

Exploring the Genesis of Climate Change in Amitav Ghosh's *The Nutmeg's Curse*

Dr Yash Pal Singh

Associate Professor

Department of English

Dyal Singh College

University of Delhi

Delhi, India

yashpalsingh.english@dsc.du.ac.in

Abstract

Amitav Ghosh's nonfiction work, *The Nutmeg's Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis* (2021) offers a compelling account of the genesis of climate change by portraying an undeniable picture of horrific events that led to the mass massacre of tribes, causing irreversible destruction of pristine environments and habitats. The devastating effects of brutality and extractive capitalism of colonial powers lie at the core of today's climate crisis. The war and compromise among various colonial powers to gain control and hegemony over indigenous people of Banda Island in Indonesia to monopolise the trade of nutmeg and mace spice, and bloodshed in the colonies in America during the Seventeenth century showcase that the practice of colonialism is inherently bestial and dehumanising. The chapter also focuses on how the European colonists' rapaciousness disqualifies them from their self-proclaimed claims of being enlightened, civilised, and saviours. The theoretical frameworks of Ecocriticism and Postcolonialism are employed to analyse the book and surface the injustices inflicted on the environment and the natives.

Keywords: Genesis, colonialism Capitalism Brutality, Hegemony, Massacre

Amitav Ghosh is one of the celebrated authors of English literature with a notable contribution to the best literary works in the world. His literary productions deal with a range of issues related to the themes of politics, colonialism, capitalism, partition, fundamentalism, anthropology, environmental, and climate concerns. His early works were well acclaimed for engaging readers with issues that emerged post-Partition, such as communal violence, migration, cultural conflict, and identity. However, in recent times, his attention has shifted from the themes he previously addressed to the pressing and much-needed issue of the climate crisis. Ghosh argues that the phenomena of desertification, flash floods, melting of glaciers, wildfires, and many other notorious and horrendous natural calamities are not merely automatic but are the result of human intervention. He establishes the connection between climate change and environmental degradation, and to substantiate his proposition, he visited areas around the world that had been decimated by colonial powers to extract precious and rare resources endemic to those regions. These small and partially isolated islands, with their unique biodiversity, had been subjected to the worst exploitation by the Western colonial powers. The primary material gathered through observations, interactions, and document analysis during his visits to these regions was industriously analysed, and finally, the work emerged as a compelling polemic, *The Nutmeg's Curse*, establishing an undeniably strong connection between colonialism and the onset of climate change. *Nutmeg's Curse* (2021) is a remarkable non-fiction work by Amitav Ghosh, which draws attention towards the issue of the Climate crisis after the publication of *The Great Derangement* (2016).

The book was written at a time when the lab-made coronavirus forced the world into lockdown, and the author to deeply reflect upon human-made calamities caused by something invisible yet mighty. It foregrounds that the root of the entire crisis lies in the process of European colonialism, which vigorously began after the voyages of European explorers and travellers like Christopher Columbus and Vasco da Gama in the later part of the Fifteenth

century. Renaissance learning enabled Europe to break spiritual and geographical boundaries and explore far-off lands, as in the case of Banda Island, which will be discussed in this chapter. The pressure of increasing population, and the desire to access valuable resources and treasures, forced the European states to engage in trade in preliminary stage with some regions in Asia and Africa for their rich biodiversity. The small island areas in these continents were largely inhabited by culturally diverse tribes with their own value systems. They were gradually manipulated, their resources eventually seized and dominated. In contrast, regions with rulers and emperors were initially brought into trade deals, but later, these rulers were also slyly divested of their powers through the establishment of Western hegemony and control. The traditional methods and weapons of warfare could not withstand the modernized weaponry of the colonial plunderers for long. Ania Loomba, in her book *Colonialism-Postcolonialism*, says:

“Colonialism was not an identical process in the different parts of the world, but in every part, it locked the original inhabitants and the newcomers into the most complex and traumatic relationships in human history.” (Loomba 08)

Amitav Ghosh, like a revisionist historian, debunks the myth of the Enlightenment and the narrative of progress that was created and glorified by the Eighteenth and Nineteenth century European philosophers and scholars. The Eurocentric texts’ positioning of the Whites as synonymous with knowledge, advancement, and progress is refuted by him through a systematic analysis of documents, exposing the bestiality and plunder of resources in the colonies. The Anthropocene narratives propagated by the West hold all humans, irrespective of their positionality, responsible for environmental degradation. Amitav considers it a tactical attempt to divert the attention from the individual nations’ wrongdoings. Amitav views the European scientific formulation of the concept of Anthropocene as seriously flawed, limited, shallow, and based on prejudiced conjectures. This idea deliberately overlooks the bitter reality of the ruthless exploitation of resources during colonisation and industrialisation. Gautam

Karmakar, in his article ‘Cognitive (In)justice and Decoloniality in Amitav Ghosh’s *The Nutmeg’s Curse*’, foregrounds that

“Eurocentric modernity endorses the homogenization and essentialization of ‘others’—all those who are deemed as irrational and uncultured, and therefore suppressible. In this context, Ghosh’s *The Nutmeg’s Curse* is significant because it pinpoints the ramifications of Eurocentric progress informed by totalizing versions of Western modernity. The narrative goes back to the early days of European encroachments in different parts of the world and delineates how the indigenous masses, ecology and resources of the colonies have been commodified under the facade of progress.” (p. 120)

Ghosh’s *Nutmeg’s Curse* narrates the history of nutmeg and mace spice, which is endemic to the region of the Banda Islands in Indonesia. This archipelago has many active volcanoes, and one of them is Gunung Api (five mountains) in the Maluku region. The volcanic eruption offers a “mixture of alchemical materials that interact with the wind and weather in such a way as to create a forest that teems with wonder and rarity.” The uniqueness of the nutmeg and mace of Banda is the gift of these volcanic eruptions. The indigenous people carefully used and traded the surplus amount with the outside world for thousands of years before the advent of the European colonisers. The tribes there had a deep relationship and connectedness with their pristine nature and environment; therefore, they never had an exploitative urge to disturb harmony. There was no distinction between human and non-human, i.e., Nature was treated as a living being; therefore, it was worshipped and revered. There is no scientific basis today that supports the idea that nutmeg has any special magical or healing properties, for which it can be considered a vital spice. But in those days of colonial loot, it gained special value in the European market not because of its herbal properties, but on account of its rarity. Amitav argues that the model of colonial capitalism made it exquisite. The drive

to acquire this exotic spice, which became excessively overpriced in Europe, led to the extermination of the entire Bandanese tribe. Nutmeg, consequently, becomes a curse for the Bandanese. Amitav Ghosh recovers historical evidence showing that the Portuguese were the first Europeans to reach Banda Island in search of nutmeg, followed by the Dutch East India Company (VOC), led by Jan Coen in 1621. Various western states had struggled to gain control over the region, but the Dutch eventually dominated the region by establishing authority.

The first chapter of the book, titled “A Lamp Falls,” delves deeply into the fundamental flaws of colonial capitalism. The title serves as a metaphor for the collapse of sensibility and knowledge among the colonialists. The small event of a lamp accidentally falling in the Dutch camp was misunderstood as an attempted attack on the Dutch settlement by the Banda people. However, there was no concrete evidence to support that claim. This fallacious assumption culminated in the ghastly act of genocide. The entire episode underscores the heinous nature of the colonial enterprise, demonstrating its severe disregard for the tribes and their environment. This extermination was not only the wipeout of natives but also of their indigenous culture, rituals, and wisdom with which the ecology of the region once reverberated. It exposes the functionality of colonial capitalism, which subjugated both nature and tribes, establishing a pattern that continued to reshape global geopolitics. The volcanoes play an important role in tribal ecology in Indonesian archipelagos, as Amitav records:

“The Indonesian reverence for volcanoes is a matter of frustration also for Islamic and Christian fundamentalists, who regard such beliefs with abhorrence. Yet volcanoes continue to be intricately knit into the lives of Indonesians, not just culturally and spiritually, but also politically.” (Nutmeg 42)

The colonial powers treated the belief system of the tribes as superstitions and subdued them forcefully. Nature, as well as the natives, just become an inert resource for exploitation. Amitav records how Coen’s statues were built in the cities across of Holland to honour him for

making the Dutch famous for their “enterprise and commercial prowess”. The VOC’s ruthless exploitation of colonies, such as the Indonesian Islands, for overproducing spices establishes their monopoly and hegemony on the spices. Holland flourished on the wealth from the colonial loot as the prices of the spice were very high. Nutmeg got space in the artwork of that Dutch Golden Era. Amitav underscores that there are a number of books encompassing the glory and fame of these artworks of Holland, but very few talk about the cruelty in the form of genocide of the Banda people in the 1621 whose Nutmeg spice made Holland famous and prosperous. The VOC’s “elimination of the Banda people was brought about not just by targeted killings of humans, but by destroying the entire web of nonhuman connections that sustained a certain way of life.” (Nutmeg 41)

Amitav’s accounts hugely draws upon the archival and anecdotal records by scholars from different fields. The other notorious act of dispossession by the colonialists was in America, where native American tribes were exterminated over centuries. The tussle between the native Americans and the European settlers escalated into deadly conflicts. The settlers’ livestock infiltrated the pristine territory of the Indians, and this entire process of colonisation altered the pattern of land and farming in the Americas. The native flora and fauna gradually disappeared on account of disregard to plant and animal biodiversity in the region. Bison, the reverend animal, was mercilessly killed in huge numbers by the White settlers and almost pushed to extinction. The terrains were transformed into big plain farms and the places renamed to erase memories and past, as they could serve as a potential threat to rekindle the memory of colonial wrongdoings in tribal consciousness. This practice of Terraforming in America by the colonisers was severely destructive, and served as an act of erasure. The whole land, with its unique terrains and distinguished ecology, is altered according to the new colonial needs. Even the peasants of pre-colonial Europe share some affinity with the tribal world by prioritising the inextricable link with nature. But the power elite exhibit disregards to the environment and

humans. Indigenous knowledge has assisted humans for thousands of years to survive and thrive without any major threats of extinction. Now, these threats are very frequent in the form of climate issue and altering the ecological balance. The places worshiped by the tribes in Banda and in Native America are transformed to produce more plants for commercial purpose. Amitav produces a number of references showing that the root of climate change lies in such transformative practices of colonial capitalism. This transformation disrupted the delicate pattern of ecological balance. The author problematises the deliberate avoidance of inclusive and factual projection of the causes of the climate crisis in the Western narratives propounded by the elite European scientific communities. According to Das et al:

“Ghosh observes that these details are never factored into global climate negotiations and claims that such negotiations fail to understand that the global or neoliberal capitalistic condition is not a nomadic or an abrupt eruption, but a monolith grounded on and inclined towards repeating the workings of an exploitative Empire in producing multiple *cul-de-sacs*.” (749)

The ruthless practice of colonial capitalism led to the commodification of resources. Anything that is apparently non-human was considered a commodity and exploited beyond imagination. The extermination of tribes and exploitation of apparently non-human was celebrated in the form of monetary rewards, honours, and commemoration. The poets and writers composed nationalist literature; philosophers propounded various abstract philosophies; political leaders admired and vehemently endorsed; religious leaders divinely justified the colonial act of plunder and massacre. Amitav substantiates that the Western scientific institutions assisted the empire, and purposely remained blind to the long-term consequences of colonial brutality.

Ghosh further claims 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” (Nutmeg 108). He indicates how the area stands as the main theatre of the world’s economic activity, claiming that “its sea lanes carry one third of the world’s bulk cargo, fifty per cent of the world’s container traffic, and 70% of crude and oil products” (Nutmeg 113) Amitav throws light upon the less known aspects of the modern militarisation not only in US but in other developed economies also. The conceptualisation of modernity is based on fossil fuel consumption. The gigantic machines in industries run on petroleum, causing huge pollution. A major share of fossil fuels, approximately thousands of gallons per hour, is consumed by the U.S. military’s operation of sophisticated, vast fleets of vehicles, ships, and aircraft. Around 900 military installations in the U.S. and other parts of the world work in coordination and continue operating for maintenance even during peacetime, also consuming a mind-boggling amount of fossil fuel. One hour of operation consumes as much energy as a city does in a year. The data compiled by the author highlights that:

“These activities come with other environmental costs as well, because the operation of military equipment requires the use of many kinds of toxic chemicals like thinners, solvents, pesticides, and so on. As a result, the Department of Defence “generates 500,000 tons of toxic waste annually, more than the top five US chemical companies combined, and it is estimated that the armed forces of the major world powers produce the greatest amount of hazardous waste in the world.”” (Nutmeg 102)

Amitav emphasises that climate change is the crisis of culture and imagination also as:

“Global warming is in every sense a collective predicament, humanity finds itself in the thrall of a dominant culture in which the idea of the collective has been exiled from politics, economics, and literature alike” (Derangement 130)

The entire system of earth is deeply connected, any injustice on any part of earth affects the overall health of the planet. The colonial approach remained fail to acknowledge this fact, and blindly kept exploiting nature as merely a resource. The global south collectively holds the opinion that the West gained power and advancement through colonial capitalism, and now it is time that they should also compete with the West through capitalism. Many countries of South Asia are pacing with Western economies by following the model of capitalism. Amitav argues that capitalism is in the core of climate degradation. He further argues that:

“Across much of the global South these beliefs are held with a strength of conviction that belies the idea that the planetary crisis can be addressed merely by “fixing” capitalism. At the heart of the crisis lie geopolitical problems, and inequities of power, inherited from the era of colonization: those issues cannot be wished away.” (Nutmeg 169)

Amitav appreciates the vitalist movements by the post-colonial nations as well as tribal resistance such as Native American’s, whose strategy has been based on an ethnic approach that foregrounds the familial instinct to protect “all our relatives”- that is to say, that the entire spectrum of nonhuman kins, including rivers, mountains, animals, and the spirit of the land.” (Nutmeg 160) The nonhuman should be considered sacred, not merely as commodities to exploit, but as entities with which to coexist in harmony. Amitav argues that story telling is very powerful part of vitalist movement as the process of telling the story connects us to the world of ancestors and their deep reverence to their environment.

“I do not need to be Bandanese to understand what Gunung Api means to the islanders, just as I do not need to be Greek to be moved by the *Iliad*. 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.” (Nutmeg 240)

Conclusion:

Amitav's mapping of the violence and injustice done to the tribes, the natives, and the pristine natural world during colonial expansion demonstrates that the responsibility for the climate crisis primarily and solely lies with the West. The commodification of everything that is deemed non-human becomes normalised, and is justified by the grand narratives produced to support colonial capitalism. This intensifies the ruthless exploitation of both the non-human and the non-European, encouraging more European nations to engage in colonialism. It thus transforms into a "lucrative enterprise" that demanded strategic manoeuvring and violence to ensure high returns. The elimination of the indigenous also eliminates the treasure of indigenous knowledge of thousands of years. The symbiotic and syncretic relationship between the tribes and their environment is decimated by the ruthless exploitation, which leads to commercialisation, disregarding the natural world.

Conflict of Interest: The corresponding author, on behalf of second author, confirms that there are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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