

# Amitav Ghosh: Writing the planetary crisis

Sunday 6 October 2024, by [NILSEN Alf Gunvald](#) (Date first published: 27 September 2024).

**On a recent Friday afternoon, with summer firmly in place, well over 100 people are gathered in the main auditorium of the University of Pretoria's Future Africa campus.**

They are there to listen to world-renowned Indian author Amitav Ghosh talk about history, geopolitics and how we think, speak and write about planetary crisis.

He begins by taking his audience to Ternate in Indonesia's Maluku Islands. Despite being both small and remote, the island has been at the heart of capitalist globalisation for centuries due to the clove industry, which developed under colonialism.

Today, Ghosh tells us, Ternate's clove plantations are dying. Local farmers know all too well their troubles are linked to climate change, and for them, climate change is above all an historical injustice.

From this starting point, Ghosh weaves a fascinating narrative that reveals the deep historical links between the global environmental crisis, war and geopolitical power.

This form of storytelling is characteristic of his recent books, in which he engages with the roots of the present-day ecological crisis in eye-opening ways.

When I met him earlier that day, I asked Ghosh how these questions had come front and centre in his writing.

"When I look back on my work," he said, "I think there are these very consistent threads that run through all of it."

Referring to his celebrated novels such as *The Circle of Reason* (1986), *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1996), *The Glass Palace* (2000) and *The Hungry Tide* (2004), Ghosh tells me how the human entanglement with other forms of life has been a constant interest for him.

"It was through the actual experience of writing books like *The Glass Palace* and *The Hungry Tide* that I found myself having to contend very forcefully with the world around me and, beginning from there, it was a process of discovery."

One of the things these two books — one a sweeping historical novel in which colonial commodity chains figure centrally, the other a gripping story set in the Sundarbans archipelago in Bengal — led Ghosh to discover that literary fiction wasn't quite able to grasp the extraordinary realities of climate change. And these limitations became the central subject matter of the essay collection *The Great Derangement*.

"I think of *The Great Derangement* as a kind of autocritique or as a kind of self-examination. Why is it that I haven't been able to deal with climate change and global warming in a more direct way?"

For Ghosh, the answer to that question lies in the conventions that shape literary fiction. These banish unthinkable occurrences, such as the extreme weather events that result from climate change, from their realm of interest.

“The real problem is that the ecosystem of literature resists that kind of writing very much. It responds by marginalising it, ignoring it or trivialising it. It’s not seen as serious writing — whatever serious means.

“So much of writing about the planetary crisis is sidelined as apocalyptic fiction or science fiction.”

Our conversation veers to the books of Octavia Butler and Ursula K Le Guin and the irony that these are labelled speculative fiction, given how accurately they portray crises that are increasingly real.

“It’s hard to understand, but let’s face it, the mainstream literary press has a model of literature in their minds which is derived from the 19<sup>th</sup> century. And that’s why it’s so limited.”

I ask Ghosh what it would entail to create a different form of writing, which is better equipped to engage with planetary crisis and our relationship to the non-human world.

“I’ve been experimenting with that ever since I wrote *The Great Derangement*,” he says, and gives the example of his graphic verse novel *Jungle Nama*, which retells the Bengali folk story of Bon Bibi, the guardian spirit of the Sundarbans forests, to address questions of greed and ecological devastation.

“I became interested in the Bon Bibi tale because those kinds of stories exist in multiple iterations. They exist as a text; they exist as a script for a play; they exist as stories.

“So, with *Jungle Nama*, I wanted to do exactly that — I wanted it to be collaborative so, in the first place, I worked with the artist Salman Toor, who illustrated the book.

“And then I wanted it to be in music, so I worked with the singer Ali Sethi for the audiobook, and together we also turned *Jungle Nama* into a play. And now I’m collaborating with someone to turn it into a video game!”

For Ghosh, such a layered approach is key to telling stories that have an impact: “I wanted the story to exist on multiple iterative levels, because that’s the way stories make their way into our minds — how they become archetypal.”

In two of Ghosh’s most recent books, *The Nutmeg’s Curse* (2021) and *Smoke and Ashes* (2024), his register for writing about planetary crisis is that of historical non-fiction.

What is the significance, I ask, of tracing the lineages of contemporary ecological violence to colonial conquest, capitalist extractivism and war?

“History has always been very important and interesting to me,” he says. “And that’s the big difference between me and others who write about the planetary crisis.

“Most others think of it in terms of the future, but I see the planetary crisis as being rooted in the past. The current crisis is not really a radical break from the past — it’s very much a continuation of it.”

We discuss how this perspective compels us to address the planetary crisis by confronting historical injustices — an approach that goes against the grain of mainstream climate discourse, which focuses

on technocratic management.

Ghosh is critical of how elite groups in what he calls the Anglosphere attempt to control the way we speak about climate change: “The climate discourse comes out of an elite sphere. There’s a whole body of technocrats who are deeply invested in it, who want to assert their control of it, and keep other people out of it. And that’s why nothing will come of it; nothing will change.

“Whenever you hear talk of climate solutions, what you know is that some people will get rich by selling the solution, and it will have no impact whatsoever,” Ghosh continues. “As I keep pointing out, the planetary crisis is one phase of a biopolitical war which has been happening for 500 years.”

Ghosh’s recent historical non-fiction centres the sea, the Indian Ocean in particular, and botanical materials — nutmeg and the opium poppy. The former, he argues, enables him to think beyond political geographies that are focused on land.

“Especially in relation to the Indian Ocean, if you look at it from the point of the sea, the entire political configuration changes completely,” he says, pointing to the cultural and political continuity of the Indian Ocean littoral. Thinking in these terms, he argues, can reveal power and open imaginative possibilities.

So can the focus on botanical matter. In *Smoke and Ashes*, his most recent book, he insists the opium poppy is an agent in its own right, creating cyclical patterns in history.

What happens when we think like this, I ask.

“We part company with modernity, that’s really what it is,” Ghosh responds. Parting with this company means parting ways with words and language as our primary tools for communication and understanding.

“Language is a very limited way of interacting with the world,” he says.

Perhaps that’s an indication of just how challenging the task of grappling with the planetary crisis we confront really is, even for a master of the written word such as Amitav Ghosh.

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