

Online Peer-reviewed  
Multidisciplinary Journal

**December 2023**  
**Volume- 1, Issue- 1**



Netaji Satabarshiki Mahavidyalaya, Ashoknagar,  
North 24 Parganas, West Bengal- 743223



## Review: The Nutmeg's Curse: Parables for A Planet in Crisis by Amitav Ghosh, India, Penguin Random House India, 2021, 5+ 339 pp., index. ₹ 599 (hardback), ISBN 9780670095629

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Amitav Ghosh is one of the foremost authors of the contemporary period to address the issue of ecological crises and climate change in both his fictions and non-fictions. A social anthropologist by training, he brings into his writing well researched data and amalgamates it with fiction, often taking cues from history, to achieve an effortless fusion. The title of the non-fiction under consideration is intriguing and suggestive in various ways. The reader immediately understands that Ghosh will speak about the crisis of the natural environment in an anecdotal way. The word “curse” portends something ominous which will unfold through “the nutmeg.” It is imbued with life and thus broadly suggests the living environment. In his work, Ghosh traces the origin of ecological devastation and climate change. He goes back to 15th century, the onset of European settler colonialism and imperialism to show how man, divorced from nature, considered it inert and a field of resources to be plundered as if man is a separate entity and not a part of nature. Ghosh opens the book with the massacre of the indigenous people of the Banda islands in Indonesia by the Dutch East India Company with the objective of plundering their natural resource, the nutmeg which was extremely valuable during those times. By turning that vegetation into plantation through “terraforming,” the price of the much-coveted nutmeg, the nucleus of all brutalities, came down. This emphasizes the fact that improper dwelling and forceful encroachment of nature by deranged humans meet with utter failure of any objective and ultimately decimate the natural order jeopardizing the existence of humans on earth. This is an argument which Ghosh suggested in his previous non-fiction, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*. (2016) Rather than focusing on carbon emissions, global warming, rising sea levels etc. Ghosh wants us to delve deeper and see the pollution of the human mind especially the Western way of thinking which considers the planet lifeless, full of unused space and the way of living of the indigenous people as savage. The White Man considered himself superior and the “White Man's burden” was to civilize the rest of the world. Such a notion of European superiority was supported by poets and philosophers such as Tennyson, Bacon and Galton. The way of civilizing was “a way of extermination” as stated by the commander in chief of the Dutch East India Company, General Coen, “No war without trade, no trade without war.” (Ghosh 23) In chapters 4 and 5, like a travel narrative of exploitation and brutality, Ghosh shifts focus on how an entire race of Native Americans was almost obliterated and their ways of life and even surroundings were changed. Written in the context of Covid 19, Ghosh recounts in the manner of storytelling how the diseases, unbeknownst to the indigenous community living in harmony with pristine nature, were spread. Viruses of smallpox were transmitted among Native Americans who had neither immunity nor knowledge to treat the disease. This, along with arms,

was used to kill them as they did not know how to 'use' nature and were hindering 'modernity.' Continuing the narrative of settler colonialism, Ghosh also emphasizes the link between the intensification of climate change and maintaining present geopolitical structures of power and consequently neo-colonialism. He says that fossil fuels feed the edifice of power and violence such as the petrodollar regime (any country must pay in US dollars for purchasing oil and no other currency is accepted). This perhaps answers the reason why emphasis on effectively using unconventional sources of energy is not laid. Ghosh traces how neo-colonialism is not an abrupt eruption but a historically sustained effort to monopolize environmental regions and turn them into anthropocentric theatres of power. Ghosh claims that the choke points for oil and gas transportation are the "exact locations that European colonial powers fought over when the Indian Ocean's most important commodities were cloves, nutmeg, and pepper" (Ghosh 108). This area stands as the main region of world's economic activity as "its sea lanes carry one third of the world's bulk cargo, fifty percent of the world's container traffic, and 70% of crude and oil products." (Ghosh 113). However, these details never feature in global climate negotiations. However, the 'West' vs 'the other' divide has further ramifications. The onus of ecological devastation also rests with the elites especially the "urban elites." (Ghosh 38) of Asia, Africa and South America. This argument invariably leads us to address the question of inequity. The West is not a homogenous society and there is inequality in terms of race, class, gender and economic stability. Secondly, the deification of the West to the extent that the other parts of the world are being measured in relation to it accentuates the legitimization of colonial domination. In countries like India, Brazil etc. there is terrible inequity in terms of income and standard of living and thus a disparity in consumption of fossil fuels. The issue of growing militarisation and the consumption of fossil fuels is discussed in chapters 9 and 10. The Western colonial endeavour called for an increasing military power not only to expand colonies but also to control certain strategic points so that the trade monopoly of the West of fossil fuels can be maintained. Ghosh refers to World War II to show how the biggest military powers of the West have been the largest consumers of polluting fossil fuels and producers of hazardous waste. There is a cyclical nature of Western hegemony where they consume polluting fossil fuels to ensure dominance along with regulating the same. In chapter 7, Ghosh also focuses on the monopoly of knowledge when it comes to the context of climate crisis. Ghosh says that Climate change has become a highly specialized form of knowledge located within the Western institutions. The voices of the victims of climate change are never considered. Though science and technology are needed to address the issue of climate crisis, this knowledge ought to be fortified by indigenous knowledge and be aimed towards decreasing inequity instead of accelerating capitalism of knowledge. The anthropocentric arrogance of hyper technical aspect of scientism based on calculative reasoning must be given up.

Amitav Ghosh also speaks about the politics of 'vitalism' in *The Nutmeg's Curse: Parables for A Planet In Crisis*. It is the belief that environment is animated with life and agency. The Banda Islands are shown to have been sitting upon "one of the fault lines where the Earth shows itself to be most palpably alive" (Ghosh 7). The active volcano Gunung Api makes the soil fertile and especially fecund for the vegetation of the coveted Nutmeg. On the cover of the book under consideration, the picture of volcanic eruption at the backdrop of a picture of greenery and a placid lake, reinforces the idea of the vitality of nature which is capable of both destroying and creating anew. The Bandanese were not afraid of this wrathful grace of nature but considered it a blessing as they were aware of nature's innate nurturing ability. Ghosh depicts how the trees of the island were not wanderers but on the other hand "Nutmegs and mace, on the other hand, were tireless travellers." (Ghosh 8). He animates the non-human with life which evokes a form of animism. Ghosh describes the nutmeg as a microcosm of the planet. He says that the nutmeg is "like a planet, the nutmeg is encased within a series of expanding spheres." (Ghosh 10) and in this manner of description evokes a sense of agency. This nutmeg became a resource curse for the Bandanese and the consequent anthropocentric misdeeds wrote a history of environmental decimation having devastating effects of planetary proportions. "Humanity is being so closely entangled with the products of the Earth that the past cannot be remembered without them." (Ghosh 91) We are compelled to rethink our belief that "resources or commodities" such as the nutmeg "have no world or history making powers of their own." (Ghosh 91) Ghosh takes eco-

consciousness to a mystic level when he introduces James Lovelock's idea of the 'Gaia Hypothesis' in chapter 7. The Greek goddess of Earth or the mother of all beings is not a religious belief but a metaphor of science. All the natural objects are related to each other and dynamic. If anything in this tenderly balanced harmony collapses, the whole is bound to collapse just like mathematician and meteorologist Edward Lorenz espoused in his 'Butterfly Effect.' There is a fusion of poet's imagination and scientist's reasoning, and the latter is never discarded for the former. In chapter 15, Ghosh picks up this argument where he challenges the idea of "brute" nature and the indigenous living in association with it as "brutish." (Ghosh 187). This idea is not only exclusive to European settler colonialism but applies to the Indian context as well. In chapter 17, he discusses the persecution and marginalization of Dalits and Adivasis as well. Amitav Ghosh's *The Nutmeg's Curse: Parables for A Planet In Crisis* delves deeper into history of imperialism and capitalism and also looks at neo-colonialism to grapple with the issue of ecological crisis in a compelling narrative style which weaves together science, myth, history and culture. It calls for a collective response especially from artists, authors, filmmakers, and communicators. "It is essential now, as the prospect of planetary catastrophe comes ever closer, that those nonhuman voices be restored to our stories." (Ghosh 257). This evocative text voicing an urgent call to address the planetary crisis of climate catastrophe calls for an urgent reading.