

Inextricability of Colonialism, Imperialism, Racism, Modernity, Climate Crisis, and Climate Migration Since the Seventeenth Century to the Present Day in Amitav Ghosh's *The Nutmeg's Curse: Parable for a Planet in Crisis*

Sahabuddin Ahamed

PhD Research Scholar

Department of English and Foreign Language
Guru Ghasidas Vishwavidyalaya (Central University)
C.G., India

Abstract

This essay critically analyses the processes of Western colonization's conquest, exploitation, and accumulation of both humans and nature and the resultant planetary climate crisis events that happened in the past and are happening at present around the world represented by some parallel narratives in Amitav Ghosh's work of non-fiction, *The Nutmeg's Curse: Parable for a Planet in Crisis* (2021). It explores how colonization and its brutality is implemented through the dominant Eurocentric ideology, the legitimacy of colonial domination over indigenous people and environmental exploitation, and through the pursuit of materialistic life, leading to the planetary crisis. It aims at unfolding the power of the natural forces and the motives behind the elimination of indigenous people and their culture, and the causes of climate crisis. The paper also explores how Ghosh attempts to arouse an eco-consciousness in the readers and offer the ways to protect the planet. The postcolonial ecological approach is used in the paper.

Keywords: Colonialism, nutmeg, Banda islands, climate crisis, migration, uncanny

Introduction

After visiting the Banda islands in 2016, Amitav Ghosh began to write this non-fiction work amidst coronavirus in 2020. He lived in Brooklyn amid Covid-19 pandemic. When New York was hard-hit by corona pandemic, he perceived the need to write this book to reveal the certain visible aspect of planetary climate crisis when the whole world was battling the coronavirus. He found that it is the power of the invisible nonhuman entity that intervenes in our everyday lives and transform the meaning of our dominant worldview, reality and everyday happenings. To him the story of the seventeenth century Banda islands is relevant to the present crisis during Covid 19 coronavirus. He searched internet and archive and found some pdf data, beginning to read and later writing this work. He searched seventeenth century Dutch words and their modern meanings and translations. He began to write after reading Van der Chrijs' source twenty-first century. The narrative goes back to the seventeenth century. He relates the fate of the Bandanese people to the fate of the people of the present world. Writing against the backdrop of the Covid pandemic and the Black Lives

Matter protest, Ghosh raises concerns how European colonial invaders annihilated not only indigenous communities, but also their views of the natural world. Settler colonial invasion and violence continues to the present day by viewing nature as an inanimate object to be used and exploited and indigenous populations as savages – how developing countries try to colonize them through the imposition of settler colonial ideology. By weaving diverse historical events and stories and connecting them with European colonization, Ghosh seems to draw a parallel between the fate of Banda islanders (now in Indonesia) who suffered exploitation, extermination, and European colonial violence and the fate of today's peoples from around the world who experience exploitation and inequality under the guise of dominant ideologies grounded on the past colonial ideals.

The structure of the book follows: onset-setting; middle-references, and ending-only 1 chapter as a conclusion. Chapter 1 to 3 is set in the Banda islands; chapter 4 to 18 works as a reference, link, connection, similarity, and resemblance to the Banda island stories, the past and the present phenomenon revolving around colonialism, planetary crisis; chapter 5 focuses on impacts of European colonial projects on Native Americans way of life and nature; US history of European colonialism in US. The narrative extends from the early seventeenth century to the present day-1621 to the present. Throughout the book different narrative techniques are used including metaphors, allusion, non-chronology, testimony, polemic, analogy, parallel story, parables, the past, the present, myth, history, science, religion, ethics, culture, environment, beliefs, animism, planetary climate crisis, ecosystem, uncanny, coincidence, pantheism, vitalism, and human and non-human coexistence.

Discussion

In his non-fiction work Ghosh illustrates the role of non-human presence in human life. He shows the way how the fate of humans depends on nature for their survival. Humans are completely dependent on energy that comes from nature-coal, oil and natural gas. At the centre of his narrative, non-human forces play an essential role in shaping human civilization, materialistic way of life and the bonds between humans and nonhuman entity. There is an interconnection of various earth systems for the balance of ecology. Trees can communicate. They live years more than humans. Human body consists of natural elements, bacteria. There is always a human and non-human interaction and fusion of reasons and facts and science and myth. In common beliefs, humans are able to communicate, make meaning through language, and has ability in shaping narratives but nonhumans cannot. Ghosh seems to destabilize this notion. He is concerned with how non-humans narrative stories and forms are suppressed and erased by the dominant human imaginative life and narratives. Ghosh's appeal is to restore non-human voices in literature, culture, and art.

Ghosh's work offers a critique of anthropocentric, mechanistic attitude towards nature as it views nature as an inert entity and a repository of resource for humans to be exploited, accumulated, and consumed. This colonialist assumption towards the natural world is not only followed by Europeans but also by non-Europeans in the South-East Asia and other regions for the pursuit of wealth and power. This dominant philosophy caused the 1621 genocide of the people of the Banda islands by the Dutch colonial soldiers as it views both indigenous people and nature as savage, inert, and resources to be exploited, subjugated and profited from for their own greed and material wealth. In this way, the relationship between the indigenous populations and natural world is disrupted and destroyed. It is because of binary opposition created in the colonizers' dominant ideology to legitimate colonization of

distant territories and peoples and to maintain a cultural difference in terms of dichotomy such as civilized/savage, human/nature, 'us'/'them, and 'self'/'other' that oppose animism and vitalism. To describe the major reasons of environmental exploitation and the resultant planetary climate crisis, Ghosh takes a particular story of the massacre of the people of the Banda islands under the Dutch colonialism and frames a parallel between the Dutch colonization of the Banda islands and the British colonization of North America and other parts of the world.

The nutmeg tree has been an object of colonial desire that is closely associated with profit, greed, conquest, exploitation, and accumulation of both humans and natural world. The story of the nutmeg has been a parable for the planetary climate crisis, unveiling the ways of how centuries-old human civilization, history, and culture are entangled with discoveries of new territories, new sea routes, spices and other materials and with new geopolitical order through the process of colonization. Europeans came to the Banda islands that produced the nutmeg which reached other parts of the world like China long before Europe because the spice became valuable in Europe for its culinary and medicinal use and economic value. Ghosh demonstrates that how the Europeans colonial and imperial powers-Dutch, Spanish, Portuguese and later British came to the Banda islands for nutmeg and mace in the seventeenth century. They exploited land, natural resources, and human labour for their greed and profit. Nutmeg, mace, clove and other spices helped discover new sea routes and connect trading networks across the Indian Ocean since the fifteenth century. The spice trade led to the contest among European races for exploiting natural resources and indigenous people equally and building their empires. Portuguese established their empires across the Indian Ocean in the mid sixteenth century. Like Portuguese, the Dutch did the same in the seventeenth century. Like them the British came and did the same things. Similarly, the US establishes colonies in today's world through the strategy of neo-colonization.

In medias res, Ghosh's book opens with the story of the colonization of the village Selamon, in the Banda archipelago, by the Dutch East India Company. In 1621, Martijn Sonck, the Dutchmen colonial official orders a violent attack on the native peoples due to the falling of a lamp on the night which he considers an ominous event from the side of the islanders to destroy him and his soldiers. To the European colonizers, this incident denotes a connection between witchcraft and devil that need extermination for the purpose of political and epistemic order. This consolidates the process of colonization by first stigmatizing the natives tribes as witches and by then eliminating them from their native homelands. Metaphors of witches and witch trail signify torture of native population, and exploitation and destruction of natural resources. The colonizers don't recognize nature as protagonists. They fear and fail to perceive the hidden forces of the Banda Island and it's vitality. Although the Bandanese make several treaties and negotiations with the Dutch Company, Sonck and his men perceive the incident to be the cause of the legitimacy of the annihilation of them from the island. In the course of the narrative, the anti-colonial resistance of the Bandanese to the colonists continues and later is completely suppressed by the Dutch Governor-General, Jan Coen. Dutch imperial soldiers burn down the entire villages, rob of their lands, execute the elders, enslave the captive inhabitants and deport them to other places. Some of the defeated Bandanese survive and run to the mountain island of Maluku. By massacring the islanders and occupying the islands, he establishes a colonial trade monopoly on nutmeg and mace. In this way, he creates a new capitalistic economy by bringing colonial settlers and slaves from others parts of the world in the islands.

The process of Western colonization is executed through the laws of “liberal interventionism” that justifies the absolute right to extinguish certain groups or tribe and invade nations that are thought as pagan and savage, elaborated in Francis Bacon’s *An Advertisement Touching an Holy War*, “written around the time of the Banda massacre” (Ghosh 26). Similar assumption is made by Alfred Lord Tennyson in his poem *In Memoriam* that praises man as “the herald of a higher race” who would “move forward, working out the best/And let the ape and tiger die” (Ghosh 79). The poem celebrates a belief in human exceptionalism and in non-human inertness. For Ghosh this philosophy works as the driving force behind the justification of wars and empire to the present world. European colonial vision is exposed in the words of Jan Coen: “No war without trade, no trade without war” (Ghosh 115).

Ghosh argues that the seed of planetary climate crisis lies in the exploitation, extraction, and consumption of the earth and the extermination, alienation, and dehumanization of the indigenous peoples through the process of European colonization and modernity. In an interview he unfolds the root-cause of climate change that threatens the planet today:

“Because for two centuries, European colonists tore across the world, viewing nature and land as something inert to be conquered and consumed without limits and the indigenous people as savages whose knowledge of nature was worthless and who needed to be erased. It was this settler colonial worldview – of just accumulate, accumulate, consume, consume – that has got us where we are now.” (“Amitav Ghosh: European”)

Ghosh describes that for the Bandanese, the landscapes of the Bandas are more than the meaning of ordinary living and are “not land but Land,” as they live idyllic lives and their existence is enmeshed with the features of the natural world that affect every aspect of their everyday lives and ways of thinking – leading to human and non-human coexistence in a balanced way. In this context, the islands become “the unique entity that is the combined living spirit of plants, animals, water, humans, histories, and events” (Ghosh 36). In contrast, both the traditional Banda and the modern gaze see the nutmeg as an object of trade and commerce. For the colonists, the nutmeg and the landscapes of the islands have no meaning and are seen as brute and inert resources to be conquered and exploited for their “profit and material wealth as ends” (Ghosh 36). By subjugating and subduing humans as savages and non-human being as an inert entity, colonists suppress the indigenous worlds and their ways of thinking about the mother earth as a “living organism, animated by many kinds of unseen forces” (Ghosh 37). From the perspective of white man’s burden, the Dutch colonists deserve the right to destroy the intrinsic connection between the natural world and the indigenous peoples. This hegemonic ideology of the Dutch is closely associated with conquest, trade, commerce, and power. By weaving the story of the Bandas in a macro level, Ghosh seems to demonstrate the broader aspect of the effects of European colonization on the natural world and the mechanistic, exploitative, and destructive European attitudes towards the natural world and indigenous peoples and their beliefs.

The European colonial vision is entangled with racism with the aid of science, capitalism, and technology. The European colonialists perceive indigenous peoples and non-human beings as savages, feminine, savage, brute, primitive, and inert objects. On the basis of absolute difference between human and nature and Western and non-Western, they

supporters of the idea of extermination of the indigenous peoples and the exploitation of the earth. This colonial vision of conquest and domination works through a racist ideology in terms of binary opposition: white/black, educated/brute, noble/savage, human/nature, and culture/nature. For instance, in Shakespeare's play *The Tempest*, Caliban, despite being a native islander, becomes savage and slave to the European colonizer, Prospero who rules over the island of Caliban's mother, Sycorax. Caliban's nature is seen as brutishness, earth, and animal. Similarly, in Joseph Conrad's novel, *The Heart of Darkness*, native Africans are rendered as savages and colonized others, enslaved and suppressed by European colonialism and racism. In this context, nature and indigenous peoples are treated as mute and brute objects to conquest, decimate, and enslave by the European colonisers, thereby leading to ecological consequences.

Like nutmeg and mace in the Banda archipelago, clove is also valuable that attracts the European colonizers in the Malukan archipelago. Nutmeg, mace, clove, and other spices become a "resource curse" in terms of material value. European colonial powers build their empires of trade, commerce, and colonies across the world for these spices. Nutmeg and clove not only become commodity but also the driving forces behind power and war as there emerges rivalries among European spice races who try to conquer, subjugate, extract, and destroy distant territories, natural resources, and native populations. To depict the brutality of the Dutch colonialism in the Bandas, Ghosh makes similar references to European colonialism in North America for three hundred years and in other parts of the world.

Throughout the book Ghosh draws parallels between the Dutch colonialism in the Banda islands and the British colonialism in the US and the Banda massacre of 1621 and Connecticut massacre of 1636-1638. The fate of the Bandas is linked to New Netherland. John Mason is responsible for the massacre of the Pequot in Connecticut, Jan Coen in the Banda islands, John Underhill in West America, and Mr. Kurtz in Congo, Africa. In *Heart of Darkness*, Mr Kurtz is a colonial official who leads a life of solitude and depravation for suppressing and killing the African natives in the Congo basin. Like the Bandanese, the native Americans were being subjugated, exterminated, exploited, and enslaved under the British colonialism. Ghosh unfolds the ways how colonies are renamed after conquest by Europeans colonial settlers and how they make borders that result in the disruption of "the intricate connections between various earth systems" and the "ecological and topographic transformation" – leading to planetary crisis (Ghosh 52).

The project of terraforming in the Bandas is shaped by the European conquerors who view the landscape of the islands as a repository of resource and a subdued object. It is responsible for the environmental degradation, elimination of indigenous people, extinction of species, animals, and plants, toxic pollutions, rapid changing in the environment, and collapse of ecosystem done through the processes of colonization, capitalist economy, and modernity. VOC's vision of capitalistic economy in the Banda islands brings about the destruction of old pastoral world and traditional indigenous economy. The same happens in the US due to the British colonialism.

Ghosh is deeply concerned that European colonization lets native indigenous populations decline. For instance, European colonial settlers are responsible for spreading small pox and cowpox to be a biological warfare to eliminate the native Americans in the eighteenth century. To tame and suppress the anti-colonial struggles of the indigenous peoples, Spanish and English colonists introduce the project of terraforming as an ideology of

imposing their way of life and belief onto the earth and the natives. Ghosh finds a close link to the present-day conditions of the indigenous people in the US as they receive poor medical care and inadequate nutrition. He also raises concerns how the process of Portuguese colonization causes destruction and degradation of the landscapes of Amazon and how Brazil copies the same colonial policy to destroy the Amazon forest, animals, and the indigenous populations. Amazon's current vulnerable conditions resemble the previously subjugated and subdued conditions caused by a centuries old project of European colonialism.

The narrative of the book shifts to the myth of Gaia, a living earth, a vital entity. James Lovelock popularized "the Gaia hypothesis," named after "Gaia, the Greek Goddess of the Earth" (Ghosh 85). The hypothesis stresses the idea of vitalism that natural objects and non-human forces not merely inanimate but innate and that have powers and are capable of producing meanings and interactions. Like the Bandanese, native Americans live a life of animism and vitalism as their indigenous beliefs in the earth and all the beings as an animate entity whether they are seen or unseen. Their close connections to the earth are overshadowed and destroyed by the European colonizers for their profit and material wealth from natural resources like nutmegs, maces and cloves.

Ghosh explains that in recent years, the unprecedented climate change becomes a serious threat to numerous ecosystems and human civilization. The world is endangered by environmental disasters such as floods, wildfires, tornadoes, droughts, and hurricanes resulting from the project of the Western terraforming in the forms of colonization, economic capitalism, empires, and industrial modernity as these hold the belief that the planet is an inert entity that exists merely as resources to be extracted and exploited. He asserts that climatic changes in utterly uncanny ways are nothing but the planet's responses to the project of centuries-old terraforming in its neoliberal, Eurocentric, and anthropocentric guise that is adopted by both the Western colonists and the ruling elites in the East.

Ghosh describes the stories of economic migrants who undertake dangerous journeys to the Global North. The emergence of the present-day migrant crisis in Europe is due to climate change. Millions of people are displaced by climate-related disasters such as cyclones and flooding. Both human and non-human lives in the Sundarbans are heavily affected by cyclones, sea level rise, and salinity in fresh water and fertile soil. Consequently, there emerges the terrible damages to the dense mangrove forests, embankment and cultivated soil and the resultant homelessness and climate migration of people. The environmental impacts lead to the external and internal migration of people, who leave their homeland in search of opportunity and betterment in life in a foreign land. Most of the economic migrants in Italy are Bangladeshis who come to there because of climate change along with poverty, corruption, inequality, joblessness, family feud, political violence, and local conflict. In Parma, Italy, Ghosh meets Bengali refugees who confess their experience of perilous journeys, sufferings in the connection house and at borders. Khokon, one of the oppressed refugees in Italy, comes from the Kishoreganj district, Bangladesh as he is displaced from his homeland due to "heavy rains" and flooding. He recounts his life story of how a dalal helps him to get to Italy, how he suffers in detention, and how he crosses difficult processes to reach there. It is the Internet and new communication technology that connect him with human traffickers who arrange his migration like others from the Sundarban. Migrants borrow money to pay dalals who promise to send them abroad—the Global North. They are unwilling to tell their difficult journeys and miserable conditions to others. Along with their nightmare journeys, they go through torture, beatings, and enslavement in the slave camps.

They use the common migration routes including Egypt, Libya, Turkey, and Greece around the Mediterranean Sea to enter Europe. In recent years, the so-called European migrant crisis occurs due to the unprecedented emergence of climate migrants from the Middle East, South-East Asia, Africa, and other parts of the world. They cross the Mediterranean in blue boats to seek opportunity and better live style in Italy. Climate migrants in the rickety boats often drown while crossing the Mediterranean, heading towards Italy. While living in the host lands, they confront anti-immigration sentiment, inequity, hierarchy, and racism. Even the news of migrant's death is unnoticed in the international press. By taking climate migration to Europe, Ghosh seems to unfold the numerous uncanny events that are taking place in different parts of the world at the same time and the environmental degradation of the Banda islands is linked to the contemporary planetary. He demonstrates the impacts of climate change on the planet resulting from the anthropocentric belief and capitalist economy under the guise of modernity in terms of consumption and exploitation of natural world and indigenous people alike.

The warnings of the climate scientists regarding the ecological consequences are ignored by both governments or non-government organizations. Climate scientists often receive hostile attitudes from them. Human activities causing ecological disasters are obscured.

Throughout the book Ghosh argues that industrial and capitalist modernity are being made through the processes of colonization, massacre, organized racism and violence, and domination. Capitalist modernity emerges as a system through colonial conquest, mass enslavement, extermination, and exploitation of native peoples and the earth. There is a relationship between slave labour and commodities, slavery and capitalist economy. In the Banda islands, VOC and Coen establish capitalist economy by adopting new technologies, slave labour, agricultural land, and capital on a large-scale for profit.

Ghosh relates the Western colonial projects and interests regarding the stories of nutmeg and clove in the Banda Islands to the present-day oil, fossil fuel, and petroleum – leading to global conflicts, geopolitical strategy, and power dynamic and the resultant global climate change detailed in the book comparatively. He shows the importance of fossilized energy as the shortage of oil causes defeats to the Axis power in the world wars. The US domination and hegemony is executed through its energy policy and petrodollar system. The same past colonial fetish is alive in the US foreign policy. For Ghosh, fossil fuel plays a major role in disrupting global ecosystem, planetary crisis, climate change, inequity, and hierarchy. The US military depends on fossil fuels. It consumed 1.3 billion gallons of oil annually for the Iraq-US war in the Middle East. Ghosh uses parallels between the past and the present: commodity, trade, commerce, geopolitics, and power. Like conflicts among Europeans over trade and colonies in the past, at present the Asian countries are involved in conflicts across the Indian Ocean for oil, trade and geopolitical strategy. Like nutmeg and clove, fossil fuel becomes material aspects that attract the colonizers for profit and prosperity through the strategies of war, violence, power, and exploitation. Ghosh illustrates that the principal reason of the global climate change is human activity in various forms, such as dominant military power and warfare that depend on fossil fuels and they support the systems of exploitation, extraction, consumption, and production.

Conclusion

Thus, throughout his work, Ghosh draws an inescapable link with fate of the Bandanese and the fate of today's people from around the world. His storytelling plays an important role in reframing European colonialism and planetary climate crisis and the providing solution to the problems. He points to a hope for energy transition for less carbon intensive economy and renewable energy systems for the survival of the planet. He calls for the world to pay attention to the climate crisis and the hidden forces of nature-nature's vitality. He critiques the paradox of science and technology, exploitation and profit models of the colonial invaders that the ruling elites of the developing countries follow, and he reveals our failure and struggling to control the power of hidden natural forces in the planetary climatic events. Through powerful storytelling, he challenges the way the of the dominant, mechanistic view of the natural world as brute and passive and draws attention to the value of non-human beings and the indigenous beliefs alike. He proposes a solution that non-human voices need to be restored in art and literature and there is a need on interact with the mother earth as a living being. There is a need to have empathy with indigenous peoples and rouse about the planetary crisis. There is a sense of urgency to recognize non-human voices and public consciousness a need to respect, listen to, understand, and communicate to them. This work provides the ways of challenging colonialist assumptions, viewing nature as a vital force of meaning and agency that shape human life and history and looking at the survival of both human life and nature. As in the final lines of the book, Ghosh puts his argument about the potential change of prevalent Eurocentric and anthropocentric worldview that dominate and exploit humans and the earth equally and the need of mass movement to change the minds of people and save the world: "the fate of humans, and all our relatives, depend on" the earth, the nonhuman voices (257).

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