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CLIMATE CRISIS AND THE LIMITS OF LITERARY REPRESENTATION: AN ECOCRITICAL READING OF AMITAV GHOSH'S THE GREAT DERANGEMENT

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ABSTRACT

The accelerating climate crisis has challenged conventional literary forms, exposing their limitations in representing the scale, complexity, and unpredictability of environmental change. In *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (2016), Amitav Ghosh contends that modern literature has largely failed to confront climate change because its narrative conventions privilege individual experience, realism, and probability over the extraordinary realities of the Anthropocene. This paper examines Ghosh's critique through the lens of ecocriticism, analyzing how *The Great Derangement* redefines the relationship between literature, ecological consciousness, and environmental responsibility. Drawing on the theoretical perspectives of Cheryll Glotfelty, Lawrence Buell, Greg Garrard, Rob Nixon, and Timothy Morton, the study employs qualitative textual analysis to investigate Ghosh's arguments concerning literary realism, colonial modernity, capitalist development, and the marginalization of nature within contemporary fiction.

The paper argues that Ghosh does not merely identify the inadequacies of modern literary representation but also advocates a renewed literary imagination capable of engaging with ecological uncertainty, non-human agency, and planetary interconnectedness. His work positions literature as a critical space for cultivating environmental ethics and challenging anthropocentric modes of thought that have contributed to the climate crisis. By situating *The Great Derangement* within contemporary Ecocritical discourse, this study demonstrates how Ghosh's intervention expands the role of literature beyond aesthetic expression to include ecological awareness and social responsibility. The paper concludes that meaningful

engagement with climate change requires both a transformation of literary imagination and a reconfiguration of the cultural narratives through which environmental realities are understood, making literature an indispensable participant in global climate discourse.

KEYWORDS: Ecocriticism, Climate Crisis, Anthropocene, Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement*, Literary Representation, Environmental Humanities, Ecological Imagination.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study adopts a **qualitative descriptive-analytical research design** based on textual analysis to examine Amitav Ghosh's *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (2016) from an Ecocritical perspective. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the research investigates literary representation, environmental imagination, and ideological concerns rather than quantitative data. The primary source is Ghosh's *The Great Derangement*, with particular emphasis on Part I ("Stories"), supported by relevant discussions from Parts II ("History") and III ("Politics"). Close reading is employed to analyze Ghosh's treatment of literary realism, probability, climate crisis, colonialism, capitalism, and environmental ethics.

The study is theoretically grounded in **ecocriticism** and incorporates concepts from **Anthropocene studies**. The critical perspectives of Cheryll Glotfelty, Lawrence Buell, Greg Garrard, Timothy Morton, Rob Nixon, and Dipesh Chakrabarty provide the conceptual framework for interpreting the text. These theories facilitate an examination of ecological imagination, non-human agency, environmental justice, and the relationship between literature and the physical environment.

The research follows a close reading and interpretative method, in which significant textual passages are analyzed alongside established Ecocritical theories to identify recurring themes, metaphors, and ideological patterns. Rather than summarizing the text, the study critically evaluates Ghosh's arguments concerning the limitations of literary realism and demonstrates how *The Great Derangement* redefines literature's role in addressing the climate crisis. All quotations and references follow **MLA 9th edition** guidelines.

6. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The close textual analysis of Amitav Ghosh's *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* reveals that the most significant obstacle to representing climate change in contemporary literature lies not in the absence of environmental awareness but in the limitations of the dominant literary tradition itself. The study identifies that modern literary

realism, developed during the nineteenth century, has become increasingly inadequate for depicting the complexities of the Anthropocene because its narrative conventions privilege probability, individual experience, and everyday life over extraordinary environmental phenomena. Consequently, literature has largely failed to engage with one of the most pressing crises of the twenty-first century.

The first major finding emerging from the analysis is the systematic marginalization of climate change within contemporary literary fiction. Ghosh observes that "Climate change casts a much smaller shadow within the landscape of literary fiction than it does even in the public arena" (Ghosh 9). This statement serves as the foundation of his argument and demonstrates a striking contradiction between environmental reality and literary representation. This finding resonates strongly with Lawrence Buell's theory of environmental criticism, which emphasizes that literature shapes human perceptions of the natural world and influences environmental consciousness. Buell argues that "the environmental crisis involves a crisis of the imagination the amelioration of which depends on finding better ways of imagining nature and humanity's relation to it" (Buell 2). Ghosh's critique develops this argument further by demonstrating that the inability of contemporary fiction to represent climate change is fundamentally an imaginative failure rather than merely a literary omission. Both scholars contend that literature performs a crucial cultural function by enabling readers to perceive ecological realities that often remain invisible within everyday experience. Accordingly, *The Great Derangement* calls for a renewed literary imagination capable of representing the uncertainties of the Anthropocene and fostering ecological responsibility.

The second major finding concerns the relationship between literary realism and the concept of probability. Ghosh argues that the conventions of the realist novel have historically excluded extraordinary natural events because they were considered statistically improbable. Questioning the adequacy of inherited narrative forms, he asks, "Are the currents of global warming too wild to be navigated in the accustomed barques of narration?" (10). The metaphor of the "barques of narration" symbolizes the traditional structures of the realist novel that were designed to portray stable and predictable social realities rather than planetary crises. The findings suggest that realism itself has become one of the principal barriers to representing climate change because it assumes a world governed by order, causality, and probability. However, the Anthropocene has fundamentally disrupted these assumptions. Extreme weather events, ecological disasters, and environmental uncertainties no longer exist at the margins of human experience; they have become defining

characteristics of contemporary life. Consequently, literary forms rooted exclusively in probability fail to correspond to present environmental realities.

The analysis further reveals that Ghosh substantiates this theoretical argument through autobiographical reflection. Recalling his encounter with the devastating Delhi tornado of 1978, he acknowledges that despite the profound impact of the experience, he never succeeded in incorporating it into his fiction. He writes, "It is certainly true that storms, floods and unusual weather events do recur in my books... Yet, oddly enough, no tornado has ever figured in my novels" (20–21). This confession is particularly significant because it demonstrates that the limitations of literary realism extend beyond theoretical speculation to influence actual creative practice. Even an author deeply committed to environmental concerns found himself constrained by literary conventions that regarded extraordinary climatic events as unsuitable for realist fiction. The present study therefore identifies this admission as empirical evidence supporting Ghosh's broader claim that climate change presents a crisis of literary form rather than merely a deficiency of subject matter.

A fourth important finding concerns the historical relationship between realism and statistical probability. Explaining the origins of the modern novel, Ghosh remarks that "Probability and the modern novel are in fact twins" (22). This concise observation encapsulates one of the book's most original theoretical contributions. The emergence of the realist novel coincided with the rise of scientific rationalism, statistical reasoning, and Enlightenment notions of order. As a result, literary narratives increasingly favoured ordinary events while excluding phenomena considered exceptional or improbable. The findings demonstrate that this literary inheritance has become increasingly problematic because climate change has blurred the distinction between ordinary and extraordinary experience. Floods, cyclones, droughts, and heatwaves have become recurring realities across the globe, rendering traditional assumptions of probability increasingly obsolete. From an Ecocritical perspective, the study suggests that literary realism has failed to evolve alongside changing environmental conditions, thereby limiting its ability to represent ecological transformation.

Another important result of the analysis is Ghosh's redefinition of realism itself. Contrary to the conventional belief that realism faithfully represents reality, he argues that it frequently conceals the most significant aspects of contemporary existence. He observes, "Here, then, is the irony of the 'realist' novel: the very gestures with which it conjures up reality are actually a concealment of the real" (31). This statement fundamentally challenges established assumptions regarding literary representation. Rather than reflecting reality objectively, realism constructs a selective version of the world in which extraordinary environmental

events appear implausible or irrelevant. This finding also resonates with Rob Nixon's concept of "slow violence," which he defines as "a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space" (Nixon 2). Like Nixon, Ghosh suggests that climate change often escapes literary representation because its effects are cumulative rather than immediate. Consequently, literature must develop new narrative strategies capable of making slow, invisible environmental crises visible to readers. The analysis also demonstrates that Ghosh expands the discussion beyond aesthetics by identifying climate change as a cultural and imaginative crisis. He asserts that "The climate crisis is also a crisis of culture, and thus of the imagination" (12). This statement represents one of the central findings of the present study because it shifts the discourse from environmental science to literary and cultural studies. Scientific knowledge alone cannot generate meaningful environmental action if societies lack the imaginative capacity to comprehend ecological interconnectedness.

This interpretation is reinforced by Greg Garrard's foundational definition of ecocriticism. Garrard argues that ecocriticism is "the study of the relationship of the human and the non-human, throughout human cultural history and entailing critical analysis of the term 'human' itself" (Garrard 5). Ghosh's critique of literary realism directly reflects this Ecocritical perspective by demonstrating that climate change cannot be adequately represented through narratives centred exclusively on human experiences. Instead, *The Great Derangement* advocates a broader literary imagination that recognizes the agency of the non-human world and the ecological interdependence between humans and nature. Thus, Ghosh extends Ecocritical discourse by exposing how anthropocentric literary conventions have contributed to the cultural invisibility of the climate crisis.

The findings therefore reinforce Cheryl Glotfelty's foundational conception of ecocriticism as an inquiry into the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Defining the discipline, Glotfelty states that ecocriticism is "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (Glotfelty and Fromm xviii). This definition provides the theoretical basis for interpreting Ghosh's critique of literary realism. Like Glotfelty, Ghosh argues that literature cannot remain detached from ecological realities because environmental crises fundamentally reshape human experience and cultural consciousness. His assertion that climate change represents "a crisis of culture, and thus of the imagination" (Ghosh 12) demonstrates that literary texts must move beyond anthropocentric concerns to engage with the interconnected relationship between humanity and the natural world. Viewed through Glotfelty's ecocritical framework, *The Great*

Derangement emerges not only as a critique of the failure of literary representation but also as a call to redefine literature as a medium for fostering ecological awareness and environmental responsibility. Closely connected with this argument is Ghosh's rejection of gradualism, a concept that profoundly influenced nineteenth-century scientific and literary thought. Challenging deterministic assumptions, he writes, "Nature does certainly jump, if not leap" (26). This observation contests the belief that natural systems always evolve gradually and predictably. Contemporary climate science increasingly demonstrates that environmental systems are capable of abrupt and catastrophic transformations resulting from cumulative human intervention. The findings indicate that literary realism, developed under assumptions of gradual change, is no longer capable of adequately representing ecological realities characterized by sudden disruptions and uncertainty. This conclusion aligns closely with Timothy Morton's theory of hyperobjects, which he defines as entities that are "massively distributed in time and space relative to humans" (Morton 1). Climate change exemplifies such a hyperobject because it exceeds conventional modes of human perception and challenges the representational capacities of realist literature.

The final and perhaps most significant finding concerns Ghosh's diagnosis of contemporary civilization itself. Reflecting upon humanity's collective inability to respond to climate change despite overwhelming scientific evidence, he predicts that "Quite possibly then, this era... will come to be known as the time of the Great Derangement" (15). The phrase "Great Derangement" symbolizes not merely environmental degradation but a profound failure of perception, imagination, ethics, and cultural responsibility. The study finds that Ghosh employs this concept to describe a civilization that possesses unprecedented scientific knowledge yet continues to produce literary and cultural narratives incapable of confronting planetary crises. The derangement therefore lies not within nature but within the human imagination that refuses to acknowledge ecological reality.

Ghosh's critique also resonates with Dipesh Chakrabarty's argument that climate change has transformed the relationship between human history and natural history. Chakrabarty observes that "the mansion of modern freedoms stands on an ever-expanding base of fossil-fuel use" (Chakrabarty 206). This insight complements Ghosh's view that the climate crisis is inseparable from the historical processes of industrialization, colonialism, and capitalist modernity. Both scholars contend that understanding climate change requires rethinking conventional human-centred narratives and recognising humanity's collective role as a geological force in the Anthropocene.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that *The Great Derangement* constitutes a fundamental critique of the epistemological assumptions underlying modern literary realism. Rather than simply documenting environmental destruction, Ghosh exposes the cultural and narrative structures that have prevented literature from engaging meaningfully with climate change. The discussion reveals that literary representation must move beyond anthropocentric realism towards an ecological imagination capable of recognizing uncertainty, non-human agency, and planetary interconnectedness. Such a transformation would enable literature to recover its social relevance by functioning not merely as a reflection of reality but as a catalyst for environmental consciousness and ethical responsibility in the Anthropocene.

CONCLUSION

The present study examined Amitav Ghosh's *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* through the theoretical framework of ecocriticism to explore the relationship between climate change and literary representation. The textual analysis reveals that Ghosh's work extends beyond environmental commentary to offer a compelling critique of the narrative conventions that have historically shaped modern literary realism. The study demonstrates that the realist tradition, grounded in probability, individual experience, and anthropocentric perspectives, is increasingly inadequate for representing the complex, unpredictable, and interconnected realities of the Anthropocene.

One of the major findings of this research is that the marginalization of climate change in mainstream literary fiction results not from writers' lack of environmental awareness but from the structural limitations of inherited literary forms. Ghosh argues that nineteenth-century realism privileged ordinary experience while excluding extraordinary environmental events as improbable, thereby restricting literature's ability to engage meaningfully with the climate crisis. By exposing this limitation, *The Great Derangement* challenges the conventional assumption that realism provides the most authentic representation of reality and calls for new narrative strategies capable of reflecting contemporary ecological conditions.

The study further establishes that Ghosh reconceptualizes climate change as a cultural, ethical, and imaginative crisis. His argument that climate change represents "a crisis of culture, and thus of the imagination" underscores the importance of literature in shaping environmental consciousness. Supported by the ecocritical perspectives of Cheryll Glotfelty, Lawrence Buell, Greg Garrard, Timothy Morton, Rob Nixon, and Dipesh Chakrabarty, the analysis demonstrates that literature can play a transformative role by encouraging readers to rethink the relationship between human beings and the natural world. Ghosh's critique of

anthropocentric realism highlights the need for literary forms that recognize non-human agency, ecological interconnectedness, and the planetary consequences of human actions. This study contributes to contemporary ecocritical scholarship by demonstrating that *The Great Derangement* should be understood not only as an influential work of environmental writing but also as a significant intervention in literary theory. Ghosh redefines the social function of literature by arguing that narrative imagination is essential for confronting the ecological challenges of the twenty-first century. Ultimately, the study concludes that meaningful responses to climate change require both scientific knowledge and imaginative transformation. By advocating a renewed ecological imagination, Ghosh positions literature as a vital medium for fostering environmental ethics, challenging anthropocentric worldviews, and promoting a more sustainable and responsible relationship between humanity and the natural world. Future research may extend this ecocritical approach to Ghosh's fiction or undertake comparative studies with other contemporary climate writers to further enrich environmental literary scholarship.

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