

**Narrating the Unthinkable: Ecocritical Perspectives  
on Amitav Ghosh’s The Hungry Tide  
and The Great Derangement**

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**ABSTRACT:**

Amitav Ghosh’s work has become central to contemporary ecocritical discourse, pairing imaginative narrative with cultural diagnosis. This paper performs a comparative ecocritical reading of *The Hungry Tide* (2004) and *The Great Derangement* (2016). In *The Hungry Tide*, Ghosh stages the tensions of inhabiting a fragile tidal landscape through multiple voices and local ecologies; in *The Great Derangement*, he theorizes literature’s failure to render climate change and urges aesthetic reform. Together, these works chart a poetics of ecological responsibility one attentive to scale, historicity, and multiplicity. The paper engages narrative form, ethics, politics, and epistemology to show how Ghosh’s project challenges anthropocentrism and calls for more expansive narrative imagination.

**KEYWORDS:**

Ecocritical, Anthropocene, Environment, Nature, Ecological



**Introduction:**

Ecocriticism encourages us not only to ask what literature says about nature but how narrative forms condition our perception of environmental crises. Amitav Ghosh as both novelist and essayist occupy a distinctive place in this conversation. His fiction embeds ecological dilemmas in richly textured social worlds; his non-fiction probes why our cultural imaginaries often fail to address climate change. By reading *The Hungry Tide* alongside *The Great Derangement*, this paper explores how Ghosh crafts an ecological model that is both imaginative and politically engaged. I argue that Ghosh's dual approach marries narrative enactment with theoretical diagnosis: the novel dramatizes ecological entanglement, while the essay traces the aesthetic, historical, and institutional barriers to climate consciousness. This synergy offers a framework for what we might call a civic ecocritical poetics.

My method combines close reading (with attention to form, temporality, point of view) and thematic-contextual interpretation (bringing in ecocritical, postcolonial, and climate-justice scholarship). The guiding questions are: How do narrative techniques frame human nonhuman relationships? In what ways does Ghosh historicize ecological crisis? How does he call literature to account?

**The Hungry Tide as Ecological Narrative:****Environment as Actor and Co-agent:**

In *The Hungry Tide*, the Sundarbans is not a mere backdrop: the tides, mangrove, currents, and animals are active forces shaping human lives. Ghosh's prose frequently blurs the line between subject and environment: "the tide country" becomes a space that moves and remembers, insisting on co-constitution (Ghosh 125). According to a critical ecocritical reading, Ghosh "connects plant, animal, and human life together" and reveals how one affects the

other (Blushan 45).

Such depictions destabilize the human/nature binary. Water is both subject and object; the river carries memory and danger. In the Sundarbans, human intention is constantly mediated by the nonhuman: fishermen must interpret tides, scientists contend with storms, and characters live in a flux of shifting land. This approach aligns with recent ecocritical work examining co-agency and relational ecologies (Smith 82).

### **Narrative Multiplicity and Epistemic Pluralism:**

Ghosh employs a polyvocal structure Piyali (the cetologist), Kanai (the consultant/translator), Nilima (the teacher), and Fokir (the local fisherman). This multiplicity is not ornamental but essential. It allows the novel to stage epistemic tension: Western scientific frames (Piya) coexist and often collide with local, embodied knowledge (Fokir's tide-sense). Kanai's archival work links these registers through translation and memory (Ghosh 230).

Arunprasath and Thenmozhi note how the novel "interrelates postcolonial and ecological issues of indigenous people" by permitting multiple ways of knowing (Arunprasath & Thenmozhi 94). The narrative refuses to privilege one epistemology; instead, it asks readers to negotiate among them.

### **Temporality, Memory, and Historical Violence:**

Ghosh layers time in *The Hungry Tide*: partition, refugee resettlement, colonial interventions, and environmental change. These historical strands show how the present ecological precarity is constructed through past violence. The Marichjhapi massacre, interwoven into the plot, exemplifies how state power, conservation policies, and ecological claims can suppress marginalized human communities (Biswas 170).

In the novel, Kanai reflects on his aunt's memoirs and the history of displacement, linking human migration with ecological flux (Ghosh 295). The text insists that ecological crisis is never merely natural but always mediated by colonial, capitalist, and political forces. Pantu argues that social injustice and environmental injustice mirror each other, rejecting universalist Eurocentrism (Pantu 402).

### **Ethics, Responsibility, and Ambiguity:**

The ethical weight of *The Hungry Tide* is concrete rather than abstract. Characters must make choices rescue or let die, intervene or withdraw, conserve land or allow habitation. Fokir's fate, Piya's moral dilemmas, and Kanai's ambivalence dramatize responsibility in ecological crisis. The novel's ending resists closure: lives are altered, but the ecosystem remains precarious, reminding readers that responsibility is ongoing, not resolved.

Ghosh's formal strategy supports that ethics. The shifting narrative pace, patience in description, and localized detail train readers in ecological temporality. The novel's episodic structure allows moments of pause, reflection, and tension, rather than rushing toward dramatic resolution.

### **The Great Derangement as Cultural Critique:**

#### **Literature's Inability to Envision Climate:**

In *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*, Ghosh posits that literature especially modern realist fiction is ill-equipped to take on the scale and temporalities of climate change (Ghosh 19). He identifies three converging constraints: the disciplinary amnesia of modernity, the formal limits of realism, and political denial. Realism, with its focus on plausible interior lives, tends to exclude improbable events precisely the kinds of extreme

weather events central to climate crisis.

Ghosh argues that the climate crisis challenges the very notion of plausibility in literature: “the weather events of our time have a very high degree of improbability,” making them “unthinkable” within conventional narrative frames (Ghosh 52). He contends that many novels shy away from explicitly naming climate change, relegating it to background or allegory.

### **Scale, Probability, and Imaginative Reform:**

A central theoretical move in *The Great Derangement* is the mismatch between literary scale and climatic scale. Climate operates via slow processes, statistical accumulation, tipping points, and probabilistic risk. These are hard to render through individualist causality or closed plots. Realist fiction “short-circuits” climate because it demands credible motives, manageable stakes, and resolved conflict (Ghosh 77).

To overcome this, Ghosh calls for genre innovation: speculative fiction, mythic modes, climate fiction (cli-fi), expanded temporality, multiagent narratives. He writes that literature must “loosen its hold on realism” to account for planetary time (Ghosh 103). Such forms can accommodate deep time, nonhuman agency, and distributed causality.

### **Historical Responsibility and Coloniality:**

Ghosh uses climate history to link ecological crisis with colonialism, capitalism, and structural inequality. He argues that greenhouse gas emissions and fossil fuel economies emerged from imperial networks; while their worst impacts fall disproportionately on the global South. Thus, climate justice cannot ignore historical injustice (Ghosh 126).

He critiques the liberal idea of progress that erases historical

responsibility. Ghosh writes: “we must see climate change as a form of historical violence” (Ghosh 142). This ethical claim insists that narrative must carry the weight of delay, neglect, and colonial legacy.

### **Narrative Ethics and the Demand on Literature:**

Ghosh does not merely diagnose. He advocates for what literary critics might call a narrative ethics of responsibility. Literature, he suggests, has an obligation to expand its registers of time and agency. In doing so, it can help cultivate collective moral imagination. He claims that literature should act as a “public sensorium” for crises that outstrip immediate perception (Ghosh 162).

### **Comparative and Synthetic Observations:**

Reading these two works together highlights how Ghosh’s projects fictional and theoretical complement each other. They share several key moves:

**Epistemic Pluralism:** The *Hungry Tide* dramatizes multiple knowledge traditions; *The Great Derangement* insists literature must accommodate registers of time, probability, and nonhuman agency.

**Historicity and Embeddedness:** Both texts refuse ahistorical treatments of environment.

**Scale Mismatch:** The novel’s tidal and episodic temporality counters human short-termism; the essay identifies scale as a formal barrier.

**Ethics of Entanglement:** Responsibility is situated, relational, ongoing.

**Aesthetic Imperative:** Narrative forms must expand hybridize, historicize, open temporally to face ecological crisis.

**Conclusion:**

Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* and *The Great Derangement* together offer a compelling ecocritical intervention: the former enacts ecological entanglement through story, the latter theorizes the cultural blockages to climate awareness and calls literature to evolve. Together, they propose a poetics of ecological responsibility grounded in historicity, epistemic plurality, ethical entanglement, and aesthetic daring. Literature must stretch to render the unthinkable thinkable and thereby help us live responsibly within intertwined human and nonhuman worlds.

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