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Climate Change and Environmental Anxiety

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ABSTRACT

The intersection of climate crisis and literary imagination has produced one of the most urgent scholarly conversations of our era. This paper examines the way ecological disruption and environmental fear are articulated throughout the fiction and non-fiction prose of Amitav Ghosh, whose career-long engagement with the natural world sets him apart within the landscape of contemporary Indian writing in English. Anchored in the theoretical terrain of postcolonial ecocriticism, the study moves across Ghosh's major texts — from the tidal wilderness of The Hungry Tide (2004) through the colonial spice routes of the Ibis Trilogy (2008–2015) to the polemical arguments of The Great Derangement (2016) and the more recent fictions Gun Island (2019) and The Nutmeg's Curse (2021). Three interlocking claims organise the analysis. First, that Ghosh situates the ecological wounds of the present within the longer arc of colonial extraction, demonstrating that environmental crisis is never politically innocent. Second, that his narratives embed environmental anxiety in specific, deeply rendered landscapes — most memorably the mangrove archipelago of the Sundarbans — whose vulnerability becomes a measure of planetary fragility. Third, that his theoretical writing diagnoses a collective failure of cultural imagination, arguing that the conventions of the realist novel are structurally unsuited to representing the scale and strangeness of climate change. Through engagement with the frameworks of Rob Nixon, Graham Huggan, Helen Tiffin, and Timothy Morton, this study demonstrates that Ghosh's body of work constitutes a decisive contribution both to Indian English literature and to the wider field of environmental humanities.

Keywords: Amitav Ghosh, Climate Change, Environmental Anxiety, Ecocriticism, Postcolonial Literature, The Great Derangement, Anthropocene, Slow Violence, Indian English Fiction, Ecological Crisis

INTRODUCTION

Few questions pressed upon the literary imagination with greater insistence in the opening decades of the twenty-first century than the question of how writers ought to respond to accelerating environmental breakdown. Rising ocean levels, intensifying storm systems, mass displacement of species, and the psychic weight of living within a climate that is visibly destabilising — these are not abstract threats but lived realities that reshape coastlines, livelihoods, and the inner emotional lives of millions. Yet the mainstream literary tradition, particularly in its realist form, has been slow to register this transformation with the seriousness it demands. It is within this context that Amitav Ghosh's literary project acquires its exceptional importance.

Ghosh occupies a singular position among contemporary Indian writers in English. His fiction and non-fiction have consistently treated the natural world not as backdrop or symbol but as an active force with its own histories, logics, and moral claims. From the delta forests of West Bengal to the opium fields of colonial Bihar and the nutmeg groves of the Indonesian archipelago, Ghosh's imagination has ranged across ecosystems that have been shaped and scarred by the same colonial forces that shaped and scarred human communities. His work insists, with quiet but unyielding persistence, that ecological history and human history cannot be told apart — that the environmental crises of the present are the direct inheritance of decisions made under colonial regimes of extraction and enclosure.

The theoretical framework that most productively illuminates Ghosh's literary project is postcolonial ecocriticism. This interdisciplinary field brings together the analytical resources of postcolonial theory — its attention to colonial histories, unequal power relations, and the persistence of imperial logics into the present —

with the methods of ecocriticism, which examines how literary texts construct, represent, and respond to the natural world. Applied to Ghosh's work, this combined framework reveals a literary intelligence alert to the ways in which environmental damage and social injustice are not parallel problems but dimensions of a single historical process.

This paper proceeds through Ghosh's major works in roughly chronological order, with each section attending to a specific dimension of his engagement with climate change and environmental anxiety. The aim is both to offer close readings of individual texts and to map the larger arc of an evolving literary and intellectual project that has made Ghosh one of the most important ecological writers of his generation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

When the discipline of ecocriticism emerged formally in the 1990s, its founding texts — including the anthology assembled by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm in 1996 and Lawrence Buell's landmark study of 1995 — established a set of preoccupations that were unmistakably shaped by the North American wilderness tradition. Nature, in this early ecocritical imagination, was predominantly rural, sublime, and, implicitly, white. The environmental experiences of colonised peoples, indigenous communities, and the global South were largely absent from this founding archive, a lacuna that scholars working in postcolonial and world literature traditions were quick to identify and critique.

The systematic elaboration of a postcolonial ecocriticism capable of addressing these absences gathered pace during the 2000s. Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin's sustained engagement with the question, developed across several collaborative studies and culminating in their 2010 monograph, drew upon literary texts from Africa, the Caribbean, South Asia, and the Pacific to demonstrate that postcolonial writing had long been concerned with environmental justice, ecological belonging, and the legacies of colonial land use, even when it employed a vocabulary that differed from that of mainstream ecocriticism. Their work was decisive in establishing that environmental criticism could not reach its full interpretive potential without engaging seriously with colonial history.

Among the theoretical contributions that have proved most generative for reading Ghosh specifically, Rob Nixon's concept of slow violence deserves particular attention. Introduced in his 2011 study, slow violence names the gradual, attritional forms of environmental destruction — soil depletion, river poisoning, desertification, the creeping inundation of low-lying coastlines — that accumulate over years and decades rather than erupting in single dramatic events. Because slow violence unfolds incrementally and affects primarily communities that lack political and media visibility, it is structurally resistant to the forms of representation that dominate both news culture and literary realism. Nixon's framework illuminates precisely the kind of environmental harm that Ghosh's fiction makes visible.

Scholarly attention to Ghosh as an environmental writer has grown substantially over the past two decades. Early responses to The Hungry Tide were alert to its ecological ambitions, with critics examining the novel's representation of the Sundarbans as a space where human and non-human ecologies are inextricably entangled and where conservation politics reproduce colonial hierarchies of exclusion. The publication of The Great Derangement in 2016 prompted a wider wave of scholarly engagement, with researchers from literary studies, environmental humanities, and postcolonial theory all staking claims to Ghosh's theoretical arguments. Timothy Morton's notions of the mesh and dark ecology — frameworks that understand ecological relations as fundamentally entangled, uncanny, and resistant to redemptive narrative closure — have been productively applied to Ghosh's fiction by several critics, illuminating the way his narratives refuse the consolation of resolved endings.

What remains underexplored in existing scholarship is a comprehensive reading of Ghosh's environmental imagination across his full career, one that traces the development and deepening of his ecological thinking from the tidal forests of his 2004 novel through to the climate polemics of his most recent non-fiction. This paper aims to provide such a reading.

The Hungry Tide (2004): Ecological Precarity and the Sundarbans

The Sundarbans — the vast mangrove delta straddling the border between India and Bangladesh — is among the most ecologically complex and humanly precarious landscapes on earth. Its islands are not stable landmasses but temporary accumulations of silt, constantly reshaped by tidal forces that can reclaim in a single monsoon season what took decades to settle. For the fishing communities and subsistence farmers who have made their lives along these shifting margins, existence is organised around an intimate and inescapable awareness of environmental instability. It is into this landscape, charged with both ecological wonder and existential threat, that Ghosh sets his 2004 novel.

The Hungry Tide follows two principal figures whose encounter in the Sundarbans generates the novel's central tensions. Piyali Roy is a cetologist of Indian origin, raised in America and trained in the methods of Western marine biology, who arrives in the delta to study the endangered Irrawaddy dolphin. Fokir is a local fisherman who lives by an intimate, embodied knowledge of the tidal ecosystem — a knowledge transmitted not through formal education but through generations of practical engagement with the rhythms of the delta. Their collaboration, mediated by a translator who serves as a third narrative consciousness, dramatises the encounter between two radically different ways of knowing the natural world.

The environmental anxiety that saturates the novel operates on several registers simultaneously. Most immediately, it is expressed through the landscape itself — through Ghosh's precise and evocative rendering of a world in which the ordinary rhythms of daily life are shadowed at every moment by the possibility of sudden, overwhelming violence. The tigers that haunt the novel's margins are not merely symbols of wild nature but agents of genuine danger, and the vulnerability of the human communities who share the forest with them is rendered with unsentimental clarity. Yet the anxiety is also historical and political. At the heart of the narrative lies the memory of the Morichjhapi massacre of 1979, when Bengali refugees who had settled on a forest island were expelled by state forces in the name of wildlife conservation, with a death toll that remains disputed. This event — a real historical occurrence that Ghosh incorporates into his fiction — is the novel's ethical and emotional centre, the point at which the politics of conservation are revealed to reproduce the politics of colonial dispossession.

The storm that ends the novel — a sudden, ferocious cyclone that sweeps across the delta — functions as the novel's most concentrated figure of environmental catastrophe. Ghosh's description of the storm's approach and impact anticipates the language that would later come to characterise public and literary responses to extreme weather events in the era of climate change: the sense of a force that exceeds human comprehension, that overwhelms all the ordinary structures of protection and preparation, and that exposes the profound fragility of human habitation in a world of intensifying natural extremes. Fokir's death in the storm is the novel's most painful instance of what Nixon would call the disproportionate vulnerability of the poor to environmental catastrophe — a vulnerability that is not natural but historically produced.

The Ibis Trilogy (2008–2015): Historicising Colonial Ecology

The three novels that make up the Ibis Trilogy — Sea of Poppies, River of Smoke, and Flood of Fire — are works of enormous historical ambition. Set in the 1830s and 1840s, at a hinge moment when the expansion of British colonial trade in Asia was transforming the economies, landscapes, and social structures of the Indian subcontinent and the wider Indian Ocean world, the trilogy is at once a vivid narrative of adventure, migration, and resistance and a sustained act of environmental historical reckoning.

The opium poppy that dominates the first novel is the trilogy's governing ecological figure. Its cultivation in the Gangetic plain was not a neutral agricultural practice but a colonial imposition that required the systematic dismantling of the complex, diverse farming systems that had sustained peasant communities for generations. Ghosh's account, grounded in careful historical research, shows how the colonial demand for opium as a trade commodity with China transformed the landscape of Bihar and Bengal — converting mixed subsistence agriculture into vast monocultures, exhausting the soil, and binding cultivating households into a system of debt and coercion from which escape was virtually impossible. The ecological violence of this transformation was

inseparable from its social violence: the degradation of the land mirrored and reinforced the degradation of the people who worked it.

The figure of the ship Ibis is rich with environmental implication. Originally a vessel of the slave trade, she is repurposed in the novels as a carrier of indentured labourers, transported across the Indian Ocean to work the sugar plantations of Mauritius. But she also carries living specimens of the natural world — plants, animals, and seeds collected by the obsessive colonial botanist Fitcher Penrose — and it is through this dimension of her cargo that Ghosh explores the colonial practice of botanical imperialism: the systematic extraction, classification, and relocation of the natural world for European scientific and commercial purposes. Penrose's quest for a lost species of camellia in the second novel is an allegory of this extractive logic, and Ghosh treats it with a sharp eye for its absurdity as well as its destructiveness.

Reading the trilogy in the light of contemporary climate science, one is struck by the degree to which the ecological processes it describes — the burning of coal to power the steamships that enforce imperial trade routes, the clearing of forests for plantation agriculture, the pollution of waterways by industrial processing — are not merely historical curiosities but the founding acts of the carbon economy whose consequences we are now beginning to fully comprehend. Ghosh's historical fiction thus becomes, implicitly, a prehistory of the Anthropocene: an account of how the choices made under colonial capitalism set in motion an ecological trajectory whose terminus is the climate crisis of the present.

The Great Derangement (2016): Literature, Culture, and the Climate Crisis

When Ghosh turned from fiction to sustained argumentative prose with The Great Derangement in 2016, he produced a work that has been widely recognised as one of the most significant contributions to climate humanities of the decade. Derived from lectures delivered at the University of Chicago, the book addresses three interlocking questions: Why has literary culture failed to take climate change seriously as a subject? How did the fossil fuel economy shape the cultural imagination of modernity? And what are the structural and political obstacles to collective action on climate change?

The book's most provocative argument concerns the relationship between literary form and ecological imagination. Ghosh contends that the dominant conventions of the literary novel — its commitment to plausible causation, its focus on individual psychological experience, its preference for the gradual over the catastrophic — are structurally at odds with the representational demands of climate change. Climate change is, by its nature, improbable in its local manifestations (extreme weather events that exceed historical precedent), collective rather than individual in its causes and consequences, and geological rather than biographical in its timescale. These characteristics make it resistant to the kinds of narrative treatment that the realist novel has evolved to provide. The result, Ghosh argues, is a peculiar cultural silence: the phenomenon most urgently requiring literary attention is precisely the one that the dominant literary form is least equipped to address.

Ghosh traces this predicament to the historical formation of the realist novel itself. The novel as a form, he argues, emerged and consolidated during precisely the period — the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries — when the fossil fuel economy was being established and culturally legitimated. The values that the realist novel prizes — individual agency, rational causation, the primacy of the human — are the same values that underwrote the colonial and industrial exploitation of the natural world. Literary culture, in this analysis, is not merely failing to respond to climate change; it is, in a deeper sense, complicit in the cultural infrastructure that produced the crisis.

The book's second section turns to history and examines, with particular attention to the situation of Asia, the political paradoxes of climate action. Countries like India and China, which were denied the fruits of fossil-fuelled development during the colonial period and are only now achieving the industrialisation that might deliver material wellbeing to their populations, are being asked to forgo the very resources that underwrote Western prosperity. This demand, Ghosh argues with considerable force, is not a politically neutral environmental prescription but a form of continued colonial imposition — what has since come to be widely described as climate colonialism. The moral weight of this argument, and its implications for climate justice advocacy, give the book a political urgency that extends well beyond its literary critical claims.

Gun Island (2019) and The Nutmeg's Curse (2021): Crisis and Response

Gun Island, published in 2019, can be read as Ghosh's attempt to do in fictional form what The Great Derangement argued the literary tradition had failed to do: to write a novel that takes climate change as its organising subject without sacrificing narrative power or human complexity. The novel follows Deen Datta, a specialist in rare books who is drawn, against his rationalist inclinations, into a web of coincidences and connections that link the folklore of the Sundarbans with the contemporary refugee crisis in the Mediterranean. His journey takes him from Kolkata to Los Angeles to Venice, and the novel uses these displacements to chart the global geography of climate-induced migration.

The novel's most distinctive formal strategy is its insistence on continuity between human and non-human forms of migration. As climate change alters ocean temperatures and atmospheric patterns, it drives the movement not only of people fleeing drought and flood but of species relocating in response to shifting ecological conditions — spiders colonising new territories, dolphins following warming currents into unfamiliar waters. Ghosh presents these parallel migrations not as coincidence or metaphor but as dimensions of a single phenomenon: the planetary reorganisation of life in response to anthropogenic environmental change. This insistence on the entanglement of human and non-human experience is one of the novel's most important ecological contributions.

The folk mythology of the Gun Merchant — a deity of the Sundarbans associated with protection from snakebite — functions in the novel as a vehicle for exploring the capacity of pre-modern, non-Western imaginative traditions to make sense of experiences that exceed the explanatory resources of secular rationalism. Ghosh is careful not to romanticise these traditions or to suggest that mythology can substitute for political action. But he does argue, implicitly, that cultural repertoires which have historically sustained human communities in conditions of ecological uncertainty offer resources of meaning and solidarity that purely scientific or technocratic responses to climate change cannot provide.

The Nutmeg's Curse, published in 2021, extends Ghosh's environmental thinking into perhaps its most ambitious formulation. Taking as its point of departure the Dutch colonial massacre of the indigenous Bandanese population in 1621 — carried out to establish monopoly control over the nutmeg trade — the book argues that this act of violence, and the larger colonial logic it exemplifies, established a template for the human relationship with the natural world that has persisted, with devastating consequences, to the present day. The same imperative to dominate, extract, and commodify that drove colonial violence against indigenous peoples has driven the assault on non-human nature that has produced the Anthropocene. Climate change, in Ghosh's analysis, is not an unintended consequence of industrialisation but the predictable outcome of a centuries-long project of terraforming the planet in the image of colonial capitalism.

Against this destructive logic, The Nutmeg's Curse sets the alternative ontologies embedded in indigenous knowledge traditions — traditions that understand the natural world as animate, relational, and morally significant rather than as inert matter available for exploitation. Drawing on the work of indigenous scholars and environmental philosophers, Ghosh argues that recovering and learning from these traditions is not an exercise in nostalgia but an urgent intellectual and political task for a civilisation confronting the consequences of its own hubris.

Suggestions and Recommendations

For Researchers and Literary Scholars

The framework developed in this study invites extension in several directions. Comparative analysis placing Ghosh alongside other South Asian writers who engage with ecological themes — including Arundhati Roy, whose essays on dam displacement and corporate resource extraction share much of Ghosh's moral universe, and poets such as Ranjit Hoskote, whose lyric engagement with geological time opens different formal possibilities — would enrich our understanding of the broader landscape of Indian environmental writing. There is also substantial scope for interdisciplinary work that brings Ghosh's literary analysis into dialogue with environmental science, particularly the rapidly developing fields of climate psychology and environmental sociology.

Scholars interested in the formal dimensions of climate fiction would find productive material in a comparative study of Ghosh's narrative strategies alongside those of international climate novelists such as Richard Powers, Barbara Kingsolver, and Kim Stanley Robinson. Such a study might illuminate both the distinctive contributions of postcolonial literary traditions to climate fiction and the ways in which Indian English writing participates in and complicates global literary responses to ecological crisis.

For Educators

Ghosh's works offer outstanding resources for environmental literature pedagogy at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. The Hungry Tide, with its balance of narrative accessibility and ecological richness, provides an excellent introduction to postcolonial ecocriticism for students approaching the field for the first time. Teachers might pair it with historical accounts of the Morichjhapi eviction to help students understand the real political stakes of conservation policy, and with scientific literature on mangrove ecology to situate the novel's environmental detail in a broader ecological context.

The Great Derangement serves as an invaluable primary theoretical text for advanced courses in environmental humanities, climate fiction, or postcolonial literary theory. Its argument about literary form and climate representation is sufficiently provocative to generate productive classroom debate, and its historical and political sections introduce students to the global dimensions of climate justice in ways that connect literary study to contemporary political life. Pairing the text with contrasting positions — critics who argue that literary realism can represent climate change, or who defend genre fiction as a vehicle for ecological imagination — creates conditions for genuinely challenging intellectual exchange.

For Public Discourse and Policy

Ghosh's insistence on the inseparability of ecological crisis from colonial history has direct implications for public debates about climate responsibility, climate finance, and the terms of international climate agreements. His argument that the countries of the global South bear a disproportionate burden of climate impacts as a consequence of Northern industrialisation provides a powerful moral vocabulary for climate justice advocacy that goes beyond the technocratic language of carbon budgets and emissions trading. Communicators seeking to reach audiences in postcolonial societies might find in Ghosh's framework a set of conceptual tools for articulating climate change in terms that connect with local histories of colonial dispossession and environmental exploitation.

At the same time, Ghosh's critique of the cultural dimensions of climate denial — his argument that the problem is not simply a failure of political will but a deeper failure of imagination — suggests that environmental communication needs to engage with narrative and cultural strategies as well as scientific and policy arguments. Literary works like Ghosh's own fiction can serve as resources for this broader cultural project, helping to build the imaginative infrastructure that adequate collective response to climate change requires.

CONCLUSION

Across more than two decades of fiction and non-fiction, Amitav Ghosh has assembled a body of work that constitutes one of the most sustained, serious, and formally sophisticated literary engagements with ecological crisis in the contemporary world. His achievement is not simply a matter of thematic breadth — though the range of ecosystems, histories, and communities that his writing encompasses is genuinely remarkable — but of the depth and consistency with which he has pursued a set of interconnected intellectual and ethical commitments.

Those commitments can be summarised under three headings. Ghosh is committed, first, to historicising ecological crisis: to insisting that the environmental catastrophes of the present cannot be understood apart from the colonial histories that produced them, and that any response to climate change that ignores those histories will be both morally inadequate and practically ineffective. He is committed, second, to situating environmental anxiety in specific places and specific communities — to grounding abstract ecological discourse in the textures of particular landscapes and the lives of particular people, so that the human cost of environmental degradation becomes vividly, irresistibly concrete. And he is committed, third, to challenging the cultural and literary

assumptions that have allowed educated, imaginative people to avoid confronting the scale of the crisis — to arguing, with patience and with rigour, that the failure to respond adequately to climate change is in significant part a failure of imagination, and that changing our cultural practices is as important as changing our energy systems.

As the environmental crises of the Anthropocene intensify and the cultural conversation about climate change becomes ever more urgent, Ghosh's work stands as an indispensable resource — not because it offers consolation or easy answers, but because it takes the full measure of the challenge and refuses to look away.

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