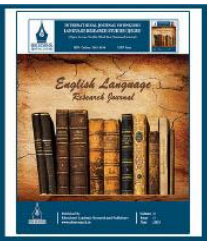
INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE RESEARCH STUDIES (IJELRS)
(Open Access, Double-Blind Peer Reviewed Journal)
ISSN Online: 3049-1894 ISSN Print



Narrative Failure and Ecological Crisis: Amitav Ghosh's The Great Derangement in Postcolonial and Ecocritical Perspective

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Article information

Received: 5th December 2025
Received in revised form: 7th January 2026
Accepted: 10th February 2026
Available online: 20th March 2026

Volume: 3
Issue: 1
DOI: https://doi.org/10.63090/IJELRS/3049.1894.0028

Abstract

This paper explores the argument advanced by Amitav Ghosh in The Great Derangement that the conventions of literary realism are inherently ill-suited to representing the large-scale and unpredictable phenomena of climate change. The study analyzes Ghosh's claims across the book's three sections—Stories, History, and Politics—situating them within the broader contexts of ecocriticism and postcolonial environmental thought. It draws on concepts such as Nixon's notion of slow violence, Chakrabarty's theses on the climate of history, and Morton's theory of hyperobjects, while also examining how Ghosh's own fiction, The Hungry Tide and Gun Island, attempts to enact the principles outlined in his critique. The paper contends that Ghosh's most significant contribution lies not only in his literary diagnosis but in his insistence on linking environmental catastrophe to the legacies of colonialism and capitalism, a connection that much Western ecocriticism has been slow to acknowledge.

Keywords:- Amitav Ghosh, ecocriticism, climate change, The Great Derangement, Anthropocene, postcolonial environmentalism

Introduction

Amitav Ghosh tells a story about a tornado. In 1978, living in Delhi, he witnessed one a terrifying, improbable event that left a trail of destruction through a city where tornadoes are not supposed to happen. Years later, when he tried to incorporate the experience into a novel, he found he could not. Not because the memory had faded but because the event felt, in fictional terms, implausible. Readers would not believe it. It belonged to the world of disaster movies, not serious literature. And therein, Ghosh argues, lies the problem: "serious literary fiction" has made itself incapable of engaging with the kinds of extreme, improbable, devastating events that climate change is making routine (Ghosh, The Great Derangement 9).

The Great Derangement, based on lectures delivered in Berlin in 2015, is Ghosh's attempt to explain why this is the case and what it means. The "derangement" of the title is not psychological but cultural: a collective inability to face what we already know about the climate crisis, an inability that Ghosh traces to the deepest structures of modern Western culture its literary conventions, its historical narratives, its political institutions. The book is slim but its

ambition is enormous, and it has provoked a critical conversation that shows no sign of abating. I engage with that conversation here, trying to identify what is most valuable in Ghosh's argument and where its weaknesses lie.

Stories: Why the Novel Cannot See the Storm

Ghosh's literary argument is elegantly simple. The modern realist novel, which took shape in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, emerged during a period when European society was learning to think of nature as background predictable, manageable, essentially static. The novel focuses on human psychology, social relationships, the gradual unfolding of character within stable settings. Extreme natural events floods, earthquakes, hurricanes appear, when they appear at all, as metaphors for human turmoil rather than as literal realities deserving attention in their own right.

Climate change explodes this framework. The events it produces Category 5 hurricanes, unprecedented wildfires, coastal cities drowning are not metaphors. They are facts. But they feel, within the conventions of literary realism, melodramatic, implausible, genre-fiction-ish. A tornado in Delhi is real; in a literary novel it reads as contrived. Clark's concept of "scale effects" captures the difficulty well: climate change operates at temporal and spatial scales that dwarf human experience, and the novel, which is calibrated to individual lifetimes and local communities, cannot accommodate that scalar mismatch without bending its own conventions out of shape (Clark 72).

This is a genuinely interesting diagnosis, and I find it largely persuasive. But it is not without problems. Some critics have objected that Ghosh underestimates the flexibility of the realist tradition that writers like Barbara Kingsolver and Ian McEwan have addressed climate change within recognizable literary frameworks. Others have questioned whether the distinction between "literary fiction" and "genre fiction" that Ghosh's argument depends on is as stable as he assumes. Science fiction, after all, has been thinking about ecological catastrophe for decades. Ghosh acknowledges this but considers it a symptom rather than a solution: the fact that climate-related fiction is relegated to genre shelves confirms his point about mainstream literature's refusal to engage.

History: The Carbon Economy and Its Colonial Roots

The second section of The Great Derangement shifts from literary criticism to political history, and this is where Ghosh's argument becomes most distinctive. Climate change, he insists, cannot be understood apart from the histories of colonialism and capitalism that produced the global carbon economy. This is not a popular position in mainstream environmentalism, which tends to frame the crisis as a universal human problem requiring universal solutions. Ghosh thinks this framing is dishonest. The industrial revolution that launched the carbon economy depended on colonial resource extraction, and the wealth that allowed Western nations to industrialize was extracted, in significant part, from colonized peoples. To discuss climate change without discussing empire is to mystify the problem.

Nixon's concept of "slow violence"—environmental degradation that unfolds gradually and disproportionately harms the poor and the colonized—provides a powerful companion to Ghosh's historical argument (Nixon 2). Chakrabarty's "Climate of History" theses complicate it usefully: if humans have become a geological force, as Chakrabarty argues, then the distinction between natural history and human history collapses, and traditional humanistic frameworks are inadequate to the new reality (Chakrabarty 209). Ghosh accepts this but pushes back against what he sees as Chakrabarty's insufficient attention to the unequal distribution of both responsibility and vulnerability. The Anthropocene is real, but it is not evenly distributed. Guha's distinction between the "environmentalism of the rich" and the "environmentalism of the poor" captures the class dimension that Ghosh insists on (Guha 3).

Politics: The Failure of Institutions

Ghosh is scathing about the Paris Agreement, which he sees as diplomatic theatre a performance of concern that leaves the fundamental structures of the carbon economy untouched. The voluntary, non-binding national commitments, the absence of enforcement, the marginalization of the most vulnerable communities these are symptoms, in his reading, of a political system constitutively incapable of addressing a crisis that transcends national boundaries and time horizons.

The most provocative element of his political argument is the suggestion that religious traditions might offer resources for environmental thought that secular modernity has foreclosed. Enlightenment rationality, with its sharp distinction between human subjects and natural objects, has produced a worldview fundamentally inhospitable to ecological thinking. Religious traditions with their sense of the sacred in nature, their practices of restraint, their narratives of interdependence may provide alternative frameworks. Morton's concept of "hyperobjects" entities so vast and temporally distributed that they overwhelm human cognitive categories (Morton 1) gives philosophical backing to Ghosh's intuition that we need entirely new ways of thinking about the relationship between humans and their environment. The suggestion has been controversial. I think it deserves serious consideration rather than reflexive dismissal.

Ghosh's Fiction as Practice

The Great Derangement is a book of criticism, but Ghosh has also been trying to write the kind of fiction he argues for. The Hungry Tide (2004), set in the Sundarbans, refuses pastoral idealization: its mangrove forest is a place of beauty and terror where human and nonhuman worlds interpenetrate in ways that are both ecologically fascinating and physically dangerous. Gun Island (2019) goes further, deliberately incorporating extreme weather, mass migration, and the uncanny into a narrative that moves between the Sundarbans, Venice, and Los Angeles. It is not, I think, entirely successful the novel sometimes feels like an illustration of a thesis rather than a fully realized work of fiction but the ambition is admirable, and the attempt to practice what his criticism preaches deserves recognition.

Conclusion

The Great Derangement is not a comfortable book, and it does not offer comfort. What it offers is a diagnosis: literary fiction has failed to engage with the defining crisis of our era, and this failure is not accidental but structural, rooted in the very conventions through which modern literature represents the world. Ghosh's insistence on connecting this literary failure to the political failures of the nation-state system and to the historical legacies of colonialism gives his argument a scope and a seriousness that most ecocriticism lacks.

Whether the literary world will rise to Ghosh's challenge remains to be seen. The "great derangement" he diagnoses is not merely literary but civilizational—a collective refusal to face what we already know. Literature alone cannot cure it. But literature, at its best, can make the unthinkable thinkable and the overwhelming imaginable. Ghosh has written a book that insists, with considerable force, that this is no longer optional. It is, in the most literal sense, a matter of survival.

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