

Amitav Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide* & Contemporary Narrative Form, English 4550, Fall 2019

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“American Literary Globalism”

- Relatively unburdened by the legacies of Euro-American modernism or the politics of the Cold War, their fiction reacts against the aesthetic sensibilities of high postmodernism while providing American literature with a new set of genealogical, geographic, and temporal referents.

— Rachel Adams

- [Such fiction] enacts a tireless, ongoing search for another order of connectivity that might respond to globalization as a geo-social-economic-political fact without merely imitating, and being complicit with globalization's forms.

— Hyuong Song

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In 2019, *Foreign Policy* magazine named Ghosh one of the most important global thinkers of the preceding decade.

- Global Economy — A World Gone Post-al
post-colonialism, post-9/11, post-nation state, post-humanism
- Global Communications Networks
WhatsApp, facebook, master narratives of Holly/Bollywood
- Disturbances in the Force – Global Weather Events / A World Without Boundaries => “Planetary”



—Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak

The Hungry Tide – Preliminary Reflections

American Literature Across Deep Time



- a vision of American literature as “a crisscrossing set of pathways, open-ended and every multiplying, weaving in and out of other geographies, other languages and cultures” and centering around “input channels, kinship networks, routes of transit, and forms of attachment—connective tissue binding America to the rest of the world.”
- Rethinking “the shape of literature against the history and habitat of the human species, against the ‘deep time’ of the planet Earth, as described by two scientific disciplines, geology and astronomy.”
- Understanding humanity as “a species with a sedimented imprint”

—Wai Chee Dimock, *Through Other Continents*

The Hungry Tide— The Anthropocene 1



- Considering . . . [the] major and still growing impacts of human activities on earth and atmosphere, and at all, including global, scales, it seems to us more than appropriate to emphasize the central role of mankind in geology and ecology by proposing to use the term ‘**anthropocene**’ for the current geological epoch.

—Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer (2000)

- **The Anthropocene** could be said to have started in the latter part of the eighteenth century, when analyses of air trapped in polar ice showed the beginning of growing global concentrations of carbon dioxide and methane. This date also happens to coincide with James Watt’s design of the steam engine in 1784.

—Paul J. Crutzen (2002)

The Hungry Tide — The Anthropocene 2



- Developing “a world-wide accepted strategy leading to sustainability of eco-systems against human-induced stresses will be one of the great future tasks of humankind.”

—Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer

- *Humans as Geological Agents*

“To call ourselves geological agents is to attribute to us a force on the same scale as that released at other times when there has been a mass extinction of species.”

—Dipesh Chakrabarty

- - The cyclone of 1970 killing 300,000 people: “’Like Hiroshima!’”

The Hungry Tide — The Anthropocene 3

■ **Vietnam—Carpet Bombing and the Carbon Economy**

The Mekong Orcaella had shared Cambodia's misfortunes: in the 1970s they had suffered the ravages of indiscriminate carpet bombings. Later they too had been massacred by Khmer Rouge cadres who had hit upon the idea of using dolphin oil to supplement their dwindling supplies of petroleum These dolphins were hunted with rifles and explosives and their carcasses were hung up in the sun so that their fat would drip into buckets. This oil was then used to run boats and motorcycles (“Interrogations” 305)

The Hungry Tide — The Anthropocene 4

■ Nylon Nets and Overfishing

“I don’t want him growing up catching crabs. Where’s the future in that? [. . .] Mashima says that in fifteen year the fish will all be gone. What with all the new nets and all. And what after that?” — “What new nets?”

“These new nylon nets, which they use to catch *chingrir meen*—the spawn of the tiger prawns. The nets are so fine that they catch the eggs of all the other fish as well. Mashima wanted to get them banned, but it was impossible.” — “Why?”

“Because there’s a lot of money in prawns and the traders had paid off the politicians. What do they care—or the politicians for that matter? It’s people like us who’re going to suffer and it’s up to us to think ahead” (“Moyna” 134).

The Hungry Tide + The Great Derangement

Contemporary Narrative Form



Convention and the Carbon Economy

- I have come to recognize that the challenges that climate changes poses for the contemporary writer, although specific in some respects, are also products of something broader and older; that they derive ultimately from the grid of literary forms and conventions that came to shape the narrative imagination in precisely the period when the accumulation of carbon in the atmosphere was rewriting the destiny of the earth.
- [F]iction that deals with climate change is almost by definition not of the kind that is taken seriously by serious literary journals: the mere mention of the subject is often enough to relegate a novel or a short story to the genre of science fiction. It is as though in the literary imagination climate change were somehow akin to extraterrestrials or interplanetary travel.

— Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement*

The Hungry Tide + The Great Derangement

Contemporary Narrative Form



(Im)Probability and Narrative Form

Probability and the modern novel are in fact twins, born at the same time

[B]ut what is distinctive about the form is precisely the concealment of those exceptional moments that serve as the motor of narrative

It is thus that the novel takes its modern form, through the ‘relocation of the unheard-of toward the background . . . While the everyday moves into the foreground’ [Franco Moretti].

— Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement*

The Hungry Tide + The Great Derangement Contemporary Narrative Form



(Im)Probability and Narrative Form—The Norm of the Everyday

Why should the rhetoric of the everyday appear at exactly the time when a regime of statistics, ruled by ideas of probability and improbability, was beginning to give new shapes to society? Moretti's answer is '*Because they offer the kind of narrative pleasure compatible with the new regularity of bourgeois life*' Or in other words: fillers are an attempt at rationalizing the novelistic universe: turning it into a world of few surprises, fewer adventures, and no miracles at all.'

— Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement*

The Hungry Tide + Narrative Form

■ Improbability as the New Realism 1

Motif of chance, haphazard encounters, luck/microcosm

. . . but if life had taught him anything, it was that opportunities often appeared unexpectedly. Piya appeared to be a case in point. It was not often such a perfectly crafted situation presented itself: with his departure foreordained in nine days, his escape was assured

He had been hurrying to get to a lecture, and while running past the displays of old books on the university's footpaths he'd barreled into someone who was browsing at one of the stalls. A book had gone flying into the air and landed in a puddle. Kanai was about to swear at the man he had bumped into, *Bokachoda!* Why didn't you get out of my way?, when we recognized his uncle's wide, wondering eyes

The Hungry Tide + Narrative Form



Improbability as the New Realism 2

- *felix culpa*: Piya's fall into the water—one of many, mostly fortunate, falls—"the luckiest thing that could have happened to me"—a shortcut to unique decades of delta experience
- Piya and Fokir and the lunar rainbow, a quasi once-in-a-lifetime event

They sat unmoving, like animals who had been paralysed by the intensity of their awareness of each other. When their eyes met again it was as if he knew at a glance what she was thinking.

— Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement*

The Goon Squad & Narrative Form



Improbability as the New Realism 3

- As [the basket] swung upward again, toward the window, Ted recognized the cigarette buyer as his niece. . . . So acutely had he been dreading this encounter that he felt no real surprise at the staggering coincidence of its actually taking place.
- It was one of those days when every intersection bring up another familiar face, old friends and friends of friends, acquaintances, and people who just look familiar. Alex had been in the city to long to know how he knew them all . . . but somehow, enough years had managed to pass that he felt he'd seen every person in Manhattan at least once,

— Jennifer Egan, *Goon Squad*

Normalizing the Narrative(s) of Science—Gradualism vs. Catastrophism

- Through much of the era when geology—and also the modern novel—were coming of age, the gradualist (or “uniformitarian”) view held absolute sway and catastrophism was exiled to the margins.
- The victory of gradualist view in science was . . . won by characterizing catastrophism as un-modern. In geology, the triumph of gradualist thinking was so complete that Alfred Wegener’s theory of continental drift, which posited upheavals of sudden and unimaginable violence, was for decades discounted and derided.

— Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement*

- Key players: Sir Charles Lyell, Charles Darwin, Alfred Wegener, Stephen Jay Gould

The Hungry Tide + The Great Derangement

Contemporary Narrative Form



Normatizing the Narrative(s) of Science—Continental Drift

- *I would take them back to the deep, deep time of geology and I would show them that where the Ganga now runs there was once a coastline—a shore that marked the southern extremity of the Asian landmass. India was far away then, in another hemisphere. It was attached to Australian and Antarctica [...]* I would show them how it happened that India broke away suddenly, a hundred and forty million years ago, and began its journey from Antarctica to the north. They would see how their subcontinent had moved, at a speed no other landmass had ever attained before; they would see how its weight forced the rise of the Himalayas; they would see the Ganga emerging, as a brook on a rising hill. (“Beginning Again” 181)



Thank you
Dhanyavad
Shukriya

