

Research Article**Narratives of Planetary Crisis: Amitav Ghosh's Literary Response to Slow Violence, Colonial Legacy, and the Anthropocene****T. Rama Krishna¹, Dr. Gujju Chenna Reddy²**¹Research Scholar, Department of English, Acharya Nagarjuna University, Guntur, Andhra Pradesh²Professor, Department of English, Acharya Nagarjuna University, Guntur, Andhra Pradesh**Corresponding Author: T. Rama Krishna****Abstract**

Amitav Ghosh's successful attempts to exemplify and resolve cultural and narrative conflicts caused by climate change is remarkable. He successfully amalgamates environmental literature with postcolonial criticism and climate change fiction. Here, I focus on Ghosh's writing on the Anthropocene, the narratives folding climate change into colonial histories, and the narratives tackling "slow violence." Rob Nixon coins the term, 'slow violence' to describe the unseen and gradual environmental harm and destruction that is largely suffered by the politically and economically marginalised people in the Global South. The narratives of Ghosh, and more specifically *The Hungry Tide* (2004) fiction, make this slow violence visible with respect to ecosystems and subaltern people. Ghosh's critique of the Western worldview, in which nature is inert and can be conquered and exploited by capitalism, lays the foundations of the climate crisis. In *The Nutmeg's Curse* (2021), Ghosh explains the violence of colonial resource acquisition and plantation economies to trace the imperial roots of climate change. To move beyond the limitations of the traditional realist novel, which Ghosh finds structurally incapable of capturing the unpredictable, collective phenomenon of climate disruption, he employs new techniques. This research, for one, positions Ghosh's work as an important site for engaging with the challenges of anthropocentrism and the use of narrative to promote Ghosh's articulation of the need for a multitude in contemporary storytelling as a form of protest to raise ecological consciousness and challenge the political order during a time of planetary crisis.

Keywords: ecological protest, political order, environmental exploitation, vulnerable groups**1. Introduction**

Humanity's "Anthropocene" crisis is profound. It is not only a planetary crisis of varied extremes phenomena— like: deforestation, melting of ice caps, extreme weather, environmental refugees, mass extinctions, and Climate Change—but also a cultural and narratological one. It is also a deep political, scientific and cultural crisis. This is a time of Terror with climate emergency. It is this extreme moment of planetary crisis of extreme climate events that has spawned a new genre of literature—climate fiction— or cli fi as it tries to engage with the impact of the climate crisis on the future of human and nonhuman life. Yet, the traditional forms of Western literature, especially the realist novel, seem unable to convey the full scope and intricacy of this crisis. This is since, in most instances, climate change does not force itself upon our attention in spectacular forms, but rather, in "slow violence". Rob Nixon explains this as a form of violence that is not perceived as such, as it is a form of destruction that is inflicted

gradually, out of sight, and dispersed over time and space. The violence of toxic drift, acidifying oceans, and the thawing cryosphere is, however, inflicted primarily on the marginalized populations, particularly in the Global South, which begs the question of culture. Ghosh's writing allows us to examine how humanity can reconsider its relationship with nature and how we can become more equitable and sustainable in the face of a planetary crisis, adopting a broad and generous narrative scope that emphasizes the global connectedness of global within historical and global causality.

2. The Colonial Foundation of Environmental Crisis

Ghosh is of the opinion that European colonialism created the planet in crisis. The 'extractive, exploitative logic of empire' laid the ideological groundwork for today's environmental devastation. In his non-fiction work *The Nutmeg's Curse*, Ghosh draws violent history of spice trade and plantation economies and resource colonialism to climate change. He challenges generalized framing of the Anthropocene, arguing that environmental violence is colonial and imperial, and disproportionately impacts the indigenous and subaltern. His historical fiction allows readers to see the connection, even if only implicitly, between early colonial capitalism and environmental devastation. For example, the ecological damage, passing the trilogy's soil depletion, forced opium cultivation described in the trilogy and the techniques of traditional agriculture were disrespected. The human cost in Deeti's chapter in *Sea of Poppies* is described in the following passage:

"In the old days, the fields would be heavy with wheat in the winter, and after the spring harvest, the straw would be used to repair the damage of the year before. But now, with the sahibs forcing everyone to grow poppy, no one had thatch to spare – it had to be bought at the market, from people who lived in faraway villages, and the expense was such that people put off their repairs if they possibly could." (Ghosh, *Sea of Poppies* 29).

Here is a clear example of the destructive impact of economic exploitation in the form of forced monoculture. Not only did it degrade soil and remove useful features of the landscape and defences, but it also exposed people to violence in the form of natural disasters.

Ghosh's theoretical shift is shaped by Rob Nixon's ideas surrounding "slow violence," which Nixon defines as violence that is gradual, invisible, and dispersed over time and space. While "slow violence" differs from the "unrepeatable uniqueness" of the narratives surrounding disasters, the "cultural" challenge, according to Nixon, is to address the "representational challenges" that such incremental harm entails and to inspire authors to find compelling stories, metaphors, and visuals that capture the violence and pervasive yet imperceptible harm of the affected aftermath. Ghosh critiques modern literature, claiming that the literary novel, with its emphasis on "individual moral adventure," and contraction of time, does not attend to the collective, non-linear aspects of climate change. His narrative practice, therefore, is a conscious effort to use storytelling as a means of rewriting history. He needs to attend to the people, the environment, and the culture from a variety of subjective positions.

The Hungry Tide (2004) serves as an essential cornerstone in Ghosh's work, marking the transition from postcolonial history to a critical focus on the environment. The novel is set in the Sundarbans, "tide country," which is characterized by dynamic, ever-changing landscapes of land and water.

In *The Hungry Tide*, Grew reveals the physical environment as the force that combines the living and the nonliving. The Sundarbans, an intricate mangrove jungle, is also a major player, a 'character' in the novel, the unpredictability of the Sundarbans necessarily shaping human life and what it means to exist. This mangrove jungle is also a 'character' in the novel, the unpredictability of the Sundarbans necessarily shaping human life and what it means to exist. The recurring ecocatastrophes underline the jungle as an ecosystem that is fragile and vulnerable.

Kanai's account of the 1867 devastation of Port Canning, where colonial bureaucrats deforested the mangroves and the area was hit by a cyclone, illustrates how neglect of the human landscapes in the Sundarbans leads to disaster. The anecdote is a warning to the postcolonial regime's neoliberal corporate tourism(v) eco-devastation project in the Sundarbans as critiqued by Ghosh in "Folly in the Sundarbans". Here, the historian quotes the river Matla, "*rose as if to a challenge and hurled itself upon Canning*" (THT 287).

The novel shows in detail how human actions bring about disequilibrium in an ecosystem, thereby revealing slow violence. This is illustrated by Moyna and her observations about fishing nets. "*These new nylon nets, which they use to catch chingrimeen- the spawn of tiger prawns. The nets are so fine that they catch the eggs of all the other fish as well. Mahima wanted to get the nets banned, but it was impossible*" (THT p.134).

This passage illustrates how, in the name of progress, technology can also facilitate the destruction of biodiversity. It shows how nets that are fine technologically are also ecologically dangerous, as they capture the life of other fish species and contribute to the slow violence of life depletion. Moreover, Piya also admires the biodiversity of the Sundarbans and the intricate ways in which the river and sea waters interact to create hundreds of different ecological niches. The exceptional ecological value of this region deserves protection from global market pressures that promote unsustainable ecological exploitation.

Ghosh highlights the stories of the sidelined and oppressed communities; for instance, the Partition-displaced Dalit refugees who found shelter in Morichjhapi but were violently expelled in 1979 when the government prioritized the conservation of wildlife over the people's basic sustenance. Nirmal's diary reveals the history of the Morichjhapi massacre, an event that remains profoundly buried in the official historical accounts.

The novel ends with a shift towards a more democratic and locally informed model of conservation. Piya, the cetologist, discovers the limits of her Western scientific perspectives when she encounters Fokir, the local fisherman, and, more significantly, the local, intuitive knowledge of the region. Piya returns to the Sundarbans, profoundly altered by the storm and Fokir's death. She resolves to collaborate with local fishermen so that "the burden of conservation would not fall on those who could least afford it" (THT p.400). Her recognition is epic; she realizes that without Fokir's "particular knowledge of his environment, she would have remained ignorant of the river dolphins in the tide country and so would the rest of the world." Piya's last declaration, "For me, home is where the Orcaella are, so there's no reason why this couldn't be it," captures a post-anthropocentric shift where the life of the Irrawaddy dolphins and the entire ecosystem become the center of her sense of belonging. This is a significant shift in Piya's sense of constancy and belonging. In *Gun Island* (2019), Ghosh extends the scope of his concerns to a global, interconnected, mythic realm and directly engages with climate change as a narrative driver of migration and the behavior of nonhumans.

The novel attempts to encapsulate the phenomenon of global warming which Timothy Morton (2013) refers to as "hyperobjects". Hyperobjects are so massively distributed in time and space that they are virtually impossible to fully grasp. Ghosh employs myth, particularly Manasa Devi (the snake goddess) and the Gun Merchant (Bonduki Sadagar) myth, to mediate the realism and the hyperreality that is necessary to depict the violence of turbulence on the planet.

This narrative device connects the "Little Ice Age" of the seventeenth century with the climate crisis we live with today. *Gun Island* has a historian that connects this historical climate disruption with the large-scale adoption of fossil fuels (coal) by Londoners, arguing that the emergence of today's so-called "climate refugee" is a direct consequence of anthropogenic activities in the last four centuries. *Gun Island* showcases climate-induced displacement and migration of both human and non-human animals across borders in search of greener ecologies. This includes the traumatic illegal crossings from the Sundarbans to the West. Ghosh observes

that the impoverished migrants who travel to Europe often must “pose as victims—though they're heroes back home.”

Piya illustrates that “oceanic dead zones”, vast low oxygen expanses of sea caused by remnants of chemical fertilizers. She explains that these zones are not only widespread but can be “some as large as middle sized countries”, and cover “tens of thousands of square miles of ocean” and eliminate all but the most specialized of organisms. The novel shows the translocation of the nonhuman animals of the yellow bellied snake described as “having changed with the warming of the oceans and they were migrating northwards”. This snake lives on a beach in Venice. Deen and Cinta (a friend from Venice) explain the accessibility and vulnerability of the Sundarbans and connect it to Venice and its sinking problem. Rafi, the migrant, recalls the stifling sound of shipworms and draws a connection between Venice and the Sundarbans, where crabs burrow into the embankments. “It’s just like the Sundarbans. There, if you put your ear to the embankments you can hear the crabs burrowing inside. It’s the same over here”. There is a deep and intimate connection between these two distant, exposed, and vulnerable ecosystems, emphasizing the need to have a “planetary perspective”.

It is in the area of historical imagination that scholar Amitav Ghosh is recognized and appreciated, and it is in this area that he deploys the most innovative and persuasive techniques. Ghosh is recognized for engaging in the critique of colonial legacies and in this he focuses on several of his works which have been discussed in the context of Homi Bhabha’s hybridity, Gayatri Spivak’s subaltern, and Edward Said’s Orientalism.

In *The Shadow Lines*, Ghosh employs memory as the narrative engine. The unnamed first-person narrator, using his memory, reconstructs a somewhat disordered account of the decades (1939-40, 1960-63, 1978-79) and the miles (Dhaka, Calcutta, London) spanning across geographies. Ghosh structures the narrative using syllepsis temporal syllepsis, for instance, is the thematic grouping of narrative segments that bypasses a chronological order, while geographical syllepsis refers to the fragmentation of a narrative across spatial boundaries. Although some critics see fragmentation and the use of non-linearity as postmodernist, for Ghosh, it is a means to subvert dominant stone. The transformation of narratives pivots on the trauma of a historical event, such as the post-communal carnage of the 1964 Hazratbal atrocity, and stretches across the experience of postcolonial anxiety as a continuous and coherent whole.

Ghosh employs memory along with a diary and a memoir to interlace history with imagination, thus crafting what he calls “miniature histories of everyday people based on events in history.” For instance, in *The Hungry Tide*, while Nirmal’s diary is the primary text in telling “stories about the lives and struggles of refugees in Morichjhapi,” Ghosh is giving a voice to the individual suffering and angst that historical records tend to ignore. Ghosh argues that there can’t be a single authorized version of the truth. He believes it is essential to see facts from all sides and provide a plurality of accounts.

Ghosh is recognized as a brilliant author, but there is a discourse that surrounds the political effectiveness of Ghosh’s writing and the accessibility of his narratives. Gauri Viswanathan argues that Ghosh’s request for cross-border relations may be limited to “nostalgia with no suggestions for addressing what is, after all, an intractable political problem.” Likewise, A. N. Kaul asks if Ghosh’s interrogation of cartographic divisions gives Ghosh too much credit for “amorphous romantic subjectivity,” insisting that Ghosh fails to account for difficult political realities.

In this regard, Ghosh’s defenders talk of Tridib’s advice in *The Shadow Lines* to use “imagination with precision.” This entails the contextualization of imagination, framing the “contemporaneity of the past,” and the recognition that different times and places may be “inextricably intertwined with one’s own.” Additionally, Ghosh’s works provide possible solutions: Piya’s collaborative conservation in *The Hungry Tide* and the integration of

indigenous knowledge in Gun Island signal an ethical, pragmatic pivot. Some scholars, for instance, Nixon (2011), claim that Ghosh's "rich intellectual style in language and historical layering" may be a hindrance to the general reader and, in this regard, argues that Ghosh's aesthetic innovation makes a direct call to action seem less important. Nevertheless, the combination of historical depth, linguistic prowess, and cosmopolitanism provides Ghosh's writing the "validity and authenticity" that speaks to a large audience.

3. Conclusion

Ghosh's work represents a revised version of an ancient mariner's map for the Anthropocene. Unlike traditional history, the standard map that shows only the powerful colonial ships and the big naval battles, Ghosh historical geography documents the unseen perils—the high tides, the toxic currents of slow violence, the forced corridors of indentured labor, and the migration of marine life. In doing so, he does not discard the map but shows that the beautiful routes of civilization are leading us to uncharted and dangerous waters.

References

1. Alam, Fakrul. *Imperial Entanglements and Literature in English*. Writers ink, 2007.
2. Amin, Tasnim. "Colonial Diaspora in the Ibis Trilogy of Amitav Ghosh". *International Journal of English, Literature and Social Science*, vol. 5, no. 1, Jan. 2020, pp. 111–15.
3. Bhutani, Anchal. "Amitav Ghosh - Crafting on Contemporary Literature". *Contemporary Literary Review India*, vol. 7, no. 4, 2020, pp. 28–36.
4. Choudhury, Murshed Haider. "AMITAV GHOSH'S EXPERIMENTATION WITH LANGUAGES AND DIALECTS IN IBIS TRILOGY". *European Journal of English Language and Literature Studies*, vol. 7, no. 7, 2019, pp. 1–8.
5. DeLoughrey, Elizabeth. "Island Ecologies and Caribbean Literatures". *Tijdschrift voor Economische en Sociale Geografie*, Vol. 95, No. 3, 2004, pp. 298-310.
6. Ghanshyam, G.A., Devasree Chakrvarti and Rakshi Nara. *Amitav Ghosh: A Traveller Across Time and Space*. Authors Press, 2014.
7. Ghosh, Amitav. *Flood of Fire: A Novel*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015.
8. Ghosh, Amitav. "Folly in the Sundarbans". Published in 2004.
9. Ghosh, Amitav. *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*. Penguin Random House India, 2017.
10. Ghosh, Amitav. *The Hungry Tide*. Ravi Dayal: New Delhi, 2004.
11. Ghosh, Amitav. *River of Smoke*. Penguin Canada, 2011.
12. Ghosh, Amitav. *Sea of Poppies*. John Murray Publishers, 2008.
13. Ghosh, Amitav. *The Shadow Lines*. John Murray, 2011.
14. Grove, Richard. *Green Imperialism: Colonial Expansion, Tropical Island Edens and the Origins of Environmentalism, 1600-1860*. Cambridge University Press, 1995.
15. Gupta, Tanu. *Narratology in the selected works of Amitav Ghosh*. 13 Oct. 2016.
16. Huggan, Graham and Helen Tiffin. *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment*. Routledge, 2010.
17. Khanna, Sanjeev. "'Amitav Ghosh's Ibis Trilogy: A Study of History and Culture'". *Literary Herald*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2020, pp. 50–61

Citation: T. Rama Krishna and Dr. Guju Chenna Reddy 2025. "Narratives of Planetary Crisis: Amitav Ghosh's Literary Response to Slow Violence, Colonial Legacy, and the Anthropocene". *International Journal of Academic Research*, 12(4): 77-81.

Copyright: ©2025 T. Rama Krishna and Dr. Guju Chenna Reddy. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.