



International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research and Growth Evaluation.

Narrative Failures and Environmental Ethics: A Postcolonial Reading of Climate Change in The Great Derangement

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Article Info

ISSN (Online): 2582-7138

Impact Factor (RSIF): 8.04

Volume: 07

Issue: 01

Received: 08-11-2025

Accepted: 10-12-2025

Published: 12-01-2026

Page No: 490-494

Abstract

This paper examines how Amitav Ghosh's *The Great Derangement* reframes climate change as a failure of culture, ethics, and narrative form rather than only a scientific or policy problem. It argues that modern literary realism, shaped by colonial history and capitalist logic, struggles to represent the scale, agency, and uncertainty of planetary change. Through a postcolonial ecocritical lens, the study shows how Ghosh links the limits of storytelling to the longer histories of empire, extraction, and environmental injustice. The analysis draws on key debates in postcolonial ecocriticism, environmental humanities, and narrative theory to situate Ghosh's work within a broader scholarly effort to rethink how literature can engage with nonhuman agency and deep time. By reviewing recent research on climate fiction and experimental narrative forms, the paper highlights how writers respond to what Ghosh calls the "unthinkable." The textual analysis focuses on how Ghosh critiques realism's focus on individual experience and linear time. It also explores his call for alternative narrative modes grounded in myth, collective memory, and indigenous knowledge. These modes aim to restore ethical ties between humans and the more-than-human world. The paper concludes that literature in the Anthropocene must move beyond human-centered models of meaning. It must instead foster a sense of shared planetary responsibility. By treating storytelling as an ethical practice, Ghosh's work offers a path toward cultural renewal in the face of climate crisis.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.54660/IJMRGE.2026.7.1.490-494>

Keywords: Climate Imagination, Postcolonial Ecocriticism, Narrative Realism, Anthropocene, Ecological Ethics, Amitav Ghosh

1. Introduction

Climate change has emerged as not merely an environmental or scientific crisis, but a profound cultural and narrative one. It compels humanity to confront the limitations of its stories, its systems of meaning, and its ethical imagination. Literature, which once served as the vessel for humanity's deepest anxieties and aspirations, has largely failed to adequately address this planetary crisis. Amitav Ghosh's *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (2016) positions this failure at the heart of modernity itself, arguing that the inability of contemporary fiction to represent climate catastrophe signifies a deeper moral and imaginative paralysis. Ghosh contends that future generations will judge our era as one of "great derangement" — an age in which writers, intellectuals, and citizens collectively refused to see the storm gathering around them (Ghosh, 2016). Ghosh situates this narrative failure within the aesthetic conventions of modern literary realism, which privileges probability, individual psychology, and social continuity. Such conventions render improbable or "uncanny" events—floods, typhoons, or ecological upheavals—unthinkable within the realist imagination (Vescovi, 2017) [27]. The result, he argues, is a profound separation between art and the Anthropocene, where literature that should challenge human hubris instead mirrors it.

Ghosh's critique thus exposes the complicity of modern literary forms with the same rationalist and capitalist ideologies that enabled colonial expansion and environmental exploitation (Vincent, 2018) [28].

Postcolonial in both scope and ethics, *The Great Derangement* connects the imaginative poverty of Western modernity to the violent histories of empire. Ghosh's argument resonates with the insights of world-ecological theorists who see the colonial encounter as foundational to the carbon economy, where the commodification of nature and indigenous labor prefigured today's climate injustices (Vandertop, 2019) [26]. By tracing climate change back to imperial modes of extraction and representation, Ghosh situates the ecological crisis within the broader crisis of ethics and imagination that defines modernity. His work calls for an alternative literary consciousness—one rooted in myth, spirituality, and collective memory—that can articulate planetary interdependence and ecological justice (Afshan, 2025) [2]. In essence, Ghosh transforms the question of climate change into an ethical and narrative inquiry: how can literature reawaken the imagination to the "uncanny intimacy" between humans and the more-than-human world? The Great Derangement thus invites a radical rethinking of both storytelling and moral responsibility in the Anthropocene—a call to confront not only environmental destruction, but the cultural blindness that allows it to continue (Sharma, 2025) [23].

2. Literature Review

2.1. Postcolonial Ecocriticism

Postcolonial ecocriticism emerges at the intersection of environmental and postcolonial studies, uniting ecological awareness with historical critique. It examines how imperialism not only subjugated peoples but also colonized nature itself—transforming landscapes into resources and ecosystems into economic zones. Pioneers such as Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin, in *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment* (2010), argue that environmental degradation and cultural marginalization are twin legacies of empire. Their framework exposes how ecological imperialism continues under neo-colonial development models that exploit both land and labor (Bartosch, 2011) [6]. Rob Nixon extends this analysis through the concept of "slow violence," describing how the gradual, invisible damage of pollution and extraction disproportionately harms the world's poor and postcolonial regions (Junejo, 2022) [16]. Similarly, Dipesh Chakrabarty links the Anthropocene to the history of empire, asserting that colonialism globalized the carbon economy, making climate change inseparable from imperial expansion (Dürbeck, 2019) [11].

Recent studies, such as Indriyanto's analysis of "ecological imperialism" in the Pacific, reinforce this framework by showing how colonial powers' domination of land and species persists through capitalist globalization (Indriyanto, 2019) [15]. Together, these scholars reframe environmentalism as a decolonial struggle—one that demands recognizing indigenous ecological knowledge, resisting Western anthropocentrism, and recovering ethical narratives of coexistence between humans and the nonhuman world (Singh & Singh, 2024).

2.2. Environmental Humanities

The environmental humanities expand ecological inquiry

beyond the natural sciences, addressing the ethical, cultural, and imaginative dimensions of climate change. This interdisciplinary field foregrounds the interconnectedness of human and planetary well-being, advancing a holistic vision of "planetary health" that recognizes the inseparability of social, ecological, and moral systems (Mago *et al.*, 2024) [20]. Scholars argue that rethinking our relationship with deep time—the vast temporal scales of Earth's history—is essential for cultivating planetary consciousness and ethical stewardship (Alonso, 2021) [4]. This framework insists on interdependence across species, ecosystems, and generations, calling for moral responses grounded in care and reciprocity (Gabrys, 2018) [13]. In this sense, the environmental humanities offer a counter-narrative to anthropocentric paradigms by emphasizing "integral ecology"—an ethics of planetary kinship that bridges the human and nonhuman, the spiritual and material, and the local and global (Ferrara, 2019) [12].

2.3. Literary Responses to Climate Change

Climate fiction (cli-fi) confronts one of the most profound challenges in literary representation: depicting the vast temporal, spatial, and systemic scales of climate change. Scholars argue that modern narrative conventions—particularly realism and anthropocentric focalization—struggle to represent nonhuman agency and planetary interconnectedness. As Adam Trexler and Adeline Johns-Putra note, climate change's "networked and controversial" nature disrupts traditional plot structures and demands new literary forms that merge the personal with the planetary (Trexler & Johns-Putra, 2011) [24]. Marco Caracciolo and colleagues suggest that climate narratives must rely on metaphor and structural innovation to bridge human-scale storytelling with geophysical realities, thereby "destabilizing the separation between human and nonhuman" (Caracciolo *et al.*, 2019) [8,9]. Similarly, Daniel Kason's concept of a "crisis of scale" identifies how globalization and planetary awareness necessitate genre hybridity and narrative experimentation (Kason, 2020) [17].

More recent work highlights postcolonial and feminist cli-fi as corrective genres that decenter Western universalisms and foreground local, nonhuman, and multispecies perspectives (Machata, 2025) [21]; (Xausa, 2024). These experimental narratives transform climate fiction into a tool of "future-making" that reimagines narrative itself as a mode of cultural and ethical adaptation (Bartosch & Hoydis, 2025) [7].

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1. Postcolonial Ecocriticism as Applied Theory

As a critical framework, postcolonial ecocriticism offers a lens through which to interrogate the complicity of modern literary realism with capitalist and colonial ideologies. Huggan and Tiffin's model emphasizes that ecological degradation and imperial domination are intertwined outcomes of modernity's exploitative logic (Bartosch, 2011) [6]. When applied to climate narratives, this theory critiques how realism's anthropocentrism mirrors the colonial worldview that positioned nature and the Global South as passive backdrops to European progress (Indriyanto, 2019) [15]. By foregrounding marginalized voices and indigenous epistemologies, postcolonial ecocriticism destabilizes these hierarchies, demanding new narrative ethics rooted in interdependence and justice. Scholars such as Singh and Singh (2024) argue that literature can resist "ecological

imperialism" by reasserting indigenous relationships with land and nonhuman beings (Singh & Singh, 2024). This framework thus reveals how the environmental crisis is not just ecological, but narratological—embedded in the very forms of storytelling that reproduce colonial ways of seeing. In climate discourse, postcolonial ecocriticism exposes the need for "decolonized realism," one capable of representing the planetary as a shared ethical space rather than a resource frontier.

3.2. Narrative Theory and Climate Imagination

Narrative theory has increasingly addressed the limits of realism in depicting the unpredictable, distributed temporality of climate change. Amitav Ghosh's critique of literary realism's "probabilistic" focus finds support in narrative theorists who note that the genre's linear temporality and human-centered causality exclude the improbable and the planetary (Vincent, 2018) [28]. Marco Caracciolo's *Form, Science, and Narrative in the Anthropocene* (2019) proposes alternative narrative logics—metaphor, nonlinearity, and distributed focalization—as tools to express the entanglement of human and nonhuman systems (Caracciolo, 2019) [8,9]. Similarly, Courtney Traub identifies "non-anthropocentric narrative strategies" that redistribute agency and challenge human epistemic centrality (Traub, 2016) [25]. Such approaches, aligned with Ghosh's call for imaginative renewal, advocate for narrative forms that integrate unpredictability, multiplicity, and ecological subjectivity. As R. Bartosch and J. Hoydis (2025) argue, climate fiction should be seen not merely as representational but as performative a cultural act that shapes collective imaginaries and ethical futures (Bartosch & Hoydis, 2025) [7]. Thus, narrative theory redefines storytelling as a moral and cognitive response to the Anthropocene, offering a bridge between human perception and planetary processes a project deeply resonant with Ghosh's own vision of reawakening the "climate imagination."

4. Textual Analysis

4.1. Colonial Modernity and Narrative Failure

In *The Great Derangement* (2016), Amitav Ghosh exposes the narrative incapacity of modern literature to confront the realities of climate change, identifying this failure as a symptom of colonial modernity and capitalist rationalism. Modern literary realism, he argues, emerged from Enlightenment epistemology—a worldview that privileged human agency, predictability, and linear causality. These very traits, Ghosh claims, made the modern novel structurally incapable of depicting the chaotic, uncanny, and improbable events that define the Anthropocene (Vescovi, 2017) [27]. This crisis of narrative mirrors the broader historical crisis of perception initiated by colonialism. The expansion of empire and the rise of the capitalist world-system, as Ghosh shows, entailed the systematic objectification of nature and indigenous cultures, turning them into resources and commodities (Vandertop, 2019). The realist novel's focus on individual psychology and domestic order naturalized these hierarchies, rendering planetary processes invisible within the literary imagination. As Suhasini Vincent argues, Ghosh's "eco-critical narrative" articulates resistance against both imperial power and the epistemic violence that silences ecological interdependence (Vincent, 2018) [28]. Thus, for Ghosh, the literary failure to imagine climate catastrophe is not merely aesthetic but historical: it reflects the deep

entanglement between narrative realism, empire, and extraction. The novel form's "great derangement" is symptomatic of a civilization that has severed itself from ecological reality—a blindness inherited from colonial modernity itself (Krishna, 2025) [19].

4.2. Postcolonial Ecological Imagination

In response to this crisis, Ghosh calls for a renewal of narrative imagination grounded in postcolonial and ecological consciousness. He proposes a re-engagement with myth, spirituality, and indigenous knowledge systems as counter-narratives to the Enlightenment's secular rationality. This aligns with what M. Alexandru terms an "ecology of separation"—an ethical stance that acknowledges the autonomy of nature and the limits of human control (Alexandru, 2021) [3]. Ghosh's emphasis on collective memory, oral storytelling, and animistic worldviews recalls precolonial cosmologies that perceived humans and nonhumans as coexistent agents. This postcolonial ecological imagination offers a decolonial alternative to Western environmentalism by re-sacralizing the natural world. In *The Living Mountain* (2022), for instance, Ghosh revisits the mythic mode to dramatize the tension between colonial exploitation and indigenous reverence for nature, showing how the desacralization of land is the root of ecological crisis (Khanal & Gupta, 2023) [18]. As Syeda Afshan (2025) observes, Ghosh's fiction integrates mythic and spiritual epistemologies to "reframe ecological consciousness" and to represent the entanglement of humans, animals, and spirits within a shared environment (Afshan, 2025) [2]. This narrative ethics redefines the literary as an act of planetary solidarity, challenging the colonial logic of separation. By fusing postcolonial critique with ecological imagination, Ghosh opens pathways for storytelling that recover relational modes of being, grounded in humility, reciprocity, and wonder (Aarthi & Rani, 2025) [1].

4.3. Crisis of Imagination as a Cultural Problem

For Ghosh, the climate crisis is ultimately a crisis of imagination—a cultural and institutional blindness that extends beyond literature to the very structures of modern thought. He argues that scientific rationality and neoliberal politics have produced a "collective denial" of ecological reality, reducing nature to data and profit. Literature, academia, and media, trapped within the boundaries of realism and market logic, fail to represent the scale or urgency of planetary collapse (Sharma, 2025). This imaginative paralysis is what Ghosh calls "the unthinkable"—the inability to conceptualize climate catastrophe within dominant cultural forms. As Aarthi and Rani (2025) show, Ghosh links this paralysis to the colonial mindset that privileges control over coexistence, thereby perpetuating an ethical indifference toward nonhuman life (Aarthi & Rani, 2025) [1]. In diagnosing this "derangement," Ghosh insists that cultural institutions must move beyond anthropocentric paradigms and adopt an ethics of planetary awareness. The imaginative and ethical renewal he calls for is not simply aesthetic—it is political, moral, and existential. To reimagine our relationship with the Earth is, for Ghosh, to reclaim the very capacity to think, feel, and act as part of the planet, not apart from it (Gupta & Panda, 2025).

5. Discussion

Amitav Ghosh's *The Great Derangement* reframes climate

change as a cultural and ethical crisis shaped by colonial history and narrative form. By exposing how modern realism aligns with capitalist and imperial ideologies, Ghosh positions literature as a moral space for rethinking humanity's place within a shared planetary system. He argues that environmental collapse is not only a policy or technical failure, but a failure of imagination rooted in historical patterns of extraction and domination. A postcolonial lens reveals how climate impacts fall unevenly across the Global South, linking present injustices to earlier exploitation of land, labor, and knowledge. This perspective expands climate justice into an act of historical recognition and ethical repair. Ghosh's call for narrative renewal encourages non-anthropocentric storytelling that values interdependence across human and nonhuman worlds. Through collective memory and mythic forms, literature can restore emotional and moral connections to the Earth. In this way, storytelling becomes a means to cultivate humility, care, and a sense of shared planetary responsibility.

6. Conclusion

This study has shown that The Great Derangement challenges the way modern culture understands both climate change and storytelling. Ghosh argues that the crisis is not only environmental. It is also moral and imaginative. By linking literary realism to the histories of empire and extraction, he reveals how dominant narrative forms reflect the same values that shaped global inequality and ecological harm. Postcolonial ecocriticism provides a strong frame for this argument. It allows climate change to be read as a historical process rooted in colonial systems of land use, labor, and knowledge control. This approach shifts attention from abstract global trends to lived experiences in regions that bear the heaviest costs of environmental decline. It also highlights the role of indigenous and local traditions in offering other ways of seeing the human place within nature. Ghosh's call for narrative change points toward a broader ethical task. Literature, in this view, must move past human-centered plots and stable social worlds. It must learn to represent uncertainty, shared risk, and nonhuman agency. Through myth, memory, and collective voices, writers can create stories that reflect the deep links between people, ecosystems, and time. The findings suggest that climate fiction and related forms do more than describe a problem. They shape how societies feel and think about their future. When stories foster care, humility, and connection, they can support a culture that values coexistence over control. Future research can extend this work by comparing Ghosh's ideas with other postcolonial, feminist, and indigenous climate narratives. Such studies can deepen understanding of how different cultures imagine planetary life. In the end, The Great Derangement reminds us that the struggle against climate change is also a struggle over meaning. It is a search for stories that help humanity see itself as part of the Earth, not above it.

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How to Cite This Article

Sharma S, Attri R. Narrative failures and environmental ethics: a postcolonial reading of climate change in *The Great Derangement*. *Int J Multidiscip Res Growth Eval*. 2026;7(1):490-494. doi:10.54660/IJMRGE.2026.7.1.490-494.

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