

Indigenous People and Ecology: Reflections upon Amitav Ghosh's *The Nutmeg's Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis*

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Narratives related to Indigenous people have always offered new paradigms of thinking about the times of yore with different and altered vision. The contours of their portrayal in literature offer and create new versions of reality. The untold stories about Indigenous' struggles and survival have breathed in fresh waves of cultural identity, facets of colonialism, aspects of globalization, and impacts of industrialisation and most significantly the human-nature relationship.

Also the representation of indigenous people address the interpretations related to Mother-Earth, natural resource preservation, conservation of non-human forms of life. Representation of the concerns related to Indigenous people's life contributes as well as challenge the worldwide ideological interactions. This in turn influences the world of literature, as in the formation and literary explorations of postcolonial studies, indigenous literatures, environmental literature, green humanities, world literature, and eco-criticism etcetera.

The aforesaid perspectives are aptly addressed in the well-known historical fictions of the famous Indian writing in English diaspora author Amitav Ghosh. His well-researched fictions and non-fictions intertwine fact and fiction echoing the interlaced angles of globalization, colonialism, history, present day world and the generations.

To understand Geo Centrist, Naturalism and Collectivism one realizes the Trinity of: God, Nature and Indigenous people. The songs, rituals, culture and traditions of the Indigenous communities give prominent place to nature as their spiritual deity. In their life ecology plays an

important role. In the same wake human and non-human forms have forever found significant place in literature. Ecological perception of Mother-Nature is the integral part of Indigenous people and literature.

The culture and ways of life have been reflected in Indigenous literature with an alternative version of reality. For them the sun, the moon, the flora and fauna are their Gods. The word 'Indigenous' comes from the Latin word *indigena*, which means "sprung from the land, native". The word describes people, animals and plants living and growing in the place where they are from originally. And thus they worship Nature and its bounties.

The internationally acclaimed author Amitav Ghosh presents in his well-researched book *The Nutmeg's Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis* the untouched, unnoticed and unheard voices of the Indigenous people of Banda Island communities. His creative works have constantly voiced the struggles of Indigenous people who remained vulnerable to the colonial invasions and the impacts of climate change too. May it be the Morichjhanpi Massacre, Opium War or the Burmese War his narratives have always presented the unsung glories of the 'other' people creating the altered versions of history.

The grave issues of displacement, massacres and ecological crisis are truthfully captured in Ghosh's book *The Nutmeg's Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis*, for the contemporary and future generations. It explores the Banda Islands (Indonesia) massacre by the then Dutch East India Company in 17th century.

Through the pages of the book the author critiques – the hegemony of the so called developed races (European Colonialists) and at the same time the contemporary crisis of ecology, climate crisis, the displacement and the 'Exhaustion' of the so called inferior races. The details given in 19 chapters of the book, the events related to the non-human forms of this land and the unkind massacre based on Eurocentric monopoly and materialistic attitude situate the indigenous people amidst the trajectory of Geo-Centrism, Naturalism and Collectivism.

In contrast to the colonial structures who eyed on the precious spice – ‘mace’ found on Banda islands as a product to achieve capital gain and expand its power structure upon the so called lesser human races, the indigenous societies value Nature and its products as spiritual, as God’s disguised blessing (boon). As Europeans follow, “No war without trade, no trade without war” (42) the blessing became a curse for the native communities living in and around Banda Islands. For the selfish motives the Europeans annihilated the societies and the villages of Banda islands and the nearby areas like Lanthor. Many were killed; many were made slaves, and others were indentured.

The parables given in the book are like an alarm for the world. It emphasizes on the fact that how the traditional knowledge and occupations of indigenous people play a unique role in the conservation of climatic and ecological aspects. In spite of the struggles, hardships and blood-bath invasions how the parables of Banda community of Indonesia highlight the need of the hour to foster ecological conservation and protection of our Mother-Earth in contemporary times is the focus of the book.

The Nutmeg’s Curse seems to be an analogy for the present and future generations. Amitav Ghosh gives a glimpse of the various communities of Banda Islands who use to live in harmony with Nature. The narrative analyzes the struggle for survival of the indigenous people inhabiting in the Banda Islands connecting with the indigenous people living in any part of the world. The Eco-fascism and the destruction of the climate depicting the realities of the lives of indigenous people is being showcased in Ghosh’s narrative.

- Is Nature a commodity?
- Is Nature subdued and inert?
- Is Nature, a brute?
- Is an Indigenous, a brute?
- Should an Indigenous be extinct?
- Is the way of living of an Indigenous, savage?

The above mentioned questions signify Ghosh's referring to John Lovelock's Gaia Hypothesis. The vitality of Mother-Earth is visible in both forms- bounteous and revengeful. It gives us water, land, flora, fauna, rivers, mountains etc. Due to unmindful and selfish motifs the over extraction activities of man have given way to volcano eruptions, natural disasters, earthquakes, pandemics and what not. Such truth refers that Earth is the central force, Earth is Vital.

The parables in the narrative are a clear clarion to the contemporary and future generations that misuse of natural resources, attitude of land grabbing, deforestation, un-mindful mining etcetra have disturbed the ecology and topology of our areas in past as well as in present too. As Ghosh avers in Chapter 06 "Bonds of Earth" "Exhaustion is a metaphor that occurs often in science fiction stories about terra forming. Swarms of aliens go off to conquer another planet because their own is "exhausted". It is the same presumption that impels billionaires to plan the conquest of Mars, now that the Earth is "Exhausted" (76-77).

At such juncture, *The Nutmeg's Curse* irks the extraction process of the mechanistic and materialistic minds of the modern man. The author has presented a truthful account of western colonialism in three forms-capitalism, racism and climate crisis. Simultaneously the world is already facing the ill effects of climate change. He refers to the global Pandemics. And the Black Lives Matters protests delineate the racial apartheid in past by the colonialists and in present days by the so called elite class of the society.

Nutmeg's Curse speaks about the Indigenous genocide and the terra-forming of the pristine land and water. The book encapsulates the obliteration of an entire race and its way of living. Ghosh poignantly convey the tragic nature of the massacres in the islands of Ternate and Tidore. The Banda Islands massacre stands amidst the trajectory of Geo-Centrism and Naturalism. The book emphasizes the hard hitting truth that how the lives, traditional knowledge and occupations of Indigenous people are decimated in the garb of global development and how the selfish practices of the so called 'Haves' severely affect the Planet's climatic and ecological conservation.

The very remote Banda Islands faced Genocide due to the 17th century Western Imperialism. Every single nutmeg and every shred of mace-the spice came from the Banda islands. In spite of the struggles, hardships and blood bath invasions the parables of Banda community of Indonesia highlight the need of the hour to foster ecological conservation and protection of our Mother-Nature in contemporary times.

The Nutmeg's Curse gives a glimpse of the pristine life of the various communities of Banda Islands who use to live in harmony with Nature. The book reflects the Banda islands' massacre by the then Dutch East India Company. The struggles for survival of the indigenous people inhabiting in the Banda Islands connect the indigenous peoples living in any part of the world.

The narrative of the spice nutmeg becomes a parable for our environment crisis, revealing the ways human history has always been entangled with earthly materials such as spices, tea, opium, fossil fuels etc. In the contemporary times, the big questions are still unanswered about whom the parables of the book are a faithful account, alarming us about the crisis of:

- Neo-Colonial Domination
- Eco-Fascism
- Climate Change
- Carbon Emissions
- Super Technical Debates
- Will these answer the Banda Islands massacre or the present day climate crisis? Remain BIGG questions open-ended and to be churned out into strong governmental policies and rules in favor of the 'Have-Nots' as pointed out by Ghosh in "a politics of vitality"(p.19) where the relationship between nature and human beings is not one of ownership but of harmony and co-existence. .

The consciousness of indigenous people is revealed through the parables that how intimately they are connected with the land and its products. It is exactly these natural connections which got ruptured by European colonialism and capitalism. Ecological transformation became a very

important part of colonialism. ‘Terra forming’ was a very important aspect of the colonization of the ‘New World’ (Makery.info)

To cite here Chapter 4 of the book, clearly reveals the eco-exploitative, mechanistic and inhumane treatment of the European colonization upon the natives of Moluccas. Ghosh does this with reference to colonial terra forming in the context of America. The terra forming not only compresses the territories of the natives but also it was intermeshed with the process of ‘slow violence’ of destroying human lives and property. Such intermeshing is evident in the events of butchery, malnutrition; stress and starvation that colonisers unleash while terra forming the virgin soil of America to suit European greed and need. The author supports the portrayal of hazardous terra forming with references of 18th century biological warfare to show how colonizers used disease as ‘invisible bullets’ against Native Americans. He also exemplifies that how the colonizers seeded small pox into the geo-territory around the harbor, causing terrible suffering and devastation in the process (61).

In chapter 09, Ghosh avers that the choke points for oil and gas transportation happen to be ‘exact locations that European colonial powers fought over when the Indian Ocean’s most important commodities were cloves, nutmeg and pepper (108).

Chapter 08 and 09 mirror the English word ‘power’ in dual sense. Combining the idea of energy, “as in force of nature”, with “power” as in a relation between humans, an authority, a structure of domination”. Colonialism, genocide and structured violence were the foundations of industrial modernity. Chapters 11 to 15 raise and reflect the alarming facts of climate change. The description about greenhouse gas, military use of energy, no statistics, really affected people like farmers, fishermen, migrants etc. are matters of grave concern which the book presents as stark reality of past, present and future. Chapter 16 remarks brilliantly Davi Kopenawa’s view on literacy. Wonderfully penned down by the author that “written words on paper are lifeless and have no function and enables human only to think of their own world and being oblivious to other things” (205).

The young writer from Jharkhand, Jacinta Kereketta imparts voice to the unheard pain and angst of indigenous people as Ghosh does. Her well written poems outline the capitalist attitude of politicians, the so called leaders in the name of development, She questions that why any city or urban area is not being evacuated in the name of development. Why always it is the land of an indigenous being grabbed in the name of progress.

Similarly the select narrative *Nutmeg's Curse* pin points the systematic marginalization and oppression of indigenous peoples. It points out the fact that the over use of Fossil Fuels establish the encroachment process. The book faithfully points out that the eco exploitation enhance the climate crisis in the light of military invasions, petro-dollars etc. Thus the colonial genocides and “bio-political wars” indicate that are we repeating the histories of encroachments? One can observe that the principle of solidarity cannot exist in reality in the contemporary world which is evident in present time wars between Russia and Ukraine and Israel and Palestine.

The environmental activists like Medha Patkar, Greta Thunberg, Hidme Markam should pay the price of saving the Mother Earth, behind the bars? Should the so-called bhu-mafias, be allowed to encroach the lands more and more? Pope Francis sums up when he says, “A true ecological approach always becomes a social approach; it must integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment, so as to hear both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor” (49). The real owners of ‘Jal, Jangle and Jameen’ are the indigenous communities because they do not live on the concept of surplus. For them, Nature is their Spiritual companion to be respected and taken care of.

Thus through the eyes of Indigenous Communities all over the Planet, one may realize, that indigenous methods from around the world that offer ways of learning and living with the environment is understanding the Naturalism and Geo-centrism. The conferences, discussions, keynotes etc. may not remain ornamental. The endeavor must be to RESPECT the Indigenous people's life style and culture and natural methods in saving ecosystem and fostering the bio-diversity at the same

time. They are the MAIN from where the STREAM of Naturalism and Geo-centrism flows. The book is an extraordinary takeaway for the contemporary and future times as reflected in the concluding lines given below:

“We have no time for remorse. This is a global issue and it depends on all of us. We invite you to come into the struggles to reforest the Amazon, and to reforest your hearts and minds, because more than the forest, what has been deforested is us as human beings. There is nothing better for this than the difficult period we are in, where we have nowhere else to go. where if we continue in this way the planet will be destroyed” (Eunice Kerexu, an Indigenous representative speaking at the Flourishing Diversity Series, Brazil, Sept.2019).

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