend far beyond traditional ecological discourse.

This paper examines how Ghosh articulates environmental concerns through a multi-layered analysis that interrogates literary form, historical consciousness, and political economy. The research question guiding this investigation is: How does Ghosh's concept of "the great derangement" illuminate the complex relationship between environmental crisis, literary imagination, and the structures of modern consciousness that perpetuate ecological destruction? Through close textual analysis informed by ecocritical theory and postcolonial studies, this paper argues that Ghosh's environmental concerns are fundamentally concerned with the decolonization of climate discourse and the urgent need for new forms of narrative and political imagination.

The significance of this analysis lies in Ghosh's unique position as both a novelist and environmental thinker who brings a postcolonial perspective to climate discourse. His work challenges the dominant frameworks through which environmental crisis is understood, revealing how colonial histories, capitalist structures, and literary aesthetics intersect in producing what he terms our contemporary "derangement." This study contributes to the growing field of environmental humanities by examining how Ghosh's critique opens new possibilities for understanding the cultural dimensions of climate change.

Theoretical Grounding

Ghosh's environmental critique emerges from the intersection of several critical traditions that inform his analysis of climate change and cultural response. Ecocriticism, as developed by scholars such as Lawrence Buell and Cheryll Glotfelty, provides a foundational framework for understanding literature's relationship to the natural world and environmental crisis (Buell; Glotfelty). However, Ghosh's approach extends beyond traditional ecocritical analysis to incorporate postcolonial theory and Marxist critique, creating what might be termed a "decolonial ecocriticism" that interrogates the imperial and capitalist structures underlying environmental destruction.

The concept of the Anthropocene, as theorized by Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer, provides crucial context for understanding Ghosh's environmental concerns. However, Ghosh's analysis aligns more closely with scholars like Jason Moore who propose the "Capitalocene" as a more accurate framework for understanding the current geological epoch. This perspective emphasizes how capitalist accumulation and colonial expansion have driven environmental destruction, rather than attributing responsibility to humanity as an undifferentiated whole (Moore).

Ghosh's critique of the novel form draws upon literary theoretical traditions that examine the relationship between narrative structure and ideological content. His analysis of "bourgeois realism" engages with the work of scholars like Ian Watt and George Lukács, while his attention to the novel's limitations in representing climate change resonates with recent work in climate fiction criticism by scholars such as Amitav Ghosh himself and other practitioners of what has come to be known as "cli-fi" criticism (Lukács; Watt).

The postcolonial dimension of Ghosh's environmental thought draws upon the work of scholars like Dipesh Chakrabarty, whose "Provincializing Europe" provides a framework for understanding how European modernity's universal claims obscure other ways of knowing and relating to the natural world. This theoretical grounding enables Ghosh to articulate environmental concerns that are simultaneously local and global, historical and contemporary.

Analysis: The Great Derangement as Environmental Critique

The Failure of Literary Imagination

Ghosh's environmental concerns begin with a fundamental critique of the modern novel's inability to represent climate change. In the opening section, "Stories," he argues that

the bourgeois realist novel, which emerged alongside industrial capitalism, is structurally incapable of representing the unprecedented events that characterize the Anthropocene. The novel's commitment to probability and everyday realism renders it inadequate to the task of representing the "improbable" events of climate change – the extraordinary weather events, rising seas, and ecological disruptions that mark our contemporary moment.

This literary analysis reveals deeper environmental concerns about the relationship between narrative form and environmental consciousness. Ghosh demonstrates how the novel's formal constraints mirror the broader limitations of modern consciousness in confronting environmental crisis. The novel's focus on individual psychology and domestic relationships, its temporal structure centered on human-scale narratives, and its spatial imagination bounded by the nation-state all reflect the anthropocentric assumptions that underlie environmental destruction.

Ghosh's critique extends to the genre hierarchies that govern contemporary literary culture. He observes how events that would once have been considered supernatural or fantastic are now empirical realities of climate change, yet they remain inadmissible to serious literary fiction. This exclusion reflects what he identifies as a broader cultural "derangement" – the inability to process and respond to environmental crisis through existing cultural forms.

Historical Consciousness and Colonial Legacy

The second section, "History," reveals how Ghosh's environmental concerns are deeply intertwined with questions of colonial history and historical consciousness. He traces the emergence of the modern world-system through the expansion of European colonial power, demonstrating how the same imperial projects that established global capitalism also initiated the large-scale environmental destruction that culminates in contemporary climate change.

Ghosh's analysis of colonial Burma, drawing upon his family history and archival research, illustrates how colonial extraction of resources like teak contributed both to imperial wealth accumulation and environmental degradation. This historical analysis reveals how environmental crisis cannot be separated from questions of imperial violence and economic exploitation. The environmental concerns that emerge from this analysis are thus inseparable from concerns about justice, reparations, and decolonization.

The temporal dimensions of Ghosh's environmental critique are particularly significant here. He demonstrates how the temporal frameworks of modernity – linear progress, developmental time, the nation-state's historical consciousness – obscure the deep historical roots of environmental crisis while preventing recognition of alternative temporalities that might enable different relationships with the natural world. This analysis of temporal consciousness represents a crucial dimension of his environmental thought.

Political Economy and Carbon Democracy

In the final section, "Politics," Ghosh's environmental concerns culminate in a critique of what Timothy Mitchell terms "carbon democracy" – the political formations that emerge from fossil fuel dependence (Mitchell). Ghosh demonstrates how democratic institutions in their current form are structurally incapable of responding to climate change, as they are predicated on short-term electoral cycles, national sovereignty, and economic growth imperatives that conflict with the long-term, global, and transformative responses that environmental crisis demands.

This political analysis reveals how Ghosh's environmental concerns extend beyond questions of pollution or conservation to encompass fundamental critiques of modern political and economic systems. His analysis of carbon capitalism demonstrates how fossil fuel dependence has shaped not only energy systems but also political institutions, urban planning,

and cultural forms. The environmental crisis thus appears not as an external threat to existing systems but as the inevitable consequence of those systems' internal logic.

Ghosh's discussion of climate justice movements reveals his vision for alternative political formations that might emerge from environmental crisis. He points to indigenous movements, climate activism in the Global South, and other forms of political organization that challenge the assumptions of carbon democracy while proposing alternative relationships between human communities and natural systems.

Interpretation: Decolonizing Environmental Discourse

Ghosh's environmental concerns in "The Great Derangement" can be understood as part of a broader project of decolonizing environmental discourse. His critique reveals how dominant approaches to climate change – from carbon markets to technological solutions to international climate negotiations – reproduce the same colonial and capitalist logics that created environmental crisis in the first place.

The significance of this decolonial approach lies in its challenge to universalist climate discourse that obscures questions of responsibility, justice, and alternative ways of knowing. Ghosh's analysis reveals how climate change affects different populations unequally, how historical responsibility for emissions is concentrated in the Global North, and how indigenous and traditional knowledge systems offer alternative frameworks for understanding human-nature relationships.

This decolonial dimension of Ghosh's environmental thought has profound implications for environmental humanities scholarship. Rather than treating environmental crisis as a technical problem requiring expert solutions, Ghosh's analysis reveals it as fundamentally a crisis of imagination, politics, and cultural form. This perspective opens new possibilities for environmental scholarship that takes seriously questions of justice, democracy, and cultural transformation.

The literary dimensions of Ghosh's environmental critique are particularly significant in this regard. His call for new narrative forms to represent climate change is simultaneously a call for new forms of political and environmental imagination. The failure of the bourgeois novel to represent climate change thus reflects a broader failure of modern cultural forms to enable the kind of transformative response that environmental crisis demands.

Implications: Toward New Forms of Environmental Imagination

The implications of Ghosh's environmental critique extend across multiple domains of contemporary life and thought. For literary studies, his analysis challenges the field to develop new critical frameworks adequate to the cultural dimensions of environmental crisis. This includes not only the development of climate fiction as a genre but also fundamental reconsiderations of literary value, aesthetic judgment, and the social function of literature in an era of environmental crisis.

For environmental studies, Ghosh's work demonstrates the crucial importance of cultural analysis in understanding environmental crisis. His attention to questions of narrative, imagination, and cultural form reveals dimensions of environmental crisis that remain invisible to scientific or policy-oriented approaches. This cultural analysis is not merely supplementary to other forms of environmental knowledge but constitutive of environmental crisis itself.

The political implications of Ghosh's environmental critique are perhaps most significant. His analysis reveals how environmental crisis demands not merely policy reforms or technological innovations but fundamental transformations of political and economic systems. The "great derangement" that characterizes contemporary responses to climate change thus reflects deeper structural problems that require systemic solutions.

Ghosh's work also has important implications for postcolonial studies and decolonial theory. His environmental critique demonstrates how environmental crisis and colonial violence are deeply interconnected, requiring approaches to decolonization that take seriously questions of environmental justice and ecological restoration. This perspective challenges both traditional environmentalism that ignores questions of justice and postcolonial criticism that ignores environmental dimensions of colonial violence.

Conclusion

Amitav Ghosh's "The Great Derangement" articulates environmental concerns that extend far beyond traditional nature writing or environmental advocacy to encompass fundamental critiques of modernity, capitalism, and colonial power. His concept of the "great derangement" illuminates how contemporary environmental crisis reflects not merely technical failures but deeper failures of imagination, politics, and cultural form. Through his analysis of literary representation, historical consciousness, and political economy, Ghosh reveals how environmental crisis and cultural crisis are inseparable phenomena that require coordinated responses.

The significance of Ghosh's environmental critique lies in its decolonial perspective on climate discourse and its insistence that environmental crisis demands fundamental transformations of existing cultural and political forms. His work demonstrates how the same colonial and capitalist structures that created environmental crisis also shape contemporary responses to it, creating the paradox of a civilization that recognizes environmental crisis while remaining incapable of responding adequately to it.

The intellectual contribution of this analysis lies in its demonstration of how Ghosh's environmental concerns open new possibilities for environmental humanities scholarship that takes seriously questions of justice, decolonization, and cultural transformation. His work reveals the urgent need for new forms of narrative and political imagination adequate to the unprecedented challenges of the Anthropocene, while providing a framework for developing such alternatives through the decolonization of environmental discourse.

Future research might explore how Ghosh's environmental critique relates to other contemporary attempts to develop postcolonial and decolonial approaches to environmental crisis, including the work of scholars like Kyle Whyte, Zoe Todd, and other practitioners of indigenous environmental studies. Additionally, further investigation of how Ghosh's critique of literary form might inform the development of new genres and narrative strategies for representing environmental crisis would contribute significantly to the growing field of climate fiction criticism.

Ultimately, Ghosh's "The Great Derangement" challenges readers to recognize environmental crisis not as an external threat requiring technical solutions but as a crisis of consciousness that demands fundamental transformations of how we understand the relationship between human communities and natural systems. This recognition represents both the urgency and the possibility of our contemporary environmental moment.

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