

## *The Nutmeg's Curse: Tracing the Social Origins of Colonialism*

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It is a practice by World Economic Forum (WEF) to organise a perception survey every year where experts try to foresee the greatest global hazard that can occur in the next ten years. In the result of the 2022 survey, it was found that the greatest hazard for the upcoming years is climate change. It is quite apparent in the occurrence of natural calamities in the coming years in the form of hurricanes, fire, tornadoes, draughts, floods, heatwaves etc and the point to note is that all these are happening also in the areas which have been unaffected previously. Naturally, this climatic concern is reflected in literature also. Lawrence Buell has rightly said, "Literature and other media can offer unique resources for activating concern and creative thinking about the planet's environmental future... reflecting on works of imagination may prompt intensified concern about the consequences of such choices and possible alternatives to them" (Buell 418). To analyse the connection between environment and literature, the interdisciplinary study of ecocriticism, environmental criticism or green studies are evolved. According to Zapf ecocriticism views literature as "an ecological principle or an ecological energy within the larger system of cultural discourses" (Zapf 55) a perspective that has "moved beyond former one-sided, biological-deterministic views of the nature-culture relationship towards the recognition of the difference and relatively independent dynamics of cultural and intellectual phenomena" (Zapf 51).

A number of writers, both in India and worldwide, have voiced out their concern about climate change. Among such writers, Amitav Ghosh stands out significantly due to his constant contribution to the cause. *The Living Mountain, The Nutmeg's Curse, The Hungry Tide, The*

*Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*, *Jungle Nama*, *River of Smoke*, *In an Antique Land*, *Sea of Poppies* are just a few examples where Ghosh through his fictional and non-fictional works have highlighted the need for harmony between man and environment. Stressing upon the importance of eco criticism Nayar writes:

Eco criticism is a critical mode that looks at the representation of nature and landscape in cultural texts, paying particular attention to attitude s towards ‘nature’ and the rhetoric employed when speaking about it. It aligns itself with ecological activism and social theory with the assumption that the rhetoric of cultural texts reflects and informs material practices towards the environment, while seeking to increase awareness about it and linking itself (and literary texts) with other ecological sciences and approaches. (Nayar 242)

Now it’s an established fact that climate change has become a severe threat to human existence and civilisation. Many authors have brought out various facets and dimensions of environmental issues but its social origins are not explored often. Amitav Ghosh tries to fill in this gap by discussing the societal causes of environmental exploitation, as he specialises in social anthropology, through his non-fictional work, *The Nutmeg’s Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis*. An intersection of history, literature, essay, testimony, and polemic, this book attempts to trace the contemporary climate crisis back to the colonial period, the discovery of new world and sea routes. Ghosh holds the Western colonialism responsible for climate change as its roots can be found in the old geopolitical order established by the West. The western colonialism has been entirely built on exploitation: exploitation of flora and fauna, slave trade, exploitation of the resources of colonies and the thoughtless exploitation of nature without paying any heed to the consequences. The book covers a wide range in term of both time and space but at the centre of this works is the precious spice nutmeg. Ghosh presents the history of nutmeg as a heart wrenching narrative of colonial conquest and exploitation. Ghosh makes the narrative of nutmeg as a parable for the contemporary ecological crisis. He advises that nature is an

independent and powerful entity without which human beings cannot survive. To have a thoughtlessly materialistic attitude towards nature is like an open invitation to the doom of mankind.

While tracing the history of environmental degradation and western colonialism, Ghosh tries to complete the trajectory by posing the work in contemporary times by giving reference to the global pandemic and the Black Lives Matter protests. He weaves these historical stories in the narrative and showcases that our common colonial histories are interconnected and are also the reason behind the wide chasm of inequality in the contemporary times. Picking up the historical incidents of oil trade, migrant crisis, racism and anecdotes from Indigenous communities and then interweaving them in a meaningful narrative Ghosh produces a critique of western colonialism. He also puts forth the idea that human history is determined by these non-human factors. Though he places western colonialism at the centre of ecological disorder due to its objectified and exploitative misuse of natural resources at the same time, he also blames the elites of colonies like Asia and Africa who disrupted the environmental balance of the area for their pursuit of economic growth. They are equally responsible for the ecological degradation. Ghosh believes that the exploitative attitude of such groups is the main cause of the contemporary climate crisis because such groups had initially promoted the evil ecological practices like deforestation, burning fossil fuel, unmindful mining etc.

The narrative analyses the origin of the relationship between Global North and Global South and also the idea that the mechanistic western attitude towards nature has severely impacted the contemporary world scenario. Ghosh begins his narrative by narrating the story of Dutch colonial conquest in Indonesia, particularly in the Banda Archipelago. Through this Ghosh tries to show how the western imperialism had played a major role in determining the ecological perception of the earth. Banda Archipelago was home to the spice nutmeg, found in abundance here, which was an extremely expensive commodity in the European market and this attracted the avarice of European colonisers. Ghosh portrays how the colonial powers used manipulation, treachery and all

sort of evil practices to seize the resources of those areas. He describes an incident in the village of Selamonin Banda, where a lamp accidentally fell in the night and the officials of Dutch East India Company coloured this incident as an attack from the native islanders. The natives had already made various commercial treaties with the colonial power but then the greed of Dutch had no bounds. They took this accident as an opportunity for the complete annihilation of the village. They publicly murdered thirty-six village elders, turned all the buildings into ashes and captured the villagers as slaves and sent them to work in their other areas. The destruction caused by the Dutch and the torture born by the natives of Banda Archipelago serves as a small-scale example to the global damage done by European Imperialism.

The author's selection of the historical narrative of Banda archipelago serves his purpose on various levels. Firstly, it incorporates all the major themes the author wants to deal with, such as the destruction by the western colonial powers, their impact on colonies; both on man and land, the difference between the attitude of imperialist power and indigenous people towards nature and its resources. Ghosh attempts to show the similarity between what happened to the Banda people and what occurred to all the other colonies world-wide and thus establishing our shared colonial history. He presents the common global impact of colonisation on the human and natural world. He also succeeds in drawing the attention of a contemporary reader to the tragic story of a small island which has been unfamiliar to him previously. The tale of Banda gives the author the scope to present the two opposite approach towards nature by the west and the indigenous communities. It shows both material and immaterial attitudes towards nature. For the colonial powers the importance of nutmeg is only determined by its commercial value. This natural product has no other value for them. But for Banda indigenous people, though they were aware of nutmeg's trade value, the spice and its ecology have spiritual significance too. They view it "not as land, but rather as the Land." For them nature is not just a resource to be used for human greed but a living entity incorporating all humans, flora and fauna with full of energy and life-force.

The non-fictional work tells the tale of how the presence of this precious spice nutmeg attracted the colonial powers towards this unknown island for the materialistic value of the spice. Eventually this spice which was a boon to this island and islanders by nature became a curse for them like the forbidden apple. The Nutmeg tree was endemic to these islands due to a natural occurrence of a volcanic eruption of 'Gunung Api'. Indigenous people of the island were involved in the trade of this spice but they have a respectful and balanced attitude towards the tree and its natural surroundings. Later on, with the arrival of Dutch VOC (Vereenigde Oostindische Compagni), this balance between man and nature disrupted completely. The Dutch company unleashed a reign of terror on this peaceful area by murdering and capturing its ninety percent population as slaves with the sole purpose of monopolising the trade of nutmeg (23). To establish a total control over the demand and supply chain of this precious spice they even cut down the nutmeg trees in the neighbouring islands of Lanthor. Ghosh highlights the tendency of East India Companies across the globe to carry out full fledged wars to sustain and promote their trades. They follow this dictum, "No war without trade, no trade without war" (42), he draws a parallel between the colonial past and our contemporary issues. The impact of this relationship between war and trade that was there in 1600s to 1800s, finds its reflections in the modern conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq and currently in Ukraine. He writes, "The dominance of Capitalism was made possible by western military conquests" (116). Similarly, the migration crisis that we are encountering today is also a repercussion of colonial greed. For the extraction and plantation of nutmeg, the Dutch company needed slave in a huge number. Consequently, slaves and indentured labourers were brought from other places, thus giving the idea of mass migration. This migration was not limited to the production of nutmeg in Banda archipelago, same practice was employed by other imperialist powers across the world.

Ghosh brings into light two major factors adopted by the colonisers for the extraction of resources, terraforming and racial subjugation. Terraforming word was coined by Jack Williamson which expresses

how the colonisers strategically create a *tabula rasa* in the colonies they capture. The scheme was to erase the existing historical and cultural past of the native people and impose new meaning and definitions on the place and people both. Colonial powers modified the topography and ecology of a land in a planned way so they can impose colonial will and way of life onto that area. The purpose behind this was to put the blame of the suppression of the indigenous people on the nature itself, by altering the nature surrounding them. This process happened in both ways overtly and covertly. One such often-cited method was the planned spread of diseases like smallpox by English and Spanish powers among the indigenous communities they had occupied and it was so impactful that native people called them as ‘invisible bullets.’ On the other hand, an example of covert was the introduction of fenced livestock to the America. Fenced-in livestock was the usual practice for Europeans but it was a new concept for native Americans. They were habitual of free roaming livestock. This change in the pattern of livestock destroyed the ecology by harming the essential food webs for the native indigenous communities.

One of the major motivating factors behind this cultural and geological violence by the colonisers was their strong belief in the Darwinian theory that it’s the right of the civilised race to exterminate savage races (79). Many renowned thinkers and writers like Rene Descartes, Bernard Mandeville, Robert Boyle and Francis Bacon, nurtured this Eurocentric worldview in *The Age of Reason*. They tried to justify the supremacy of white race over other races as the Will of the Divine. Ghosh cites Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker and argues that “Bacon’s advertisement for a holy war was thus a call for several types of genocide, which found its sanction in biblical and classical antiquity” (26). This divine superiority of white race over others ruled out any chance of “fraternal solidarity” (82) while giving them self-ordained right to eradicate the human and non-human world of the presumed wild or savage races. The atrocities inflicted on the islanders of Banda happened in India, USA and in many other parts of colonies. The early settlers in USA destroyed the “entire web of non-human connections

that sustained a certain way of life” (41). These settlers spread diseases as a bio-weapon where they wanted to erase the native population. To satisfy their mechanistic profits they did not stop at the “weaponisation of the environment”(57), in fact they did not spare women and children too though they did not pose any kind of martial threat to them.

So all the development and the progress in the Global North have their roots in the horrible past and is stained with the blood of Indigenous people. By continued years of indigenous communities’ oppression, stealing of their natural resources, inhuman exploitation and terraforming the so-called developed countries have created a faulty power structure in the world and this world order feeds on environmental crisis. Ghosh strongly opposes this view as it holds nature as an inert entity devoid of any life force. If we follow this viewpoint then the bond man shares with nature will be a forlorn thought and the thin but essential balance between human and natural world will be destroyed. To maintain this balance we need to acknowledge the life force and vitality that run in every fibre of nature. To emphasise his point, Ghosh brings in the concept of Gaia which believes in the vitality of earth and natural world where both human and non-human bond in specific ways.

The Gaia Hypothesis was named and popularised by an environmentalist and scientist James Lovelock in western academic circle. This concept is named after a Greek goddess representing the earth. This hypothesis believes that life force and origin of life are dependent on forces that are beyond the physical world. Vitalism was a new idea in the western scientific circle though it was a part of centuries old belief system of many indigenous communities across the globe including India. This has been an influencing factor in the uproars against colonialism in many countries, specially in South America, where shamans significantly revolted against colonial authorities. In 2012, a tribe in Ecuador namely Sarayakus won a legal battle against an oil company after a ninety-two-year-old shaman, Don Sabino Gualinga testified in the court that the prospectors’ explosions had driven away the spirits of the forest. Quite obviously vitalism, Gaia Hypothesis and colonialism are at odds with each other. One believes in treating nature with reverence and the other

considers earth as inert entity, suitable for the exploitation and to be used as a resource for human avarice. For Banda islanders nutmeg is a living being with soul but for Dutch it is only a profitable natural product. So, the colonisers tried their best to erase this philosophy. While criticising the colonisers Ghosh tries to keep a balanced outlook. He reveals that its only the wealthy Europeans who have such approach towards nature but poor Europeans often formed connection with the earth. On the other hand, a number of wealthy natives were similar to colonisers.

While promoting the cause of environment conservation Ghosh redefines the word war. The word war is usually attached with deaths. So, he argues that the damage by climate crisis is also a kind of war. For example, the damage on the coastal ecosystem give births to the refugees who later on get subjected to great sufferings at national borders and refugee camps. Thus, ecological security is increasingly becoming a part of national security. One of the major contribution by Ghosh in this book is to present the connection of Earth's objectification with the contemporary issues which are glaring at us today. He gives the example of replacing of coal with oil and gas by colonial powers. As it was easy to extract and transport oil and gas in comparison to coal. Furthermore, the huge number of workers involved in coal industry naturally gave rise to the radicalisation of workers and the formation of labour unions. These contemporary oil companies with colonial mind set have made people and government dependent on them for energy. For this reason these powerful companies strongly oppose the green energy as it will make common man energy independent for their everyday need. Opposite to coal and oil which one needs to buy, anyone can generate green energy by simply by having a solar panel on their roof among other sources of green energy. This energy independence of a common man can destroy the well established power structure of the contemporary world. But we need to note that many countries are promoting the renewable energy. Amitav Ghosh painstakingly tries to keep the narrative grounded in contemporary times by referring to Black Lives Matters movement, COVID-19 pandemic and its effect on the



world. He writes his narration as “On May 24th, as I was writing the above paragraph . . .” (16) for this effect.

In conclusion one can say that Ghosh in this non-fictional work attempts to trace the origins of climate crisis by reflecting on historical developments. *The Nutmeg's Curse* is a powerful synthesis that artistically weaves together the analysis of historical occurrences and applies it to contemporary times to explain today's power structure. As literature presents a viewpoint before the readers to analyse an issue, we hope that a better understanding of the past will surely help in changing the future by giving a broader perspective. *The Nutmeg's Curse* is an impassioned appeal to people to organise and support mass movements against climate change. Ghosh strongly believes that storytellers can play an important role in addressing the environmental crisis. This book can be considered a redemptive panacea to solve the planetary crisis.

## Works Cited

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