

Differing Eco-Phenomenological Discourses in Amitav Ghosh's Ecological Realism and Timothy Morton's Dark Ecology

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Abstract

This paper explores the contrasting yet complementary eco-phenomenological discourses in Amitav Ghosh's ecological realism and Timothy Morton's dark ecology. Both thinkers offer crucial insights into the Anthropocene, but they do so from different perspectives. Ghosh, through his historical materialist framework, focuses on the socio-political, historical, and colonial forces driving the current ecological crises. His ecological realism reflects the entanglement of human and non-human histories and advocates for a literary realism that incorporates the agency of nature. Morton, on the other hand, embraces post-humanist philosophies, specifically object-oriented ontology, to develop his concept of "dark ecology"—a framework that highlights the inherent strangeness, ambiguity, and uncanniness of the natural world. Morton introduces the notion of hyperobjects, entities like climate change that are too vast and complex to be fully comprehended by humans. This paper argues that despite their differences, both Ghosh and Morton challenge anthropocentric thinking and offer radical reconfigurations of humanity's relationship with the natural world. By placing their theories in dialogue, this paper underscores the importance of embracing both historical materialist and ontological perspectives to address the ecological challenges of the Anthropocene.

Keywords: Anthropocene, Ecological Realism, Dark Ecology, Climate Change, Historical Materialism, Object-Oriented Ontology, Hyperobjects, Post-Humanism, Eco-Phenomenology, Entanglement, Non-Human Agency

Introduction

The relationship between human beings and the natural world has long been a central theme in philosophy, literature, and ecological studies. In contemporary eco-phenomenological discourses, two figures stand out for their distinct approaches to the question of how humans interact with nature: Amitav Ghosh, with his notion of "ecological realism," and Timothy Morton, whose concept of "dark ecology" has reshaped post-humanist and object-oriented environmental thinking. These two thinkers share common concerns but diverge sharply in how they conceptualize nature, humanity's role in ecological crises, and the philosophical frameworks they employ. This paper explores the differing eco-phenomenological discourses in Ghosh's ecological realism and Morton's dark ecology, focusing on their treatment of nature, climate change, and the role of the human subject in an interconnected ecological world.

I. Amitav Ghosh and Ecological Realism

1.1. Ghosh's Ecological Vision

Amitav Ghosh, a prolific Indian novelist, has made significant contributions to eco-critical discourse through both his fiction and non-fiction. In particular, his book *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (2016) explores the failure of contemporary literature, politics, and culture to adequately address the existential threat posed by climate change. Ghosh critiques modernity's separation of the human from the natural world and insists that literature has failed to respond to the enormity of ecological disruption. He identifies what he calls a "peculiar form of realism" that is incapable of capturing the vast, temporally complex phenomena of climate change. Instead, Ghosh proposes an "ecological realism," which acknowledges the interconnectedness of human and non-human forces.

In *The Great Derangement*, Ghosh states that The Anthropocene presents a challenge not only to imagination but also to our sense of history, for it is not an event but a process, one that requires us to rethink our assumptions about temporality. This challenge to temporality is central to Ghosh's eco-phenomenological outlook. He underscores how human lives are intricately entwined with non-human entities, yet literature and the arts often fail to represent this interconnectivity. His ecological realism thus calls for a mode of storytelling that emphasizes the entanglement of human and natural histories.

1.2. The Anthropocene and Colonial Histories

For Ghosh, the Anthropocene—this current geological epoch in which human activity has become a dominant force affecting the Earth's systems—is deeply tied to the legacies of colonialism and capitalism. In *The Nutmeg's Curse* (2021), Ghosh traces the ecological devastation of the Anthropocene to the violent extraction and exploitation of resources by colonial powers. The nutmeg trade, for instance, serves as a microcosm for the wider entanglements of empire, violence, and environmental destruction. Ghosh argues that colonial histories are ecological histories, and any serious account of climate change must address the imperial roots of environmental degradation.

This intertwining of history, politics, and ecology is at the heart of Ghosh's ecological realism. He insists that ecological crises are not just natural disasters but are produced by specific socio-political arrangements, particularly those tied to capitalist modes of extraction. As he writes, the politics of extraction is an inescapable reality of the Anthropocene. From the moment the first European ships arrived in Asia and the Americas, the Earth was destined to be a battleground for both its resources and its atmosphere. Ghosh's approach underscores the need for an ecologically grounded historical consciousness, one that can account for the multiple forces—human, economic, and natural—that shape the world.

1.3. Critique of Modern Realism

A central component of Ghosh's ecological realism is his critique of literary realism. In *The Great Derangement*, he argues that modern realist fiction is ill-suited to representing the scale and complexity of climate change. Realist literature, according to Ghosh, is rooted in a conception of the world that prioritizes human agency and downplays the agency of non-human forces. The result is a genre that is incapable of capturing the unpredictable, chaotic, and often sublime forces that drive ecological processes.

Ghosh's fiction, particularly in novels like *The Hungry Tide* (2004) and *Gun Island* (2019), attempts to address this gap by foregrounding the non-human elements of the story. In *The Hungry Tide*, for example, the Sundarbans mangrove forests are not merely a backdrop for human action but an active

agent in the narrative. The tides, the dangerous tigers, and the shifting landscape all play crucial roles in shaping the lives of the characters. As Ghosh points out, the landscape of the Sundarbans is a reminder of the precarity of human life in the face of natural forces that exceed human control.

In contrast to the traditional realist novel, which often centers on individual human experience, Ghosh's ecological realism emphasizes the ways in which human and non-human worlds are mutually constitutive. His novels challenge the reader to rethink their assumptions about agency, control, and the boundaries between the human and the natural.

II. Timothy Morton and Dark Ecology

2.1. The Concept of Dark Ecology

While Ghosh's ecological realism is concerned with foregrounding the agency of non-human forces within a historical and political context, Timothy Morton's "dark ecology" represents a more radical philosophical approach to ecological thought. In his seminal work *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence* (2016), Morton advocates for a rejection of the dualism between nature and culture, human and non-human. Morton's dark ecology is grounded in the philosophical tradition of object-oriented ontology (OOO), which posits that all entities—human, animal, plant, or inanimate—have their own intrinsic being and agency.

Morton's concept of "dark ecology" is deliberately unsettling. It challenges the romanticized view of nature as a harmonious, balanced system and instead presents a vision of ecology as messy, contradictory, and entangled. As Ghosh points out, Dark ecology undermines the idea that nature is something 'over there,' a separate domain that humans can visit, exploit, or save. It insists on the strange interconnectedness of all beings, including humans, within a vast, incomprehensible web of relations.

For Morton, ecological thought must confront the "dark" side of existence, which includes not only the ecological destruction wrought by human activity but also the inherent strangeness and uncanniness of the natural world itself. Morton draws on existentialist and post-humanist philosophy to argue that humans are not separate from nature; rather, they are embedded within it in ways that are often invisible or incomprehensible. This entanglement, Morton suggests, requires a new way of thinking about ecological relationships, one that is rooted in a deep sense of humility and uncertainty.

2.2. Hyperobjects and the End of the World

One of Morton's key contributions to ecological thought is his concept of the "hyperobject," which he introduces in his book *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World* (2013). A hyperobject is an entity that is so vast, temporally and spatially, that it transcends human understanding. Examples of hyperobjects include global warming, radioactive waste, and the biosphere. These phenomena are "dark" in the sense that they are beyond human comprehension; they are distributed across time and space in ways that make them impossible to fully grasp.

Morton argues that the ecological crisis forces us to confront the reality of hyperobjects. Climate change, for example, is not an event that happens at a particular moment in time, but a process that unfolds over centuries and affects every aspect of life on Earth. As Morton describes, climate change is not a single, punctual event but a vast, distributed hyperobject that we are only beginning to understand. It is a phenomenon that both is and is not 'of this world'—it exceeds our ability to represent or control.

The notion of hyperobjects challenges traditional ways of thinking about time, space, and agency. Morton argues that the ecological crisis requires us to abandon anthropocentric perspectives and embrace a more expansive, post-humanist worldview. In this sense, Morton's dark ecology is a call to

rethink our relationship to the world in ways that acknowledge the profound strangeness and unpredictability of ecological systems.

2.3. Ecological Coexistence and the End of Nature

Morton's dark ecology also involves a radical rethinking of the concept of "nature" itself. In his view, nature is not a stable, harmonious system that can be preserved or restored. Instead, Morton suggests that nature, as traditionally conceived, is an ideological construct that obscures the messy, chaotic reality of ecological existence. As he states, nature is over as we have imagined it. We must learn to live without the comforting illusion of a stable, balanced ecosystem. Dark ecology teaches us to embrace the instability and unpredictability of the world.

Morton's ecological vision is thus deeply unsettling, as it rejects the possibility of a return to a pre-industrial, "natural" state. Instead, he advocates for a form of ecological coexistence that acknowledges the entanglement of human and non-human forces. This coexistence is not based on harmony or balance but on an acceptance of the inherent contradictions and uncertainties of life in the Anthropocene. As Morton argues, coexistence is not about harmony but about acknowledging the deep, unsettling interconnectedness of all beings. It is about learning to live with the strange, unknowable forces that shape our world.

III. Divergences and Convergences

3.1. Differing Conceptions of Nature

One of the key points of divergence between Ghosh and Morton lies in their conceptions of nature. Ghosh's ecological realism is rooted in a view of nature as an active agent that is deeply entangled with human histories and politics. For Ghosh, the ecological crisis is a product of specific socio-political forces, particularly those tied to colonialism and capitalism. In contrast, Morton's dark ecology rejects any stable conception of nature, insisting that nature is inherently strange, unknowable, and beyond human control. While Ghosh emphasizes the need for a historical and political understanding of ecological crises, Morton focuses on the ontological and philosophical dimensions of ecological entanglement.

3.2. The Role of the Human Subject

Another point of divergence is their treatment of the human subject. Ghosh's ecological realism, while critical of anthropocentrism, still places human agency at the center of its analysis. He calls for a rethinking of human relationships with the natural world, particularly through literature and the arts. Morton, on the other hand, adopts a more radical post-humanist stance, arguing that humans are just one component of a vast ecological web that transcends human understanding. Morton's dark ecology de-centers the human subject, insisting that ecological thought must move beyond anthropocentric frameworks.

3.3. Temporality and Climate Change

Both Ghosh and Morton grapple with the temporal dimensions of climate change, but they approach the issue in different ways. Ghosh's ecological realism emphasizes the historical and political dimensions of climate change, particularly the ways in which colonialism and capitalism have shaped the current crisis. He calls for a form of storytelling that can capture the long, complex histories that underpin ecological crises. Morton, in contrast, focuses on the ontological and existential dimensions of climate change, particularly through his concept of hyperobjects. For Morton, climate change is a phenomenon that transcends human temporality, forcing us to confront the limits of our knowledge and control.

IV. Literary Implications of Ghosh's Ecological Realism and Morton's Dark Ecology

4.1. Storytelling and Narrative Form in Ghosh's Ecological Realism

In Ghosh's conception of ecological realism, the literary form is not merely a tool for aesthetic expression but a medium for exploring the profound interconnectedness between human and non-human actors. He critiques modern realist fiction for its inability to adequately address the complexities of climate change, arguing that conventional narratives are often too narrow in scope to encompass the non-linear, multi-temporal, and planetary dimensions of ecological crises.

Ghosh's own novels, such as *The Hungry Tide* and *Gun Island*, attempt to push the boundaries of narrative form by incorporating the forces of nature as active agents in the story. In *The Hungry Tide*, the tides of the Sundarbans and the mangrove ecosystem are not just passive settings but entities that shape the destiny of the characters. This kind of narrative treatment calls attention to the fact that the "realism" often found in fiction excludes the vast forces of nature that have real, often devastating impacts on human lives.

As Ghosh writes in *The Great Derangement* that The events that are sometimes called 'natural disasters' are as deeply human as they are non-human. A cyclone is not just a storm, it is the product of centuries of human interaction with the atmosphere, the ocean, and the land. In this sense, Ghosh's ecological realism advocates for a form of storytelling that does not center exclusively on human protagonists but instead reflects the agency of non-human forces, from geological events to ecosystems, in shaping the narrative.

The structure of Ghosh's fiction mirrors his eco-phenomenological outlook. In *Gun Island*, the narrative weaves together myth, history, and contemporary environmental crisis, illustrating how the Anthropocene collapses the boundaries between past and present, myth and reality, human and non-human. The novel follows the journey of Deen Nath Datta, a rare book dealer, as he becomes entangled in a series of seemingly supernatural events connected to climate change and migration. As Deen learns, the boundaries between the mythological past and the ecological present are porous, and the stories we tell about the world can no longer ignore the entangled histories of humans and nature. This collapse of temporal and spatial boundaries in Ghosh's fiction reflects his critique of modern realism's inability to represent the interconnectedness of global ecological processes.

4.2. Morton's Dark Ecology and the Aesthetics of the Sublime

Timothy Morton's dark ecology, on the other hand, offers a radically different approach to narrative and aesthetics. Drawing on object-oriented ontology and existential philosophy, Morton's work engages with the concept of the sublime—the feeling of awe, terror, and bewilderment that arises when confronted with something vast and incomprehensible, such as a hyperobject like climate change.

Morton's concept of dark ecology insists that ecological awareness is inherently unsettling, as it disrupts the comforting notion that humans are separate from or in control of nature. Instead, Morton emphasizes that ecological phenomena—such as global warming or species extinction—are incomprehensibly large and temporally dispersed, making them difficult to represent in conventional narrative forms. The hyperobject of climate change, for instance, cannot be grasped in its entirety because it operates on spatial and temporal scales far beyond human perception. As Morton writes, hyperobjects are massive entities that are only partially visible at any given moment. They occupy such vast temporal and spatial scales that humans can only perceive them through fragmented glimpses.

This fragmentation, for Morton, necessitates a new kind of ecological aesthetics, one that embraces uncertainty, contradiction, and the disorienting experience of encountering phenomena that defy

comprehension. Morton draws on the tradition of the sublime, but his version of the sublime is “dark”—it acknowledges the ecological destruction that humans have wrought while also embracing the strangeness and uncanniness of the natural world. As he explains, Dark ecology does not seek to comfort or reassure. It asks us to confront the darkness at the heart of ecological thought, the recognition that we are not in control of the systems we inhabit, and that these systems are far stranger and more complex than we can ever know.

In this sense, Morton’s dark ecology offers a new way of thinking about literature and art in the Anthropocene. Rather than attempting to represent ecological crises through conventional narrative forms, dark ecology calls for works that embrace fragmentation, ambiguity, and the uncanny. Morton’s aesthetics are not concerned with resolution or closure but with the disorienting experience of living in a world shaped by hyperobjects and ecological entanglements.

4.3. Comparative Aesthetic Strategies: Entanglement vs. Fragmentation

While both Ghosh and Morton seek to address the challenges of representing ecological crises in literature and art, their aesthetic strategies differ markedly. Ghosh’s ecological realism emphasizes entanglement, interconnection, and the ways in which human and non-human forces are intertwined across history and space. His novels often focus on specific ecological landscapes—such as the Sundarbans or the Ganges River—and show how these places are shaped by both natural and human histories. In this sense, Ghosh’s work reflects an ecological aesthetic of continuity and relationality, where nature and culture are seen as inextricably linked.

Morton’s dark ecology, by contrast, focuses on fragmentation and disorientation. His emphasis on hyperobjects and the sublime suggests that ecological phenomena are often too vast and complex to be fully comprehended or represented. As a result, Morton advocates for an aesthetic that embraces the partial, the disjointed, and the uncanny. Rather than seeking to represent ecological systems in their entirety, Morton’s dark ecology encourages art and literature that reflect the disorienting experience of encountering phenomena that exceed human understanding.

Thus, while Ghosh’s ecological realism offers a narrative strategy that foregrounds the interconnectedness of human and non-human forces, Morton’s dark ecology proposes an aesthetic of disruption, fragmentation, and uncertainty. Both approaches offer valuable insights into how literature and art can respond to the ecological crises of the Anthropocene, but they do so in radically different ways.

V. The Philosophical Foundations of Ecological Thought in Ghosh and Morton

5.1. Ghosh’s Historical Materialism and Ecological Realism

Ghosh’s ecological realism is grounded in a historical materialist approach to ecology, which sees the environmental crises of the present as deeply tied to the legacies of colonialism, capitalism, and empire. As Ghosh argues in *The Nutmeg’s Curse*, the ecological devastation of the Anthropocene cannot be understood without reference to the extractive practices of European imperialism and the global capitalist economy. The exploitation of natural resources—whether in the form of the spice trade, the extraction of fossil fuels, or the commodification of biodiversity—has been a driving force behind both ecological degradation and human inequality.

This historical materialist perspective is central to Ghosh’s ecological realism. He insists that any serious response to the ecological crisis must take into account the socio-political forces that have shaped the relationship between humans and the natural world. Ghosh’s novels, with their focus on the intersections

of history, politics, and ecology, reflect this materialist understanding of ecological crises. For Ghosh, the ecological problems of the present cannot be divorced from the economic and political systems that have produced them. As he writes in *The Nutmeg's Curse*, The story of the Anthropocene is not just the story of humans versus nature—it is the story of how a particular set of economic and political arrangements have devastated both the natural world and human societies.

5.2. Morton's Post-Humanism and Object-Oriented Ontology

In contrast to Ghosh's historical materialism, Morton's dark ecology is rooted in post-humanist philosophy and object-oriented ontology (OOO). Object-oriented ontology rejects the traditional human-centered view of reality, arguing that all objects—whether human, animal, or inanimate—have their own intrinsic being and agency. For Morton, this post-humanist perspective is essential for understanding the ecological crisis because it forces us to recognize that humans are not the central actors in the story of the planet.

Morton's dark ecology challenges anthropocentric thinking by emphasizing the interconnectedness of all entities in the ecological web. He argues that ecological thought must move beyond the human-centered frameworks that have traditionally dominated environmental philosophy. As he writes in *Dark Ecology*, Ecological awareness means recognizing that humans are not the masters of the universe. We are part of a vast, interconnected web of beings, all of which have their own agency and existence”.

Morton's object-oriented ontology also informs his concept of the hyperobject. By emphasizing the agency of non-human entities, Morton challenges the idea that humans can fully control or understand ecological phenomena. The hyperobject of climate change, for example, exists on scales of time and space that are beyond human comprehension, making it impossible to represent or address through traditional anthropocentric frameworks.

VI. Conclusion:

Amitav Ghosh and Timothy Morton offer two distinct but complementary eco-phenomenological approaches to understanding the ecological crises of the Anthropocene. Ghosh's ecological realism emphasizes the historical, political, and material dimensions of ecological crises, while Morton's dark ecology focuses on the ontological and philosophical implications of ecological entanglement.

Both thinkers challenge conventional ways of thinking about nature and humanity's place in the world. Ghosh calls for a new form of storytelling that reflects the interconnectedness of human and non-human histories, while Morton advocates for an aesthetic of fragmentation and disorientation that reflects the strangeness and complexity of ecological systems.

In bringing their discourses into dialogue, we can develop a more nuanced understanding of the multifaceted nature of ecological thought. Ghosh's historical materialism offers a valuable critique of the socio-political forces that have shaped the ecological crises of the present, while Morton's post-humanist philosophy encourages us to rethink the very nature of ecological existence. Together, their works push the boundaries of eco-phenomenological thought, offering new ways of thinking about and responding to the challenges of the Anthropocene.

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