Indigenous People, Human Rights and Environmental Concerns in Amitabh Ghosh's The Nutmeg Curse, Parable for a Planet in Crisis

Rajshree Ranawat and Archna Arora

Last year, the MuteshekauShipu (Magpie River) in Quebec, Canada, long cherished by the Innu First Nations, was granted legal personhood. This case is part of a now growing trend of cases around the world, where indigenous populations are using various strategiesto protect their ancestral lands and rivers as well as preserve their cultural connections with nature. The intent of these cases, much of which stems from indigenous ideas that challenge notions of nature as inert and reimagine existing categories of legal personhood, lies at the heart of Amitav Ghosh's book—*The Nutmeg's Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis.* (Singh)

The discourse surrounding anti-colonialism is more pronounced now than at any previous time, evident in our literature and media consumption. "The Nutmeg's Curse" presents numerous instances of colonial oppression globally, illustrating how such practices established the groundwork for extractive capitalism, which has contributed to the current state of irreversible environmental harm. The narrative begins in the 17th century on the Indonesian Island of Banda, which was invaded by the Dutch due to the allure of nutmeg, a spice native only to that island. Ghosh subsequently explores the European colonization of the Americas and Asia, drawing on narratives from the past four centuries to examine how colonialism has fostered capitalism and the resultant planetary crisis we face today.

The Nutmeg's Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis has an intricate rubric of diverse concerns and interrelated concepts of early capitalist

desires for colonization, colonialism, immigration and ecological crisis. Such half- or partly disguised semiotic applications that reappear in writings at different level in writings of Amitav Ghosh.

Amitav Ghosh born in Kolkata, is one of the leading writers in English. His works are widely read across the globe. His oeuvre displays a remarkable thematic diversity and his novels and essays as well as non-fiction are enlightening and depressing at the same time. In his work *The Great Derangement : Climate Changeand Unthinkable*, Ghosh has consistently engaged with the themes of relationship between history, literature, migration, colonialism and environmental concerns. In *The Nutmerg's Curse* he continues to manifest the dynamics between colonialism, history and ecology through a nuanced and intricate context that aids readers to comprehend the current ecological crisis posed by climate change.

... Like a planet, the nutmeg is encased within a series of expanded spheres. There is, first of all, the fruit's matte-brown skin, a kind of exosphere. Then there is the pale, perfumed flesh growing denser toward the core, like a planet's outer atmosphere. And when all the flesh has been stripped away, you have in your hand a ball wrapped in what could be a stratosphere of fiery, crimson clouds: it is this fragrant outer sleeve that is known as mace. Stripping off the mace reveals yet another casing, a glossy, ridged, chocolate-colored carapace, which holds the nut inside like a protective troposphere. Only when this shell is cracked open do you have the nut in your palm, its surface clouded by matte-brown continents floating on patches of ivory. (Ghosh 10)

Amitabh Ghosh delves into the intricate themes of nutmeg and mace in his critically acclaimed 2021 novel, *The Nutmeg Curse: Parable for a Planet in Crisis*. This profound narrative scrutinizes the harsh realities of colonialism through a sharply anthropocentric and capitalistic lens. Richly layered and deeply heartbreaking, the story is anchored in the tragic events of the Banda Island massacre, vividly illustrating the ruthless brutality inflicted upon the Bandanese people by Dutch colonial forces. Ghosh masterfully shows how a once-coveted resource can transform

into a curse, shattering the lives of the very indigenous communities it was meant to benefit.

The beginning of the novel describes a gripping and harrowing episode of the notorious Dutch slaughter that took place April 21, 1621, in Selamon in the village on Lonthor, the largest island in the Banda archipelago. As tension crackles in the air, a lamp, a relic from a more peaceful time, tumbles to the floor of an indigenous building half Lt. Sascha K. and his compatriots have commandeered into a military billet. This simple but devastating moment starts a tragic story that enshrined the coming violence and loss that would change the world of the people of Banda forever.

Colonialism and Environment

Through his work, Ghosh grapples with the question of how colonialism has been a major source of economic extraction that has set the stage for environmental degradation. Blaut is correct to say the spread of colonialism can be considered the start of the 'European diffusionism' process. This resulted in a hyper-hegemonic Eurocentrism whose overbearing presence was projected onto cultures and values, denying the plurality of the world. This origin for the destruction of the Earth can be recognized through colonialism. Its process has an annoying and serious effect on earth that raises a huge question for our life. We must all be alarmed at the deleterious effects of colonialism on the environment; it is a mandate for us today to save our planet.

The Banda Island: The Banda Islands are a volcanic group of ten small volcanic islands in the Banda Sea. These islands are located on a fault line where the earth is very active. These islands and their volcano, Gunung Api (Fire Mountains), are part of the ring of fire that stretches from Chile to the Indian Ocean. Gunung Api is still active and rises above the Bandas, with its peak always covered in swirling clouds and steam. The Banda Islands were for centuries, really one of the motors of world history. In the pre-modern era many of the world's most important luxury goods came from these forests. 'Nutmeg tree', which was the incredible gift of this island, produces not only nutmeg but also

mace. Mace is the little red scrap on the outside of the nut. Ghosh has described it as a tiny planet in his book, he has beautifully portrayed the description of nutmeg. He says:

Like a planet, the nutmeg is encased within a series of expanding spheres. There is, first of all, the fruit's matte-brown skin, a kind of exosphere. Then there is the pale, perfumed flesh, growing denser toward the core, like a planet's outer atmosphere. And when all the flesh has been strippedaway, you have in your hand a ball wrapped in what could be a stratosphere of fiery, crimson clouds: it is this fragrant outer sleeve that is known as mace. Stripping off the mace reveals yet another casing, a glossy, ridged, chocolate-colored carapace, which holds the nut inside like a protective troposphere. Only when this shell is cracked open do you have the nut in your palm, its surface clouded by matte-brown continents floating on patches of ivory. (Ghosh 10)

Everyone in the seventeenth century, who was a big celebrity and traveled, made a beeline for Banda Island. The reason why everyone went to this island is because of a tree "The Nutmeg Tree", which is endemic to that region. Before the eighteenth century, every single nutmeg and every shred of mace came from these islands. Now nutmeg's are so impoverished that we don't really pay attention to them, but in late Mediaeval Europe just a handful of nutmeg was enough to buy a house or ship. At that time, those people were called rich, who had a handful of nutmeg's. These spices like nutmegs, cloves, peppers were not only valued for their culinary uses, but also valued for their medicinal properties. They were valued as they became envy-inducing symbols of luxury and wealth.

In the late Middle Ages, nutmegs became so valuable in Europe that a handful could buy a house or a ship. So astronomical was the cost of spices in this era that it is impossible to account for their value in terms of utility alone. They were, in effect, fetishes, primordial forms of the commodity; they were valued because they had become envy-inducing symbols of luxury and wealth, conforming perfectly to Adam Smith's insight that wealth is something that

is "desired, not for the material satisfactions that it brings but because it is desired by others. (Ghosh 9)

This glorious spice seeked the attention of Europeans. The great voyages of discovery started. They started their expedition to discover the land of spices and what they found was incredible. They discovered the region named Maluku (English toponym-"Moluccas"), which was the homeland of nutmeg, mace and clove.

Portuguese who were the first to arrive at Banda with the concept of trade monopoly. Bandanese welcomed the first party of the Europeans. They came there with the 68 mindset of trade monopoly on Nutmeg. They proposed a treaty granting exclusive rights to the island's nutmeg and mace. But Bandanese refused to accept that.

It was in this spirit that the Bandanese welcomed the first party of Europeans to visit their islands: a small Portuguese contingent that included Ferdinand Magellan. That was back in 1512; in the years since, the Bandanese have discovered (to their cost) that the Europeans who come to their shores, no matter of what nationality, all have the same thing in mind: a treaty granting exclusive right to the islands' nutmegs and mace. (Ghosh 12)

They (Bandanese) refused, because they already had their accustomed business partners, from shores near and far. The islanders were dependent on their neighbors for food and much else. Besides this, Bandanese themselves were skilled traders. They had strong trade relations with other merchant communities in the Indian Ocean, finding it difficult to refuse without giving anything to their friends. Furthermore, it was not an economically sensible decision, as European buyers often offered lower prices than Asian buyers. Additionally, the Bandanese like many Asians did not find European goods to be particularly attractive. In this row, after Portuguese and Spanish, Dutch came to this tiny island, after them English came. But the Dutch were the most persistent of all and what they really wanted was to gain control of the trade in nutmeg by hook or by crook. It was very difficult for them to establish a trade monopoly, because the Bandanese were not ready. They (Dutch) repeatedly sent fleets to the island with the intention of imposing treaties

on the inhabitants. The islanders resisted as much as they could, but they were only about 15,000. It was not easy to fight the world's most powerful navy. Because of this, the elders of the island were forced to sign several treaties. But secretary, they continued to trade with other merchants and they also resisted with arms, as they did in 1609, when they attacked a party of Dutchmen that included the future governorgeneral, Jan Pieterszoon Coen. After that incident, he (Jan Pieterszoon Coen) decided to wipe out all the Bandanese. "In the aftermath of that slaughter Coen has come to believe-as had some of his predecessors that die Bandaneez are incorrigible and that the Banda problem needs a final solution: the islands must be emptied of their inhabitants. Unless that is accomplished the VOC will never be able to establish a monopoly on nutmeg and mace. Once the Bandanese are gone, settlers and slaves can be brought in to create a new economy in the archipelago." (Ghosh 13-14)

To accomplish this, Coen ordered Martijn Sonck "Burn everywhere their dwellings", ruin every place, remove them from their land, catch them and do whatever they like to do with [them]. The Banda massacre followed the pattern of most early colonial "exterminations", as the technology of the time did not allow mass killings on an industrial scale. People were generally eliminated through the destruction of vital elements in the web of life that sustained them: for example, deforestation, or the mass killing of animals that were essential to their diet. On May 8, 1621, forty-four elders were mercilessly butchered, beheaded and then quartered. Almost 90% of the population were killed, enslaved the rest and the others were driven to either starvation or they died through disease or a few managed to escape. This was the first early modern "Genocide". "That Coen intended to eliminate an entire population is so clear that in 2012 two experts, writing in the Journal of Genocide Research, concluded that "the almost total annihilation of the population of the Banda Islands in 1621 [was] a clearly genocidal act committed under the direction of Governor-General Jan Pieterszoon Coen in enforcing the Dutch spice trade monopoly . . . " (Ghosh, 42). This is how the world of Indigenous people of Banda had been brought

to an end in a span of less than ten weeks. Through this incident Ghosh wants to draw our attention towards the questions: "What was the fault of those innocent people? Just because they were blessed by the "Nutmeg" tree, they had to face this brutal treatment?? For the Bandanese, It was not just the tree, it was a "Gift of Earth". For them, the nutmeg was the "Protagonist" of stories, nutmeg was the "teller" of the stories, they used to sing songs about the Nutmeg. But for Western settlers, these Western settlers regarded "Nutmeg" just as a "resource", a "revenue generating resource". Even today the people here sing songs for the nutmeg, the nutmeg is still present in their stories and in their songs. On the Malukan island of Kai, not far from Banda, there are some villages that are still inhabited today mainly by the descendants of the survivors of the 1621 massacre. The names of these villages are reminiscent of the lost homeland, and their inhabitants still speak Turwandan, the Banda language; their songs and stories even today bring to life not only the "Banda Mountain", but also its blessing (or curse), nutmeg.

"we weep and weep
when, on what day
"get on your way"
we, pearls of wisdom
the fruits of nutmeg have died
she sends a letter so we may speak
pearls of wisdom
fruits of nutmeg have died...
pearls of wisdom the nutmegs have died
there is no faith here
there is no blessing inside this island." (Ghosh 36)

The Banda Islands were destroyed by the Dutch East India Company. It was one of the earliest conquests in Asia. Dutch East India CompanyThe Banda Islands were destroyed by the Dutch East India Company. It was one of the earliest conquests in Asia. Dutch East India Company was one of the earliest forms of Capitalism. It was a joint stock, profit-oriented company. It is actually considered the basis

of the entire enterprise of capitalism. The Banda massacre was not the only incident that occurred in the past, there are many such incidents recorded in history that reflect the "anthropocentric worldview of colonizers. The Pequot War: The Pequot war was fought between the English settlers of New England and an Algonquian tribe of Pequot, which is now known as Connecticut, in 1636-1638. The conflict has been described as the first deliberately genocidal war waged by the British in North America. Banda Island was located on the other side of Connecticut, but in the seventeenth century these two places were closely connected to each other as the two farthest poles of the Dutch maritime empire. Although the Dutch played no role in the Pequot War, the site of the worst massacre—Mystic, Connecticut, was located on the border of New Netherland, the Dutch colony whose seat was at New Amsterdam on Manhattan Island; The Dutch also had extensive dealings with the Pequot, and competition over trade was one of the factors that led to conflict.

The massacre at Mystic occurred in 1637, when a company of English soldiers and their Indian allies used the cover of night to attack a fortified Pequot settlement while hundreds of people were asleep inside. The attack was directed by two English soldiers who had both served as mercenaries in the Netherlands: John Mason and John Underhill (the latter was actually born in 71 Holland and had a Dutch wife). John Mason led the attack, and it was he who had the idea of burning down the settlement, with a torch that he had seized from a Pequot dwelling. (Ghosh 24)

Two near-contemporary massacres, one in Banda and one in Connecticut, are linked with horrific continuity. Both took place in the context of the Anglo-Dutch rivalry and against the broader background of the religious wars raging in Europe at the time. In both incidents, large numbers of captives were enslaved and deported to work on nutmeg plantations, and both massacres were intended to destroy the people's existence. In the case of the Pequot, their extinction was made official by the treaty ending the war, and survivors were prohibited from using the name "Pequot". Celebrating this victory, a Puritan historian wrote:

"the name of the Pequots (as of Amalech) is blotted out from under heaven, there being not one that is, or (at least) dare to call himself a Pequot" (Ghosh 26). These incidents reflect the dark reality of European colonialism. Bio-Political Warfare: Europeans used myriad ways to exterminate Indians. They used diseases as the weapons of war. It was started in the early sixteenth century, when they used this way to exterminate indigenous people. In the language of the native american these tactics work like "invisible bullets". In some of the stories, these diseases were represented as the kinsmen and allies of the settlers. There are several such cases recorded. In 1767, it was told to a British superintendent that "Potawatomi tribes" people believe that: while returning from lake george in 1757, they lost a large number of men as the english poisoned their rum and gave them smallpox. This was the everlasting grudge they owe to Britishers. In the year 1770, The Ojibwa tribe was thugged (ducked) by some traders who represented them with a contaminated flag as a token of friendship. After this Incident an epidemic broke out. This incident remained in the Ojibwa memory for centuries. It was expressed by a medical historian in 1928. It says that; "The Indians to this day are firmly of the opinion that the smallpox was, at this time communicated through the articles presented to their brethren by the agent of the fur company at "Mackienac" (Ghosh 61). Same happened at the time of "Pontiac Rebellion", two contaminated blankets and one handkerchief were handed over to two Lenape representatives to spread smallpox among Indian tribes to exterminate them. "On June 24, 1763, in the thick of the Indian uprising known as Pontiac's Rebellion, two Lenape emissaries were in Fort Pitt, Pennsylvania, for a parlay. When it came time for them to leave they were given some parting gifts that had been issued and signed for by the fort's commanding officer. Later, a British trader called William Trent would note in his journal, "We gave them two Blankets and a Handkerchief out of the Smallpox Hospital. I hope it will have the desired effect." And so it did: an epidemic broke out in Ohio, coinciding "closely with the distribution of infected articles by individuals at Fort Pitt" (Ghosh 61). Meanwhile, the British commander Sir Jeffrey Amherst used the same tactic to eliminate the Indians. "In a memorandum sent to Col. Henry Bouquet, in Philadelphia,

he wrote: "Could it not be contrived to Send the Smallpox among those Disaffected Tribes of Indians? We must, on this occasion, Use Every Stratagem in our power to Reduce them." Bouquet answered with alacrity: "I will try to Inoculate the Indians by means of Blankets that may fall in their hands, taking care however not to get the disease myself." To this Amherst responded: "You will Do well to try to Inoculate the Indians by means of Blankets, as well as to try Every other method that can serve to Extirpate this Execrable Race" (Ghosh 61-62). Despite doing so much, Britishers considered themselves less tyrants. They claimed that they were less brutal than the Spanish, because they were not using the military forces but rather, they were using "material forces" and "natural processes" to eradicate Indigenous people. All these incidents were the early example of "Bio-Political Warfare". All these instances show how far the Europeans wanted to exterminate the Indians so that they could take over their lands. They used this tactic not only with native Americans, but also with white Americans, during the Revolutionary War. They deployed this disease in White Americans. For the westward expansion, the U.S. Army also did not lag behind in removing the Native Americans. To exterminate the "Navajo tribe", Colonel Kit Carson and the U.S Army drove them out by destroying everything, the tribe by destroying the web of life that had sustained them. An Italian-born conqueror, GiralamoBenzoni wrote a book named "History of the New World", which was published in 1565, in which he described the perception of Indigenous people about Europeans, "They say that we have come to this earth to destroy the world. They say that we 73 devour everything, we consume the earth, we redirect the rivers, we are never quiet, never at rest, but always run here and there, seeking gold and silver, never satisfied, and then we gamble with it, make war, kill each other, rob, swear, never say the truth, and have deprived them of their means of livelihood" (Ghosh 55).

Colonialism: Violence, Control and Exploitation: The Nutmeg Curse questions the sterling credentials of the muses of globalization. It opens our eyes to the paradox of having resources available to the entire world. Still, the people who are custodians of the resources are

left to live in abject poverty and squalor. As a renewable natural resource, land is necessary for shorter and more productive livelihoods and poverty alleviation through agriculture. What then could justify the land dispossession of farmers to give room for trucks to transport nutmeg and mace from the villages derived from the sweat of the brow over one and a half centuries of the Indigenous Peoples After occupying the land, Europeans began the process of "terraforming". ThThey started naming those conquered places with the adjective "New". Renaming was one of the major tools with which colonizers erased the former meaning of conquered landscapes. As they did after exterminating the Pequot. They renamed the place "New London" and the "Pequot" river as "Thames". They wanted to erase the memory of the tribe from the face of the earth by erasing its name. "In such acts of renaming, the adjective "New" comes to be invested with an extraordinary semantic and symbolic violence. Not only does it create a tabula rasa, erasing the past, but it also invests a place with meanings derived from faraway places, "our dear native country" (Ghosh 49). The use of the word "new" in maps of the Americas and Australia points to one of the most important aspects of European expansion: ecological and topographic changes. It was this aspect of European colonialism that the prominent ecological historian Alfred Crosby tried to highlight when he coined the term "Neo-Europes" to describe changes in flora, fauna, demography and landscapes of Australia and the Americas (and also of islands such as Canaries and New Zealand). Ecological intervention was at its peak during the time of colonialism. These invaders considered the lands to be barren, wild, uncultivated, and vacant, as those lands were neither plowed nor divided into estates, and so the Native Americans had no right to claim the land. "It was by planting, and creating "plantations," that the settlers claimed the land. The right to terra-form was thus an essential part of settler identity; their claim of ownership was founded on the notion that they were "improving" the land by making it productive in ways that were recognizable as such by Europeans" (Ghosh 63). But this was not true. The land was neither unproductive nor wild. Differences existed in the perception of the Europeans. To Native Americans, the earth was bountiful with everything they needed. Their

environment, open fields, beautiful undulating hills, winding streams were no less 74 than a boon for them. These were white settlers who considered nature to be a wilderness, filled with wild animals and savage people. "For many settlers, the environment of New England was, in the words of an early colonial leader and minister, "a hideous & desolate wilderness, full of wild beasts & wild men." Subduing this wild land meant changing it ecologically, and remaking it in the image of Europe, which was then itself undergoing the most extensive terrestrial transformations in its history." Settlers began cutting down trees, establishing permanent settlements, and erecting fences. These ecological interventions began to affect the lives of Native Americans. In this disruption, domestic animals of the settlers like cows and pigs played an important role. Cows and pigs needed pastures and fences, which led to the conversion of forests to farmland. In the early days, settlers were unable to meet the needs of their livestock. So they allowed their animals to roam freely, the result being disastrous for the Natives. Cows and pigs wandered everywhere, destroying native cornfields and trampling cultivated lands. Domestic animals played an important role in the conflicts between settlers and Indians, and this conflict continues to this day.

Conflicts over cattle have remained to this day a constant feature of the terraforming of the Americas. One of the main reasons why the deforestation of the Amazon is still accelerating is that settlers and giant agribusiness corporations are pushing to expand cattle farming in Brazil. Now, as in seventeenth-century New England, this requires large-scale deforestation and the creation of pasturage; now, as then, this entails the destruction of Indigenous life-worlds. (Ghosh 67)

Deforestation is the major component in entailing the current planetary crisis. Scientists have been warning for years that the Amazon rainforest is nearing a catastrophic tipping point. Rainforests maintain their own climate; Its greenery produces 20-30% of the rainfall on which the ecosystem depends. After a certain point, the loss of greenery will trigger a series of feedback loops that will destroy the Amazon Basin's ability

to regenerate and sustain itself: it will then turn into degraded savanna and bushlands. "Once there is more dry area," says Thomas Lovejoy, an ecologist who has studied the Amazon for decades, "you get more fire and it begins to be cumulative. The fallout of such a transition, from rainforest to degraded bushland, would be catastrophic for the entire planet, because the Amazon, which has long been one of the world's most important

The Nutmeg's Curse is not a linear narrative, it follows a parabolic structure. Landscapes play a vital role in this book. This book is trying to tell what unfolded on the land. How a resource became a curse for the Bandanese. As shown through the Banda incident. These Bandanese were the earliest victim of a scourge that now threatens to engulf the entire planet which is the "Resource Curse". This book reflects the Anthropocentric world view of the colonizers and the Ecocentric worldview of the Indigenous people. Jayati Talapatra in Capitalism and Colonialism very rightly points out the fact that, "While we know that Colonialism, Capitalism and Climate Change are undeniable connected, we sometimes miss the connection between the first two. What the conquerors started centuries back, trying to erase all that wasn't a replica of themselves, continue today in the form of 'aping' the food and habits of the self-declared modern countries. And You and I continue to lose a bit of ourselves and the relationship with the planet and its beings, every time we scramble to conform.". The Nutmeg Curse raises critical issues like is the right of the Indigenous Peoples to assert their rights and liberties and be part of decision-making, such that when a third party makes decisions about their lives and properties, their participation and consent are obtained. Much like the Banda community, most indigenous communities worshipped natural bounties and nonhuman entities as 'makers of history as well as tellers of stories' (Ghosh 32). "Parables" do not have narrative complexity; they have morals. The title alerts us to what Ghosh admitted in The Great Derangement: that realist fiction and climate activism make bedfellows difficult. Our grand author is amid fervent experimentation with the most appropriate form for his urgent messages: extending his own earlier novel, *The Hungry Tide* (Ghosh), to the unstable terrain of *Gun Island* (Ghosh); writing a *Jungle Nama* in English to emulate the folk poetry of the Sundarbans (Ghosh); and now, luring us to seventeenth-century Banda only to withhold from us the pleasures of narrative consumption while educating us, instead, about our planet in crisis. We are all guilty of wanting more of a good thing, and this desire lies at the heart of our shared darkness: capitalist modernity.

In the opening chapter of his seminal work *Environmentalism:* A *Global History*, Ramchandra Guha presents a compelling argument for viewing environmentalism as an all-encompassing social movement. He articulates a vision that frames environmentalism not merely as an abstract concept, but as an urgent call to action aimed at protecting precious natural ecosystems. Guha emphasizes the crucial need to actively resist the forces that threaten to degrade these environments, highlighting the importance of advocating for sustainable technologies and lifestyles that minimize harm to the planet. His perspective champions a proactive and engaged approach to environmental challenges, underlining the imperative to safeguard our earth not only for the present moment but also for the well-being of future generations.

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