



BOOK REVIEW

Re-reading the Tales of Colonisation: An Ecological Perspective

**Amitav Ghosh (2021). *The Nutmeg's Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis*.
University of Chicago Press.**

Swapna Gopinath

Symbiosis Institute of Media and Communication, Pune, India

When a writer narrates the tale of human society and their journey into modernity in its totality, it will be ridden with instances of violent erasure along with moments of resistance and tales of survival. Amitav Ghosh's elaborately researched work, *The Nutmeg's Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis*, published in 2021, during the times of the pandemic, traces this journey of humankind, in a fascinating manner, into the Age of the Anthropocene.

The Nutmeg's Curse begins with the description of a monument in Ternate, Indonesia, which has the sculpture of a clove. This "acknowledgement of the role of botanical products" (p. 112) in the memory and history of geographical regions around Indian Ocean becomes a symbol of the violence, the genocide, of the stories of extermination that define the acts of colonization. Beginning with the story of the nutmeg, Ghosh compels us to revisit the history of exploitation of natural resources to an earlier age when European travellers began their exploration of the Global South. In the age of decolonizing knowledge, Ghosh' work is a timely one since it traces the history of colonization through the erasure of indigenous population and indigenous knowledge.

The work, though non-fiction, reads like a prose narrative, the story telling often providing the reader a pleasurable reading experience, all the while reminding the reader of the history of human progress, the story of acts of Othering in the march towards civilization. The author of this work on human society and its intricate relationship with nature, Amitav Ghosh hails from India, and writes both fiction and non-fiction. As a novelist, he enthralls the reader with tales from South Asia, and as a writer of non-fiction, he writes about the ecological concerns of his times. His latest work titled *The Nutmeg's Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis* analyzes the impact of Western normative structures, that are embedded in the values of modernity, on the globe. It is informative as well as imaginative, thereby providing a pleasurable

yet thought provoking reading experience. *Nutmeg's Curse* is a tale of the hegemonic human agency seeking control over nature, where violence, aggression, greed and the desire for power define the trajectory of colonialism, capitalism and Western modernity. The text dismantles the once-revered discourses of modernization and “myth-making of modernity” (p. 19) through his story of the nutmeg. As Ghosh says: “Humanity is being so closely entangled with the products of the Earth that the past cannot be remembered without them” (p. 91). Amitav Ghosh weaves his narrative around the structural violence of colonization by foregrounding the tale of the nutmeg, that acts as a trope symbolizing the vicious trajectory of capitalism over centuries, which was once a priceless spice, “a fetish, primordial forms of the commodity” (p. 9) and later, as it lost its value as a commodity, nutmeg trees were cut down, making it costlier by reducing the supply in the market.

Climate change, according to Ghosh, is a multidimensional threat to the planet and its geopolitical dimension cannot be ignored. Genocides, refugee migrations, erasing cultures and communities and above all, the systemic violence that validates the destruction of the planet—remain significant milestones in their journey towards civilization and modernity.

Nutmeg's Curse tells a melancholic story, recounted in a poignant fashion, liberally interspersed with quotes from memoirs, testimonies and narratives of travelers, giving the work credibility yet maintaining its narrative quality. Ghosh's earlier work of non-fiction, on the Age of the Anthropocene, titled *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (2016) was about the agency of nature and non-human species and the canonical literary texts from the Global North that failed to envision such perspectives. But his later work, *Nutmeg's Curse* attempts a more comprehensive analysis of climate change, discusses the historical contexts in which geological changes have been happening over time, and proceeds to explain its contemporaneity as a global phenomenon of immense magnitude. The text invites the reader to reimagine the place of the human on the planet by re-reading modernity's fundamental normative structures and decolonizing histories from the West. He cites from Sir Francis Bacon to Lord Tennyson and to the latest texts on human social experiences and their interactions with the natural world, to clarify his position on modernity. Ghosh further cites the “intensely chauvinistic nature of English literature” (p. 44) that perpetrates the myth of civilizing the native “barbarian”.

Furthering his arguments on human centrality and ecological interventions, Ghosh uses the concept of “terra-forming” (p. 53) to explain “biopolitical conflicts” through five centuries from the spice wars to the latest social movements involving climate activist Greta Thunberg (p. 55). He explains this process further: “Where Bolsonaro is right is that a large part of Brazil has so far escaped the fate of the interior of North America: it has not yet been terraformed into a neo-Europe like, say, the American Midwest. But this is exactly what Bolsonaro's government intends to change; the goal is to complete the project of colonial terraforming by replacing vast swathes of the rain forest with cattle ranches, mines, and soya and sugarcane monocultures” (p. 213).

Ghosh perceives history and politics as not merely human engagements with territories and populace, but they are seen enmeshed in environmental factors, and cites examples from the Americas. Colonization was not only about occupying

and owning territories but also about emerging as forces of irreversible change in the ecology of the land as well, ranging from the introduction of domestic animals to construction of dams. It was consolidated by a “belief in human exceptionalism” (p. 81), resulting in the misconception of an inert planet. He speaks of the “process of subjugating, and reducing to muteness, an entire universe of beings that was once thought of as having agency, powers of communication, and the ability to make meaning—animals, trees, volcanoes, nutmegs” (p. 190). The book goes on to successfully incorporate the concept of a “living earth—Gaia” (p. 84), adopted from James Lovelock’s Gaia hypothesis, along with the concept of vitalism as an antidote to the rationale of modernity that normalizes human interventions and the abusive, exploitative character of human-nature encounters.

Ghosh explains the multiple dimensions of this planetary crisis, resulting from the destruction of the environment, by looking beyond the economic determinants and attempts to pinpoint the reason for the significance of fossil fuels even in the new millennium. He explains the manner in which these forces “reinforce structures of power” (p. 102), and, therefore, this energy transition can also lead to paradigm shifts in geopolitical dynamics. With largescale acceptance of renewable energy sources, Ghosh envisages a power shift from the West. Another dimension to the planetary crisis is the humanitarian issue of climate refugees. Ghosh, like a storyteller that he is, begins this discussion from a survivor’s tale and leads the reader towards the systemic violence that seeks to erase the oppressed and othered class from the collective memory of the populace. Ghosh elucidates it further with the example of the pandemic thereby breaking the illusion that economic backwardness aggravates a crisis that is related to the natural world. It is inequity of all forms that worsens the condition of life forms, and it is concern not only for the marginalized sections of society, but for the whole planet. He identifies normative discourses around the “valorization of personal pursuits” and the glorification of the “ideology of morbid individualism” in contemporary societies, that is present in literature and other cultural artefacts and philosophies, as contributing significantly to this mindset that results in turning “crises into tragedies” (p. 177).

Ghosh concludes his work around the concept of ecofascism that is prominent in the West, where ecological movements are suspiciously viewed even by the lesser privileged. He finds “vitalist ideas and politics” (p. 233) waning in importance even in a country like India with its spiritual tradition and pantheistic practices. Yet he is optimistic, and believes that “global connectivity” will help build collectives who will participate, perform and gather “to find a common idiom and shared story” (p. 242).

The Nutmeg’s Curse is exceptional for its display of Ghosh’ scholarship. Extensive notes and bibliography that is a significant part of the text reveals the research that has gone into the work, which is truly interdisciplinary in nature. The work at times falters in building an argument, sometimes it rambles around several ideas, yet it keeps the reader mesmerized in the reading experience. Ghosh succeeds in moving through time, from the ancient past to the present, and his scholarship which leads the reader through the ideas from around the world keeps us captivated. Being a storyteller, Ghosh successfully presents facts in the format of stories, the human and the world in the text, appealing to the empathetic reader, thereby ensuring that the work is a critique of the Anthropocene.