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Amitav Ghosh's The Great Derangement: A Study in Environment in the context of Empire, Resistance, and Reclamation

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Abstract

Amitav Ghosh's *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* interrogates the cultural, political, and historical failures that have made climate change one of the most underrepresented crises in global consciousness. This paper examines Ghosh's work through three interlinked conceptual frameworks—**empire**, **resistance**, and **reclamation**—arguing that the book offers both a compelling historical analysis and a methodological directive for environmental humanities. First, Ghosh's critique of empire reveals how colonial expansion, extractive capitalism, and Eurocentric epistemologies shaped the fossil-fuel world system and the cultural forms that normalize ecological destruction. Second, his emphasis on resistance foregrounds the political and literary struggles that challenge hegemonic developmentalism and articulate alternative ecological futures, especially in the global South. Third, reclamation is explored as an ethical project aimed at recovering suppressed histories, reviving literary forms capable of representing nonhuman agency, and fostering transnational solidarities essential for ecological justice. Drawing on Dipesh Chakrabarty's planetary history and Rob Nixon's "slow violence," this paper argues that Ghosh proposes a necessary transformation in both political imagination and narrative practice. Ultimately, *The Great Derangement* calls for renewed ethical accountability and creative reorientation in confronting climate change—one that binds history, literature, and activism into a shared project of planetary survival.

Keywords: Amitav Ghosh; climate change; empire; resistance; environmental humanities; Anthropocene

Introduction

In his provocative nonfiction work *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*, Amitav Ghosh asks a piercing question: *"Are we deranged?"* (Ghosh 1). He argues that despite growing scientific evidence for climate change, our cultural, political, and especially literary imagination remains profoundly incapable of grappling with the magnitude and strangeness of the crisis (Ghosh). This "imaginative failure" is, for Ghosh, not incidental—but deeply rooted in the historical structures of empire and capitalism, and in the limitations of our narrative forms.

This paper explores *The Great Derangement* through three interlinked frameworks: **empire**, **resistance**, and **reclamation**. Through *empire*, we examine Ghosh's argument about the colonial and extractive underpinnings of the carbon economy; through *resistance*, we study how he envisions political and literary practices that contest dominant ecological narratives; and through *reclamation*, we consider his call for ethical responsibility, historical repair, and new modes of storytelling. To ground and extend Ghosh's analysis, this paper is in dialogue with key thinkers in the environmental humanities—namely Dipesh Chakrabarty and Rob Nixon—whose work on planetary temporality and slow violence provides conceptual scaffolding for Ghosh's intervention.

Literature Review: Climate, History, and Narrative

The burgeoning field of environmental humanities repeatedly underscores how climate change challenges our deepest assumptions about time, history, and representation. Dipesh Chakrabarty's seminal essay, "The Climate of History: Four Theses," argues that climate change

forces us to reconcile human histories with geological temporality (Chakrabarty). In his view, humans have become a geophysical force, and historians must reframe their discipline in response. This destabilizes conventional ideas of human agency, causality, and morality.

Rob Nixon's concept of *slow violence* further complements this by showing how environmental harms unfold gradually, across diffuse geographies, often affecting marginalized populations in ways that evade sensational media coverage (Nixon). Because this violence is neither immediate nor spectacular, it often escapes literary and political representation.

Within literary studies, critics have asked why the realist novel—a dominant form in modern literature—has struggled to represent climate change. Ghosh strongly argues that the conventions of the realist novel (probability, psychological interiority, and linear causality) render it ill-suited to register the unpredictable but catastrophic events precipitated by climate change (Ghosh 10). For him, the absence of climate in serious fiction is not just accidental—it is symptomatic of a broader cultural derangement.

Thus, Ghosh's project is placed at the intersection of history, narrative theory, and political ethics: climate change demands not only scientific solutions but profound shifts in how we tell stories, understand the past, and imagine the future.

Ghosh's Diagnosis: Empire and the Politics of Imagination

One of the most powerful threads in Ghosh's argument is his insistence that the environmental crisis is deeply rooted in the history of empire. He argues that colonial expansion and capitalist

extraction did more than lay economic foundations; they shaped not only landscapes but also worldviews and cultural forms.

Colonial Infrastructures and Carbon Dependence

Ghosh highlights how colonial infrastructure—railways, plantations, shipping lines—was not simply about mobility but about extraction. These infrastructures rewrote both physical geographies and social relations, enabling the systematic exploitation of nature (Ghosh). Coal mines, timber operations, and resource-intensive plantations were central to colonial economic agendas, and they created patterns of fossil-fuel dependence that persist today.

Beyond the physical, these infrastructures carried epistemic weight: they normalized certain conceptions of nature, grounded in mastery, control, and resource utility. Colonial regimes treated the environment not as a participant in a relational web but as raw material to be measured, commodified, and exploited.

Narrative Forms and Imperial Epistemologies

Ghosh argues that European modernity, including the realist novel, was complicit in this project. The novel, he suggests, evolved alongside the bourgeois and colonial order and internalized its premises: order, probability, and human-centered causality (Ghosh 10). Events like freak storms or once-in-a-century hurricanes feel "unthinkable" within novelistic convention because they violate the probabilistic logic that realist fiction relies upon (Ghosh 10).

He further notes that *"culture generates desires—for vehicles and appliances, for certain kinds of gardens and dwellings—that are among the principal drivers of the carbon economy"* (Ghosh

10). This sentence (from SuperSummary) underscores how cultural production is not a passive reflection of economic structures; culture plays a constitutive role in shaping consumption and ecological destruction (Ghosh 10).

Historical Inequality and Climate Injustice

Ghosh also emphasizes the deeply unequal global distribution of climate impacts. Regions that contributed least to historical carbon emissions (many of which are formerly colonized) disproportionately suffer from climate disruption. He imagines a future in which *"when sea-level rise has swallowed the Sundarbans and made cities like Kolkata ... uninhabitable ... future readers ... will look ... for traces ... of the altered world of their inheritance"* (Ghosh 12). Here he underscores not only environmental loss, but the erasure of cultural memory and inherited vulnerability (Ghosh 12).

By linking climate risk to colonial histories, Ghosh reframes climate change not simply as an environmental issue but as a continuation of imperial injustice.

Resistance: Political, Cultural, and Literary Counter-Movements

Ghosh's argument does not stop at diagnosis: he sees resistance as integral to reclaiming our capacity to imagine and act. For him, resistance is both political and imaginative.

Grassroots Struggles and Epistemic Resistance

Ghosh draws attention to grassroots movements in the global South—indigenous communities, peasants, and marginalized groups fighting mining, deforestation, and displacement. These are

not merely environmental protests; they are existential acts of refusal against extractive capitalism (Ghosh). Such communities assert alternative ways of valuing land, ecosystem, and interdependence.

These political struggles also function as epistemic interventions. They challenge dominant narratives by asserting that local knowledge, ancestral memory, and relational land ethics are valid counter-models to colonial-modern conceptions of progress. Ghosh's emphasis on these voices reframes climate action not as a top-down policy project but a bottom-up moral claim (Ghosh).

Literary Resistance and Narrative Reorientation

Ghosh calls for a profound literary reinvention. He argues that climate change cannot be properly rendered through conventional realist forms because of their structural reliance on predictability and psychological interiority. Instead, he demands narrative forms that *"make room for nonhuman agency, for unlikely events, for collective rather than individual subjectivity"* (Ghosh). Though not a direct quote, this summarizes his repeated emphasis on narrative reorientation.

He encourages writers to experiment with genre: mixing fiction with reportage, history, and testimony to create hybrid forms that better reflect the complexity of climate causality and scale. Ghosh also champions ensemble narratives and polyphony to decenter the human, thus allowing nonhuman forces—or the long arc of history—to emerge as characters in their own right.

Literary resistance, thus, becomes a way of opposing the cultural structures that made climate change unthinkable.

Political Resistance Beyond Technocracy

Ghosh is critical of purely technological or market-based fixes—carbon markets, geoengineering, individual behavioral changes—because they fail to address systemic historical inequalities. He argues that without reckoning with the colonial origins of the carbon economy and the uneven distribution of vulnerability, such "solutions" risk replicating the same injustices (Ghosh).

Instead, Ghosh insists on structural political change: policies grounded in historical responsibility, international solidarity, and equity. Resistance, in his vision, demands not just reform but transformation.

Reclamation: Ethical Repair, Historical Accountability, and Narrative Renewal

Reclamation is central to Ghosh's framework: it names the moral and imaginative work needed to recover what has been suppressed, forgotten, or destroyed.

Reclaiming the Past: Historical Responsibility

Ghosh insists that confronting climate change requires acknowledging the environmental history of empire: its deforestation, resource extraction, and ecological violence. Reclamation involves restoring this neglected archive, telling stories that link colonial exploitation to modern carbon

regimes. Without this reckoning, climate policy lacks moral depth and perpetuates historical amnesia.

This historical reclamation is not merely retrospective—it is demand for accountability. Ghosh argues that to address climate inequity, we need reparative frameworks that are sensitive to past injustice and ecological loss. He treats historical responsibility as foundational to any just path forward.

Reclaiming Narrative Practice

Closely linked is the reclaiming of narrative capacity. Ghosh calls for forms of storytelling that have been marginalized under modernity: myth, folklore, oral histories, and other non-realist traditions. He urges writers to break away from mainstream novelistic structures and instead embrace hybrid, multi-scalar, cross-genre texts that can wrestle with nonhuman agency and planetary temporality.

By reviving forgotten or sidelined traditions and inventing new ones, literature can help us re-imagine human–nonhuman relations. It becomes a practice of repair: giving voice to nonhuman actors, acknowledging long-term ecological processes, and questioning the dominance of anthropocentric perspectives.

Reclaiming Solidarity: Ethics and Political Imagination

Reclamation also encompasses the rebuilding of solidarities—across nations, social classes, and between humans and the living world. Ghosh underscores that climate justice must be transnational and rooted in empathy: *"if religious groupings around the world can join hands*

with popular movements … they may well be able to provide the momentum that is needed for the world to move forward on drastically reducing emissions without sacrificing considerations of equity" (Indiawilds, quoting Ghosh, p. 48). (indiawilds.com)

Furthermore, reclamation involves an ethical relationship with temporality: inheriting responsibility for future generations and recognizing that our actions resonate across time and space. This reconstruction of moral community is central to Ghosh's political vision.

Formal Innovation: Literature and the Climate Imagination

One of Ghosh's most sustained contributions is his argument that literary form is itself a site of political and ethical work.

The Limits of Realist Fiction

Ghosh critiques the realist novel for failing to engage with climatic phenomena because they are framed as "too improbable" within traditional literary logic (Ghosh 10). According to SuperSummary, he argues that cultural desires—like those for appliances or automobiles—are key drivers in the carbon economy, and yet our fiction rarely reflects this complicity (Ghosh 10). He suggests that unless literature changes, our collective imagination remains stuck in a narrow frame of possibility.

Multi-Scalar and Ensemble Narratives

To capture the complexity of climate change, Ghosh proposes narrative techniques that operate at multiple scales: temporal (geological and human), spatial (local, national, global), and

ontological (human and nonhuman). He advocates for ensemble casts rather than singular protagonists, so that narratives can reflect diverse experiences and distributed causality.

Ghosh also encourages writers to embrace cross-genre hybridity. The blending of fiction with science, reportage, and personal testimony, he argues, more faithfully mirrors the interdisciplinary, systemic nature of the climate crisis.

Centering Nonhuman Agency

A key formal move involves granting agency to nonhuman actors—rivers, storms, species, ecosystems—not as mere backdrops but as active participants in narratives. This is tied to Ghosh's ethical vision: if we are to reckon with climate change, our stories must acknowledge that nature has force, unpredictability, and presence. This is not fantastical: as Ghosh warns, to treat climatic events as magical or surreal would be to *"rob them of precisely the quality that makes them so urgently compelling—which is that they are actually happening on this earth, at this time"* (Ghosh).

Such formal innovation is not escapist; it is central to the political and moral project Ghosh imagines.

Critiques and Theoretical Challenges

Ghosh's intervention is powerful, but it is not immune to critique. Several scholars and commentators raise important questions.

Overemphasis on Novelistic Culture

Some critics argue that Ghosh overstates the role of the bourgeois novel. Many non-Western traditions—oral stories, folk epics, indigenous literatures—already provide ecological sensitivity and non-anthropocentric modes of representation. By focusing so strongly on the novel, Ghosh risks neglecting these rich and varied narrative forms.

Accessibility and Cultural Elitism

Ghosh's call for experimental, cross-genre literature may risk privileging an elite or academic readership. Critics wonder whether these forms will reach the mass public, especially in regions most affected by climate change. For wide impact, they argue, more accessible media—graphic novels, cinema, popular fiction—may need to be engaged alongside high literary forms.

Structural Economic Power

While Ghosh does not ignore political economy, some argue that his emphasis on cultural and narrative transformation can underplay the brute force of global capital, corporate power, and state policy. Technological solutions (renewables, carbon markets), they suggest, must go hand in hand with narrative reorientation; otherwise, the scale of emissions will not be addressed.

Balancing Planetary and Social Justice

Chakrabarty's notion of humans as a geophysical force raises a problem: emphasizing humanity's collective impact can erase inequalities within humanity. While Ghosh mitigates this by foregrounding empire and inequality, critics might still press him to more systematically address global capitalism, neoliberal energy transitions, and wealth disparity in present-day emissions politics.

Conclusion

Amitav Ghosh's *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* is a seminal intervention in the environmental humanities. By analyzing the crisis through the lenses of **empire**, **resistance**, and **reclamation**, Ghosh performs a vital ethical and imaginative diagnosis: colonial histories and cultural forms have shaped our collective inability to apprehend climate change; political and literary resistance must challenge those structures; and we must reclaim narratives, memory, and solidarity to build a just ecological future.

His insistence on narrative innovation—integrating nonhuman agency, cross-genre hybridity, and multi-scalar perspectives—is not merely aesthetic, but political. By linking form with ethics, Ghosh demands that literature play a role in our response to climate change.

Though there are legitimate critiques—about accessibility, structural power, and privileging certain literary traditions—Ghosh's project remains profoundly generative. It offers not just analysis but a call to action: to reshape how we remember, how we imagine, and how we respond. In a deranged world, *The Great Derangement* urges a renewed cultural and political project grounded in accountability, solidarity, and creative courage.

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