

Colonization, Anthropocene and the Planetary Crisis: A Reading of Amitav Ghosh's *The Nutmeg's Curse*

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The Nutmeg's Curse: Parables for A Planet in Crisis (2021) explores how European colonization and capitalism shaped the ecological perception of the Banda archipelago. The central notion of *The Nutmeg's Curse* posits that the present-day dynamics of climate change can be traced back to a long-established geopolitical system forged through Western colonialism. To Ghosh, this is a distinctive mode of warfare, fundamentally conflictual and uncanny, often marked by brutality and barbarism. The contrasting attitudes and practices towards the land by the natives and the colonizer ultimately led to significant environmental and cultural impacts. The planet is currently gripped by the intensity and complexity of the anthropogenic activities. *The Nutmeg's Curse* serves as a transformative parable that offers hope, inspiration, and practical guidance for addressing the planetary crisis.

Key words: Anthropocene, climate change, colonization, planetary crisis, ecology

The onset of the twentieth century witnessed the advent of a new geological epoch, characterized by the transformative emergence of humans as a formidable geological entity with the capacity to shape and mold the biosphere. The planetary changes associated with the

Anthropocene have led to disruptions in ecosystems, extinction of species, alteration of natural processes, and changes in the composition of the atmosphere, oceans, and soils. The assessments of the Anthropocene incorporate both the physical changes occurring in Earth's systems and the social and cultural dimensions that contribute to and are impacted by these changes. Brondizio et al. remark: "Anthropocene concept requires the full inclusion of the analysis of the economic, demographic, ecological, political, symbolic, and cultural aspects of globally interconnected societies" (Brondizio, 2016, p. 319). This approach recognizes the value of different knowledge domains and emphasizes the need to integrate various disciplines to gain a more holistic understanding of the crisis. "That is why, in our time, understanding and responding to the Anthropocene must be at the top of the socialist agenda" (Angus, 2015, p. 13). By placing the Anthropocene at the forefront of the socialist agenda, Ian Angus, a Canadian eco-socialist, and activist advocates for an approach that integrates environmental concerns with social justice and equality.

Amitav Ghosh the much-celebrated storyteller and the winner of the 2018 Jnanpith award through his acclaimed nonfiction, *The Nutmeg's Curse: Parables for A Planet in Crisis* (2021) explores how European colonization and capitalism shaped the ecological perception of the Banda archipelago filled with nutmeg trees. The central notion of *The Nutmeg's Curse* posits that the present-day dynamics of climate change can be traced back to a long-established geopolitical system forged through Western colonialism. By probing into the historical events of the Banda Islands, Ghosh grippingly highlights the profound impact of conquest and geopolitical dominance on the formation of capitalist history. The historical, military, and geopolitical dominance of the West enabled it to wield influence over a substantial segment of the world's population, impacting diverse aspects of their existence, such as their physical well-being, work, ideologies, and surroundings.

Ghosh contends that the expansion of European colonialism during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries laid the foundation for a metaphysical framework, which has ultimately contributed to the contemporary global crisis of climate change. The Banda Archipelago

at this time was home to a profusion of nutmeg trees, a pricey spice that was popular in European markets. Colonial agendas, driven by a desire to secure lucrative trading monopolies, initially appear to be rooted in non-violent intentions. However, the actual execution of these agendas invariably leads to violence, as evidenced by the profound devastation inflicted upon the Bandanese community. The Dutch enslaved, silenced, and stripped of the history, myths, and language of the natives in their attempt to subjugate and exploit them. Simultaneously the ethnic beliefs, visions, and the foundational philosophy that viewed resources as revered were erased from the Earth while the new colonial modernity affected ecological and topographical transformations. “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 country” (Ghosh, 2021, p. 49). To modify the colonized territory, colonization often gives it new meanings and implications that are disconnected from its original cultural and historical context. As a result, colonization entails more than merely destroying the past. Lovbrand et al. observe “in the Anthropocene, nature is domesticated, technologized, and capitalized to the extent that it can no longer be considered natural” (Lovbrand, 2015, p. 213). Heather Davis and Etienne Turpin in *Art in Anthropocene* observe: “There is no shock that could be greater than that of realizing the scope and scale of the human transformation of the world” (Davis, 2015, p. 21). These alterations are of such magnitude that they propose a paradigm shift in our terminology for the present era.

The Nutmeg’s Curse boldly challenges conventional notions of modernity by presenting it as a relentless, multi-century campaign of deliberate destruction, referred to as omnicide, targeting not only human lives but also the sacred spirits inhabiting the earth, rivers, trees, and even the seemingly inconspicuous nutmeg. This granted a self-justified license to the European colonizers to eradicate the lives of both non-human beings and humans, whom they viewed as primitive and brute. Ghosh observes that colonization involved more than just the subjugation of human beings; it also involved the silencing and subduing of a diverse range of entities that were once believed to possess agency, communication abilities, and the capacity for

significance—such as animals, trees, volcanoes, and nutmegs. In effect, the efforts of the European conquerors to silence a sizable segment of humanity are inextricably linked to their efforts to subdue nature. Consequently, the muteness of nature and the muteness of brutes mirror one another, symbolizing their shared state of silence. The colonizer views them as “resources” which can be used, exploited, subjugated, and treated as mere commodities. The Indian Philosopher, Akeel Bilgrami notices that as far as a resource is concerned, “we first need to see it as brute, as something that makes no normative demands of practical and moral engagement with us” (Bilgrami, 2014, p. 152). The colonizer thus views the resources as a brute and justifies the exploitation by believing that natural laws operate outside human agency.

To Ghosh, this is a distinctive mode of warfare, fundamentally conflictual and uncanny, often marked by brutality and barbarism. The combination of material forces and structural violence proved to be more effective than direct military action in displacing native inhabitants from their homelands. Expelling the untamed animals and transforming fertile farmland into desolate expanses disrupts the livelihood of the villagers. “The moment the endless noises of European Industrial activity are heard in any place, the animals begin to flee... Then these doomed people are seen roaming like hungry wolves through their deserted forests” (Tocqueville, 2003, p.379). This method of warfare resulted in substantial alterations in the environment as fertile farmlands were transformed into desolate wastelands- rivers, plants, forests, and animals had their due role in the struggle often marked by callousness and ferociousness.

The dissemination of contagious diseases like smallpox served as “invisible bullets” exacerbating the significant devastation and decimation experienced by indigenous populations. Yet the weapon of smallpox was advantageous to the colonizer. Elizabeth Ann Fenn, the Pulitzer Prize-winning American historian notes, “Unlike rape, pillage, and other atrocities in which the intent and identity of the perpetrator could be made clear, the propagation of smallpox had the advantage of deniability” (Fenn, 2000, p. 1579). Though vulnerability to diseases played a significant share, various forms of structural violence, such

as excessive labor in mines, frequent acts of violence, malnutrition, and starvation caused by the disruption of Indigenous trade networks, subsistence food production, and land loss, expedited the process of evacuation.

The contrasting attitudes and practices towards the land by the natives and the colonizer ultimately led to significant environmental and cultural impacts in the regions where settlers and indigenous populations interacted. The American anthropologist, Peter Nabokov recalls that during his youthful years, the country possessed a remarkable beauty. Along the riverbanks, there existed stretches of timberland adorned with diverse trees such as cottonwood, maple, elm, ash, hickory, and walnut, among numerous others. But in the wake of profound transformations, the once-vibrant landscape has been irrevocably altered, leaving behind a somber and uninhabited terrain. Nabokov reflects, “But now the face of all the land is changed and sad. The living creatures are gone... I feel as though I should suffocate from the pressure of this awful feeling of loneliness” (Nabokov, 1978, p. 232).

Maluku, an enchanting mountain island adorned with lush forests and sparkling blue waters located within the Banda archipelago was a notable hub of spices in the seventeenth century. Like numerous other areas, it also fell under Dutch colonization. However, later as the production of nutmeg increased and European culinary preferences shifted from spicy to milder flavors or even to blandness, the colonizers’ perception of nutmeg, *Myristica fragrans* Houtt, as a commodity resource lost its significance. Within a short period, the nutmeg and clove trees on Banda Island were subjected to a “resource curse”. The Dutch Governor, Ternate, issued an order to eradicate and destroy all these trees, deeming them incapable of generating further profits. Ghosh observes, “Indeed, this worldview goes much farther than either ecocide or genocide: it envisions and welcomes the prospect of “omnicide,” the extermination of everything- people, animals, and the plant itself” (Ghosh, 2021, p. 82). The long-lasting impacts of perceiving the planet as inert and solely a resource for human exploitation have been profound. “The nutmeg’s travel and its strange career perfectly

illustrate the loss of meaning that is produced by the vision of world-as-resource” (Ghosh, 2021, p. 76).

The eradication of indigenous understanding and Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) had far-reaching consequences. TEK, rooted in the Gaia hypothesis developed by James Lovelock, recognized the presence of spirit in all matter. This elevated identification with the place seeing it as a sacred territory investing it with myths and meaning “emplaced spirit forms, maintaining a watchful presence and exerting a powerful influence over their original territory” (Winn, 2002, p. 278). It embraced the belief that earthly entities, such as forests and volcanoes, possess qualities that transcend human perception. By dismissing and eroding this knowledge, we lose a deeper understanding of the interconnectedness and inherent value of the natural world leading to pollution, climate change, and habitat loss.

Climate change has transitioned from a future threat to a present reality, leading to a significant phenomenon known as climate migration. In the new era of the Anthropocene, climate migration has accelerated notably over the past three decades. Humanity finds itself at a crucial turning point, where the familiar is being disrupted, and the significance of existence is often taken for granted. To navigate these disruptive environments and achieve balance, new methods, and approaches are needed to disseminate this knowledge of balancing to one’s surroundings. Christophe Bonneuil and Jean Batiste Fressoz examine in *The Shock of Anthropocene*: “The contemporary moment is not one of a new awareness...We have not suddenly passed from unawareness to awareness; we have not recently emerged from a modernist frenzy to enter an age of precaution” (Bonneuil, 2016, p.179).

The impact of climate change on habitats, livelihoods, and the availability of resources has forced communities to relocate in search of safer and more sustainable living conditions. This unprecedented movement of people reflects the urgent need to address and mitigate the effects of climate change on vulnerable populations. Lovbrand et al. observe “in the Anthropocene, nature is domesticated, technologized, and capitalized to the extent that it can no longer be considered natural” (Lovbrand, 2015, p. 213). The last three decades

have witnessed an ever-increasing acceleration that has resulted in a range of interconnected effects, including climate change, mass dislocations, pollution, environmental degradation, political breakdown, and the Covid-19 pandemic. These phenomena are cognate, meaning they are intrinsically linked and have emerged as consequences of this rapid acceleration. “Not only are these crises interlinked- they are all deeply rooted in history, and they are ultimately driven by the dynamics of global power.” (Ghosh, 2021, p.158). As Anthropocene does not guide us in environmental choices, we have to arrive at conclusions from our experiences of travel and exposure to the environment. Bonneuil and Fressoz recognize the presence of Anthropocene as a condition we need to get accustomed to. They elucidate, “We have therefore to learn to survive, that is, to leave the Earth habitable and resilient. But surviving is not enough. To continue to thrive as communities, individuals, and citizens, we all must strive for change” (Bonneuil, 2016, p.178).

At the heart of the planetary crisis lie fundamental questions concerning the identification of those perceived as brute or fully human, the determination of who constructs meaning, and the exclusion of those who do not. The planet is currently gripped by the intensity and complexity of this issue. “It is a crisis that is all-pervasive and omnipresent, in which geopolitics; capitalism; climate change; and racial, ethnic, and religious divides interlock, each amplifying and accelerating the other.”(Ghosh, 2021, p. 222). The Anthropocene world is real and is already here, and can no longer rely solely on the narcissistic belief that unlimited progress offered by techno-science or geoengineering can be achieved through various means of action. Climate changes, hurricanes, pandemics, and the greening of the snow patches of Antarctica remind us that remediating the existing social spaces using cultural/social artifacts can get rid of fear and prepare us to confront any impending disaster. In this context, the political theorist, William E. Connolly, urges scholars and intellectuals to reorient themselves to engage with the world critically and respectfully. Connolly explains: “It is now time to modify old extrapolations of possibility and desirability” (Connolly, 2011, p. 150). The world is living in Anthropocene and the future the world has to live coping with it if at

all humans exist as a species. According to Ramachandra Guha, the genuine ecological approach is inherently social, incorporating considerations of justice that are capable of acknowledging the voices of both Nature and marginalized communities as they are intrinsically connected.

Ghosh emphasizes the significance of empathy in fostering understanding and harmony among individuals, advocating for storytelling as the most effective means to achieve this goal. He exhorts, “It is empathy that makes it possible for humans to understand each other’s stories: this is why storytelling needs to be at the core of a global politics of vitality” (Ghosh, 2021, p. 240). This requires the development of a unified language and a collective narrative that highlights the importance of humility, emphasizing the interdependence not just between humans but all other forms of life. Our future depends on restoring the nonhuman voices to our narrative in the face of inexorable apocalyptic violence.

Ghosh, by examining the historical roots of the crisis, including the Eurocentric worldview that prioritized human dominance over nature, encourages readers to question and challenge these deeply ingrained beliefs. He highlights how this perspective has led to exploitative practices, ecological degradation, and social inequality. *The Nutmeg’s Curse* emphasizes the need for collective action and global cooperation. Ghosh emphasizes the interconnectedness of nations and ecosystems, urging us to recognize our shared responsibility and work together to find constructive solutions. He invites us to reconsider our values, priorities, and economic systems, suggesting that a more sustainable and equitable future is within reach.

In essence, *The Nutmeg’s Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis* serves as a transformative parable that offers hope, inspiration, and practical guidance for addressing the planetary crisis. It encourages us to embrace a new narrative of humility, interconnectedness, and mutual dependence, fostering a deep sense of responsibility for the well-being of our planet and all its inhabitants. Through his storytelling, Ghosh challenges the prevailing narratives and calls for a fundamental shift in our relationship with the planet.

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