

Climate, Catastrophe, and Narrative Blindness: Revisiting Realism in *The Great Derangement*

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Abstract: *This paper examines the intersections of environmental ethics, sustainability theory, and ecocriticism through a critical reading of *The Great Derangement* by Amitav Ghosh. It argues that climate change represents not only an ecological emergency but also an epistemological crisis embedded in the narrative structures of modernity. Ghosh contends that the conventions of literary realism—particularly its privileging of probabilistic continuity and bourgeois interiority—have rendered large-scale climatic events narratively marginal and culturally implausible. This paper extends that claim by demonstrating how narrative form shapes environmental ethics and, consequently, sustainability governance.*

Drawing on material ecocriticism, posthuman environmental ethics, and strong sustainability theory, the study analyzes how anthropocentric literary conventions reinforce political frameworks that treat ecological disruption as exceptional rather than systemic. Through close engagement with Ghosh's critique of fossil capitalism, colonial modernity, and Global South vulnerability, the paper situates the climate crisis within histories of uneven development and environmental injustice. It further contends that sustainability cannot be reduced to technocratic adaptation; rather, it requires a relational ethical framework that recognizes nonhuman agency and planetary interdependence.

By linking literary form to governance inertia, this paper proposes that cultural imagination is a precondition for structural transformation. Reframing human–nature relations through ecocritical analysis enables a more just and ecologically grounded sustainability paradigm suited to the ethical demands of the Anthropocene.

Key Words: *Ecocriticism, Environmental Ethics, Anthropocene, Sustainability Governance, Climate Justice.*

1. INTRODUCTION

In *The Great Derangement*, Amitav Ghosh advances a provocative claim: climate change is not solely an environmental or political emergency but a profound crisis of imagination. He writes that the climate crisis is also “a crisis of culture, and thus of the imagination” (Ghosh 9). By locating the problem within narrative form and cultural production, Ghosh shifts the terrain of climate discourse from science and policy to aesthetics and epistemology. The inability of contemporary societies to respond adequately to climate change, he suggests, is inseparable from the narrative conventions through which reality itself is mediated.

Central to his argument is a critique of modern literary realism. Ghosh contends that the formal architecture of nineteenth- and twentieth-century realism—its emphasis on probability, individual psychology, and stable environments—renders catastrophic climatic events implausible within the domain of “serious fiction.” As he observes, the modern novel has tended to exclude “the improbable,” even when such improbability defines lived reality in the Anthropocene (Ghosh 16). Extreme weather events, rising seas, and ecological volatility are displaced into genres considered marginal—science fiction or fantasy—thereby sustaining what he calls a broader cultural “derangement” (Ghosh 11). The result is not merely aesthetic limitation but ethical foreclosure: if the climate crisis remains narratively exceptional, it remains politically deferrable.

This paper argues that Ghosh's critique of realism constitutes a foundational intervention in environmental ethics and sustainability discourse. Narrative form, I contend, shapes ethical possibility. When literary modernity excludes nonhuman agency—cyclones, oceans, forests—it reinforces anthropocentric ontologies that position nature as backdrop rather than actor. Such ontologies migrate into governance frameworks that treat ecological systems as manageable resources rather than dynamic, interdependent forces. In this sense, realism's aesthetic commitments parallel what ecological economists describe as weak sustainability: the assumption that natural systems are substitutable and ultimately subordinate to human development.

By synthesizing material ecocriticism, posthuman environmental ethics, and strong sustainability theory, this study demonstrates that Ghosh's argument extends well beyond literary criticism. His analysis exposes how cultural form participates in sustaining fossil capitalism and climate injustice. Indeed, Ghosh explicitly links climate crisis to the histories of imperial expansion and carbon-intensive industrialization, arguing that the Anthropocene is inseparable from colonial modernity (Ghosh 87). The disproportionate vulnerability of regions in South Asia and the Global South further reveals that climate change is structured by uneven responsibility and historical exploitation. Thus, narrative marginalization mirrors geopolitical marginalization.

Reading *The Great Derangement* through an ecocritical and ethical lens allows us to see that sustainability failure is not only technological or economic but epistemological. If, as Ghosh insists, the climate crisis is embedded in “the habits of thought that have guided us for centuries” (Ghosh 21), then reimagining those habits—through literature, ethics, and theory—becomes a precondition for sustainable futures. The stakes of narrative, therefore, are not symbolic alone; they are materially and politically consequential.

2. Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in three intersecting theoretical domains: material ecocriticism and Anthropocene studies, posthuman environmental ethics, and sustainability theory informed by ecological economics. Together, these frameworks enable a reading of *The Great Derangement* that situates its literary argument within broader epistemological, ethical, and political debates.

- **Material Ecocriticism and Anthropocene Studies**

Material ecocriticism challenges the human/nature binary by foregrounding the agency of matter and the entanglement of human and nonhuman systems. Rather than treating the environment as passive backdrop, this approach understands landscapes, weather systems, oceans, and geological forces as active participants in meaning-making processes. The Anthropocene—a term denoting the epoch in which human activity has become a geological force—further destabilizes the conception of the human as sovereign subject. In Anthropocene discourse, humanity is reconfigured as embedded within planetary systems it cannot fully control.

Ghosh's argument aligns closely with this perspective. He insists that the climate crisis disrupts the “calculus of probability” that underwrites modern realist fiction (Ghosh 23). Cyclones, storm surges, and erratic monsoons are not anomalies but expressions of planetary agency. By marginalizing such forces within literary form, realism implicitly denies material agency. Ghosh's insistence that extreme weather events must move from the periphery to the center of narrative challenges the anthropocentric assumptions embedded in literary modernity. Climate phenomena, in his formulation, are not symbolic devices but agents that reconfigure human destiny.

- **Posthuman Environmental Ethics**

Posthuman environmental ethics extends this decentering of the human into the moral domain. Rejecting Enlightenment notions of mastery, autonomy, and exceptionalism, posthuman ethics advances a relational ontology in which humans are co-constituted with nonhuman life and matter. Ethical responsibility, therefore, cannot be confined to inter-human relations but must encompass multispecies and planetary interdependence.

Ghosh's critique implicitly calls for such an ethical reorientation. He argues that climate change reveals the fragility of assumptions that humans stand apart from nature, observing that the crisis “has made it impossible to ignore the

interconnections between the human and the nonhuman” (Ghosh 62). The Enlightenment ideal of rational control over nature—central to industrial modernity—collapses in the face of intensifying climatic volatility. In this sense, *The Great Derangement* destabilizes anthropocentrism not only narratively but morally. To recognize the agency of oceans and atmospheres is simultaneously to recognize limits to human sovereignty. Posthuman ethics thus becomes indispensable to rethinking environmental responsibility in the Anthropocene.

- **Sustainability Theory and Ecological Economics**

Sustainability theory, particularly in its “strong” formulation, rejects the assumption that natural capital is indefinitely substitutable by technological innovation or market mechanisms. Ecological economists argue that economic systems are subsystems of finite ecological systems; therefore, biophysical limits are non-negotiable. Strong sustainability demands structural transformation rather than incremental efficiency gains.

Ghosh’s indictment of fossil capitalism resonates powerfully with this framework. He traces climate crisis to histories of imperial expansion and carbon-intensive industrialization, emphasizing that the modern global order was built upon fossil energy (Ghosh 87). The persistence of high-consumption lifestyles in the Global North, despite mounting evidence of planetary limits, reflects what might be called epistemic denial embedded within economic ideology. Sustainability failure, therefore, is not merely technical but cultural. The “derangement” Ghosh diagnoses is inseparable from the growth paradigms that ecological economists critique.

By integrating material ecocriticism, posthuman ethics, and strong sustainability theory, this paper situates Ghosh’s literary argument within a comprehensive interdisciplinary framework. His critique of realism becomes legible as more than aesthetic commentary: it exposes the epistemological foundations of anthropocentric governance and the cultural conditions that perpetuate ecological unsustainability.

3. The Crisis of Realism: Close Reading and Narrative Form

In *The Great Derangement*, Amitav Ghosh locates the cultural roots of climate inaction within the formal constraints of modern literary realism. He argues that the realist novel emerged in tandem with industrial modernity and bourgeois subjectivity, privileging what appears statistically “probable” and socially ordinary. Within this aesthetic regime, events that exceed the boundaries of everyday plausibility—catastrophic floods, cyclones, or abrupt ecological shifts—are relegated to the genres of romance or fantasy. As Ghosh observes, the modern novel is structured by a “calculus of probability” that filters out the very phenomena that now define planetary reality (Ghosh 23).

Close reading reveals that Ghosh’s critique is not merely thematic but structural. He traces how nineteenth-century fiction normalized a stable, predictable environment as the backdrop against which human interiority unfolds. The environment functions as scenery—static, dependable, and subordinate to human drama. In contrast, climate change introduces what he calls “events that were once considered rare and improbable” but are now “uncannily common” (Ghosh 24). The irony is profound: realism’s fidelity to probability has become anachronistic in an age when improbability is statistically routine.

This formal exclusion generates what Ghosh terms a broader cultural “derangement” (11)—a condition in which societies possess scientific knowledge of climate change yet lack narrative frameworks adequate to its scale. When he recounts encounters with cyclonic storms in the Bay of Bengal, he underscores how such events would traditionally appear implausible in serious fiction, despite their material regularity in the Anthropocene. The disjunction between lived ecological volatility and literary convention reveals realism’s epistemic limits.

Narrative form, therefore, performs ethical work. By relegating nonhuman forces to the periphery, realism reaffirms anthropocentrism and preserves the illusion of environmental stability. The climate remains a setting rather than an agent. This aesthetic marginalization mirrors political marginalization: if storms and rising seas are narratively exceptional, governance responses will remain incremental and technocratic. In exposing realism’s structural inability to accommodate planetary agency, Ghosh demonstrates that literary form is not neutral; it shapes the contours of ethical imagination and, consequently, the possibilities of sustainability in the Anthropocene.

4. Fossil Capitalism, Colonial Modernity, and Global Inequality

In *The Great Derangement*, Amitav Ghosh firmly rejects the notion that climate change is a species-wide failure detached from history. Instead, he situates the crisis within the specific trajectories of imperial expansion and fossil-fuel industrialization. The Anthropocene, in his account, is not the product of undifferentiated “humanity” but of a particular model of modernity forged through colonial extraction and carbon-intensive growth. Ghosh cautions against narratives that treat climate change as a universal human predicament, arguing that such framings obscure the asymmetries of responsibility embedded in global capitalism (Ghosh 87).

Close attention to his historical argument reveals that fossil capitalism was inseparable from empire. Industrialized Western nations accumulated wealth through coal, oil, and steam-powered expansion, restructuring global trade, labor, and land use. The prosperity of Europe and North America was underwritten by extractive practices in colonized territories. Yet the ecological consequences of this development—rising seas, intensified cyclones, prolonged droughts—disproportionately affect regions in South Asia, Africa, and the Pacific. As Ghosh notes, the countries least responsible for greenhouse gas emissions are often those most vulnerable to climatic devastation (Ghosh 103).

This uneven distribution of risk aligns with climate justice frameworks that foreground historical accountability and advocate for loss-and-damage reparations in international governance. Sustainability discourse that invokes “humanity” as a homogeneous actor risks reproducing what Ghosh identifies as a central ideological maneuver of modernity: the erasure of geopolitical inequality. By flattening difference, mainstream Anthropocene narratives dilute responsibility and displace structural critique.

Ghosh’s intervention thus destabilizes universalist environmental rhetoric. Climate change is not simply an ecological phenomenon but a legacy of colonial modernity and fossil-fuel dependency. Recognizing this history reframes sustainability as a question of justice rather than mere efficiency. Governance, in this context, must address historical emissions, uneven vulnerability, and structural inequality. Without such recognition, sustainability becomes technocratic management rather than transformative redress.

5. From Narrative Failure to Governance Failure

One of the central interventions of this paper is to clarify the causal chain linking aesthetic form to political inertia. In *The Great Derangement*, Amitav Ghosh does not merely lament the inadequacy of literary realism; he implies that narrative conventions structure the horizon of political possibility. Climate change, he argues, has been relegated to the margins of serious fiction because it violates realism’s “calculus of probability” (Ghosh 23). This marginalization is not culturally neutral. When extreme climatic events are framed as aberrations rather than systemic outcomes, the imagination remains calibrated to continuity rather than rupture.

The first step in the chain is therefore aesthetic: literary modernity marginalizes climatic extremity. The realist novel’s emphasis on stable settings and individualized psychology normalizes environmental continuity. From this follows an anthropocentric imagination in which nature appears inert, predictable, and subordinate. As Ghosh notes, the climate crisis exposes “the habits of thought that have guided us for centuries” (21). Among these habits is the assumption that ecological systems are stable backdrops rather than volatile agents.

This imaginative structure migrates into political rationality. If environmental change is presumed to be gradual and manageable, political systems will assume incremental adjustment rather than systemic transformation. Governance frameworks consequently privilege adaptation strategies—carbon markets, resilience planning, technocratic mitigation—over structural change. Such measures operate within the same epistemic horizon that once rendered climate catastrophe narratively implausible. They manage symptoms without confronting fossil-fuel dependency as a civilizational foundation.

Thus, narrative failure precedes governance failure. The inability to imagine rupture produces policy minimalism. By contrast, strong sustainability theory demands recognition of ecological limits and advocates structural transformation: fossil fuel phase-out, degrowth models, and large-scale ecological restoration. Ghosh’s critique provides the cultural groundwork for such shifts by unsettling anthropocentric realism and reopening imaginative space for systemic change.

If governance is to move beyond technocratic adaptation, the imaginative frameworks that constrain political will must first be reconfigured.

6. Conclusion

This paper has argued that *The Great Derangement* by Amitav Ghosh is not simply a meditation on climate change but a structural critique of modernity's imaginative limits. Ghosh demonstrates that literary realism, with its investment in probability, individualism, and environmental stability, has rendered climatic catastrophe narratively peripheral. This aesthetic marginalization mirrors a political one: when planetary volatility is culturally implausible, governance remains incremental.

By integrating material ecocriticism, posthuman environmental ethics, and strong sustainability theory, this study has shown that narrative form shapes ethical and political possibility. The exclusion of nonhuman agency from literary modernity reinforces anthropocentric governance frameworks that treat ecological crisis as manageable rather than transformative. In contrast, Ghosh's emphasis on relational entanglement—particularly in vulnerable regions such as the Sundarbans—repositions the human within dynamic, unstable ecological systems.

The central claim of this paper is that narrative failure precedes governance failure. Technocratic adaptation strategies operate within the same epistemic horizon that once excluded climate catastrophe from serious fiction. Strong sustainability, however, requires structural change: fossil fuel phase-out, ecological restoration, and historical accountability.

In the Anthropocene, literature is not peripheral to politics. It conditions the boundaries of what can be imagined, demanded, and enacted. By unsettling anthropocentric realism, Ghosh reopens the imaginative space necessary for climate justice and systemic transformation.

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