



## **ECO-CONSCIOUSNESS IN AMITAV GHOSH'S "THE GREAT DERANGEMENT" AND "GUN ISLAND"**

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### **Abstract**

Eco-consciousness in literature today looks nothing like the old nature poems about quiet forests and gentle seasons. Climate change has pulled us into what Amitav Ghosh calls "the age of the uncanny," where the line between human history and the earth's history no longer holds. Hurricanes, wildfires, and floods aren't rare interruptions anymore. They are the texture of daily life and that breaks something in the way we've been telling stories.

The 19th-century realist novel was built for a different world. It liked probability, individual heroes, and a stable backdrop called "Nature." It pushed the weird, the collective, and the nonhuman off to science fiction and fantasy (Ghosh 16, 23). But in the Anthropocene, that formula fails. As Enlightenment binaries of Culture vs. Nature come apart, writers are being forced to reimagine not just what stories are about, but how they work. Ghosh's *The Great Derangement* (2016) names this bluntly: "the climate crisis is also a crisis of culture, and thus of the imagination" (9). Modernity, he says, created a "great derangement" that taught us to see rivers, storms, and animals as inert and just scenery. His 2019 novel *Gun Island* is his answer to that problem. It runs on coincidence, old Bengali myths, and what Timothy Morton calls "hyper-objects", massive, slippery things like climate that we can't see all at once but that stick to us anyway (Morton 1).

For Ghosh, eco-consciousness unfolds across three interconnected dimensions. Epistemologically, it seeks to recover the nonhuman presences that modern rationalism pushed to the margins. Rather than treating nature as a passive backdrop, Ghosh restores agency to animals, weather, and landscapes as active forces in human history. Ethically, Ghosh binds ecology to questions of power and justice. Carbon is not a neutral substance but a product of empire, and climate change operates as what Rob Nixon calls "slow violence", a harm that accumulates gradually and disproportionately on the global poor (Nixon 2).



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Contextually, the present paper tries to explore how Amitav Ghosh reflected the eco-conscious elements in his narrations both in his ‘The Great Derangement’ and ‘Gun Island’.

**Key words:** Eco-consciousness, the age of uncanny, Anthropocene, binaries, hyper-objects, epistemologically, rationalism

## 1. Introduction: From Concealment to Confrontation

The failure of dominant literary forms to narrate climate change is not about a lack of scholarship. For Ghosh, it is a structural problem built into the novel itself. The bourgeois novel took shape during an era of relative climatic stability, when “the regularity of bourgeois life” could be plausibly mirrored in plots driven by probability and individual choice (Ghosh 19). Because catastrophe broke those norms of the everyday, it was pushed out to epic or Gothic modes. This “banishing of the improbable” (Ghosh 23) created what Adeline Johns-Putra calls a scalar mismatch asserting that the novel’s focus on “individual moral drama” simply cannot contain planetary forces (Johns-Putra 270).

Gun Island directly confronts this limit. Its protagonist, Deen Datta, is a rationalist rare-books dealer who suddenly finds himself “enmeshed in a web of coincidences” that his training cannot explain (Gun Island 119). Dolphins strand themselves as warnings. A brown recluse bite alters the course of the plot. A cyclone “seemed to have a malevolent intent” (Gun Island 14, 78). These are not flaws in realism. They propose a different realism for what Ghosh calls “the age of the uncanny” (Ghosh 33). In doing so, the novel tests Ursula Heise’s argument that climate change demands a “sense of planet” and elucidates to “envision the global as a set of interconnected spaces” rather than as isolated locales (Heise 4).

The Great Derangement and Gun Island as a diptych maps Ghosh’s model of eco-consciousness. Where Mita Banerjee identifies an “ecological ethnicity” in Ghosh’s earlier *The Hungry Tide* (Banerjee 297), I argue that this climate dyad moves beyond regional identity toward planetary scale, while still holding onto postcolonial critique. In both texts, eco-consciousness works on three registers: epistemological, narrative, and ethical. Each register marks the collapse of what Bruno Latour calls the “old climatic regime,” in which “the earth was a stable backdrop” (Latour 3) and each demands what Adam Trexler calls “new generic hybrids” for writing in the Anthropocene (Trexler 6).

## 2. Critical Contexts: Postcolonial Ecocriticism and the Anthropocene



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Postcolonial ecocriticism has shifted how we think about the environment by putting the “environmentalism of the poor” at the centre (Nixon 2), and by showing that “imperialism was ecological from the outset” (Huggan and Tiffin 6). Ghosh’s *Sundarbans* makes this clear. It appears first in *The Hungry Tide* and returns in *Gun Island* as a space where, as Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee argues, the Anthropocene is “relocated” to the Bay of Bengal. Here, “the poor are the first to experience climate change as catastrophe” (Mukherjee 14).

The historical and philosophical ground for this comes from Dipesh Chakrabarty, who argues that climate change “collapses the age-old humanist distinction between natural history and human history” (Chakrabarty 201). Ghosh takes that claim and pushes it into aesthetics. If humans have become a geological force, then “our modes of storytelling are inadequate to this reality” (Gosh 11). This connects directly to Timothy Morton’s idea of “hyper-objects” in other words, the phenomena like global warming that are “viscous” and “nonlocal,” and that force us to rethink what existence means (Morton 1, 27). Val Plumwood adds another layer, calling such crises an “ecological crisis of reason” rooted in the human and nature divide (Plumwood 5). Eco-consciousness, in this context, names the work of unlearning that divide, a work Ghosh undertakes through both critique and narrative experiment.

### **3. The Great Derangement: Diagnosing Literary and Historical Failure**

In his narratives, Ghosh shows how the novel’s form became complicit in erasing ecology. The 19th century established a “new calculus of probability” that made nature seem predictable and inert (Gosh 20). As a result, events like the 1882 Bombay cyclone were left out of contemporary memoirs because they were “so improbable... it could not be fitted into the narrative” (Gosh 17). This is what Adam Trexler calls the novel’s “scalar blindness” as its inability to register anything that exceeds the human scale (Trexler 13).

Ghosh, through his novels, connects aesthetic form to material history by arguing that “the carbon economy was a by-product of empire” (Gosh 87). In the real sense, colonialism did more than extracting resources and in turn made ways to export a literary regime. Narrative traditions in Asia that had room for the uncanny were “deranged” by a colonial education that imposed the bourgeois novel, just as fossil fuels deranged the climate (Gosh 92). Jennifer Wenzel describes this as the “disposition of nature” under capitalism, the way both land and story are made linear and extractable (Wenzel 5).



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Against this, Ghosh offers a clear counter-proposal that “We need to find new ways of imagining the unthinkable” as in his *The Great Derangement* (Gosh 84). He turns to epics and jatra (a popular, traveling musical theatre tradition from West Bengal, India and Bangladesh) forms where “the nonhuman is always present” (Gosh 65). This anticipates Laura Wright’s call to bring “wilderness into civilized shapes” by unsettling Western binaries (Wright 4). For Ghosh, eco-consciousness therefore begins with formal decolonization.

#### **4. Gun Island: Practicing Eco-Conscious Narrative:**

##### **4.1 The Return of the Improbable**

The limits of rational explanation become visible in *Gun Island*. Contextually, Deen Datta, a rare-books dealer, finds his worldview fracturing under a series of “uncanny” repetitions: he meets Tipu in the Sundarbans, then again in Venice, and once more in LA. His early claim that “the world of today presents itself as a series of improbable events” (*Gun Island* 3) signals a shift in genre, not a flaw. Whereas in his *The Great Derangement*, Ghosh argues that “the uncanny is the proper register of the Anthropocene” (Gosh 32), and the novel bears this out. Its linked events function like what Ursula Heise describes as planetary interconnection networks that tie far-flung places together (Heise 4).

##### **4.2 Nonhuman Agency and “Nonhuman Presences”**

The landscape is not passive in *Gun Island* since, Sundarbans feel animate, “the tide was rising... as if the water itself were alive” (*Gun Island* 77) and dolphins “come to warn us” (*Gun Island* 14), wildfires roar like a “creature” in California (*Gun Island* 290). These are all not metaphors instead, they function as actors in the plot, which aligns with Stacy Alaimo’s idea of “trans-corporeality”, the understanding that “the human is always intermeshed with the more than human world” (Alaimo 11). Ghosh also draws a parallel between the historical “gun” of Bonduki Sadagar and the modern “gun” of carbon that set the world into crisis. This recalls Arundhati Roy’s description of mega-dams as “weapons of mass destruction” aimed at the poor (Roy 41).

##### **4.3 Entangled Histories: Colonialism, Migration, Climate**

In ‘*The Great Derangement*’, this entanglement of past and present is made literal in Tipu’s journey. As a climate refugee, he retraces a 17th-century gun-running route. For Deen, the connection becomes unavoidable as “the Gun Merchant’s story was not just a legend, instead, it was history, and was also the present” (*Gun Island* 103). Climate change works



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here as “an intensifier of inequality” (Gosh 111), and as what Rob Nixon calls “slow violence”, “a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight” (Nixon 2). Similarly, Venice, “a city that is drowning” (Gun Island 176), mirrors the Sundarbans and when they read together, they show what Elizabeth DeLoughrey and George Handley describe that as “colonial histories sedimented in the landscape” (De Loughrey and Handley 4).

#### **4.4 Genre Hybridity as Eco-Conscious Form**

Gun Island refuses a single genre as it combines a detective plot, ‘mangalkavya’, academic footnotes, and a climate thriller. In addition to that ‘The legend of Manasa Devi’ is treated as “another way of storing data” about ‘Little Ice Age’ weather patterns (Gun Island 102). This formal mixing answers Adam Trexler’s claim that climate fiction “requires new generic hybrids” because realism “cannot contain the scale of the problem” (Trexler 6). It also embodies what Ghosh calls ‘the wildness of stories’ (‘Wild Fictions’), a plural epistemology in which archives, myth, and animal behaviour are all treated as sources of knowledge.

#### **5. Synthesis: Ghosh’s Tripartite Eco-Consciousness**

##### **1. Epistemological**

In his novel ‘The Great Derangement’, modernity silenced nonhumans through a “calculus of probability” (Gosh 20). Gun Island brings them back as agents of the plot, not as scenery. This is not simply an import of Western new materialism but it is a recovery of a Bengali cosmology in which “the boundaries between human and nonhuman were always porous” (Gosh 64).

##### **2. Narrative**

“For Ghosh, to think climate change is to think the unthinkable” (Gosh 33) since the novel *The Great Derangement* itself has to change. In this context, Adeline Johns-Putra argues, climate “challenges the conventions of plot, character, and setting” (Johns-Putra 272) and Ghosh’s response is to make coincidence structural rather than accidental.

##### **3. Ethical**

Gosh asserts in his *The Great Derangement*, “The poor are the first to suffer the consequences of the carbon economy” (Gosh 110). For Ghosh, eco-consciousness is therefore inseparable from justice. “There can be no effective response to climate change without



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addressing inequality” (Gosh138). This directly contests Val Plumwood’s critique of “human exceptionalism” (Plumwood 5), by placing the climate refugee at the centre of the story.

## 6. Conclusion: Limits and Horizons of the Eco-Conscious Novel

Critics have called Gun Island “contrived” (Kakutani 2019) and that contrivance is deliberate. A strictly probable novel would only reproduce the derangement Ghosh diagnoses. By embracing the uncanny, Ghosh tests whether fiction can “carry the weight of the planet” (The Great Derangement 84), and whether ecocriticism can move “beyond nature writing” into formal reinvention (Garrard 7).

Ultimately, Ghosh’s model does three things. It provincializes the Anthropocene by centring the Global South. It decolonizes literary form by drawing on myth and epic and it insists that eco-consciousness without justice is “another form of derangement” (The Great Derangement 122). There are limits. Deen’s privileged perspective sometimes risks speaking about the Sundarbans rather than from it. Future work might place Ghosh alongside other Southern Anthropocene novels to test how portable this form really is. Still, after The Great Derangement and Gun Island, eco-consciousness has to mean recognizing “the age of the uncanny” (Gosh 33) and rewriting our stories to fit it.



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