



Genocide and Ecological Ruin in Amitav Ghosh's *The Nutmeg's Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis*

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Abstract

*Writing against the backdrop of the global pandemic of COVID-19, Amitav Ghosh in his latest non-fiction text *The Nutmeg's Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis* (2021), traces the contemporary planetary crisis back to a historical event popularly known as the Dutch Massacre that occurred in 1621. This massacre resulted in the ruthless exploitation of humans and the natural world by Western imperialism. Ghosh observes that the Banda islands were rich sources of nutmegs and this is the reason why Bandalese was attacked by European settlers to own nutmeg plantations. Dutch officials viewed that there could be no trade without war. The remaining Bandalese who survived the massacre went towards the forests to hide and started living with the spirits of woods, animals, and nature. For Bandalese, nature, as Carolyn Merchant claims, was a mother. The trade and business that the European settlers started along with the genocide of Bandalese continued in different forms and prepared a ground for the ecological crisis. The current predicament is the outcome of a mechanical view of the world in which nature is viewed as a resource for humans to exploit for their purposes. Drawing on the concepts of ecological theorists, this paper claims that the entire relationship of humans to non-human kind such as rivers, mountains, woods, animals, and the spirits of land should be based on reciprocity, ethics, and egalitarian concepts. The transfer of nutmeg from the original islands to the economic centers reveals a wider colonial mindset that justifies the exploitation of the entire ecology, which continues to lead to geopolitics, and functions as a source of planetary crisis. As the paper is qualitative, the ecocritical perspective has been applied to the primary text to conclude that the environmental crisis, seen or unseen, is rooted in colonial practices and capitalism.*

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Introduction

The Nutmeg's Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis (2021) by Amitav Ghosh written against the backdrop of COVID-19, exposes the environmental crisis that Ghosh links to the Banda Islands massacre which I refer to as genocide in my paper. Banda Island lies in the east of Indonesia having an amazing tree that produces both nutmeg and mace. The period of enlightenment led to a way of looking at Earth as a repository of resources made only for human use. It is still in practice as modern society is guided largely by material gain. The genocide was an exposition of the colonial mindset of Dutch settlers who came to Banda islands to have monopoly markets over the nutmegs and mace as these valuable things are found in the islands. Most of the Bandalese were killed as they came to defend their land. However, they could not succeed as they were not fully prepared for war. Talking about nutmeg, mace, and cloves, Ittersum Van asserts, "Nutmeg, mace, and cloves had reached Europe via ports in the Middle East during the Middle Ages. One of the aims of European expansion into Asia was to cut out Muslim middlemen and establish direct trade links with the Spice Islands" (2). Due to the nutmeg, mace, and cloves, the European expansion into Asia was designed. In this process, the Bandalese were the victims who suffered a lot Van further discusses "The Bandalese were the victims of Anglo–Dutch imperial competition in Asia in the period 1609– 1621" (5). They were the victims of imperial competition for nutmeg. Ghosh, through this text, challenges imperial tendency embedded in the activities of Dutch settlers, and critiques war, empire, and genocide supported through the Earth-devouring logics that underpin ecological disaster. Here, I claim that genocide on the Bandalese led to an environmental crisis as the way Bandalese treated nature was different from Dutch settlers' understating of nature.

Review of Literature

The text *The Nutmeg's Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis* is the new and latest text of Amitav Ghosh published in 2021 AD. Though the text has not received substantial reviews yet, a few criticisms published in 2022 onwards indicate that the book is remarkable for its form and contents. Jialan Deal discusses the exploration of Western

Colonialism and its ecological Impact. He argues, “In *The Nutmeg’s Curse*, Ghosh theorizes that the objectification, exploitation, and mistreatment of the Earth’s resources results from the world order Western colonization created” (127). He means to say that the act of objectification, exploitation, and mistreatment of nature’s resources results from the colonizing project of Westernization.

The text talks about how the world gradually lost its organic form as humanity began to think that development is based on the exploitation of nature. The planetary crisis that appears and reappears constantly haunts Ghosh. Ghosh argues that today’s climate change dynamics are based on Western colonialism. Then, Deal further talks about the history of the Banda Islands where the source of nutmeg lies— an important economic site for colonizers, “Ghosh then uses a story from the Dutch occupation of Indonesia, specifically in the Banda Archipelago, as a parable for how European colonization has shaped ecological perceptions of the Earth. In the 1600s, the Banda Archipelago had an abundance of trees that produced nutmeg, a valuable spice in European markets” (128). According to the arrival of the Dutch there in the Banda Islands, they began to see the nutmeg as a source of earning huge money. They never thought of the cultural implication of Bandalese’s understanding of nature. They treated the land as a resource, “The author’s use of nutmeg in this context has both material and immaterial aspects. In the modern-day, nutmeg is often viewed through the lens of its historical value in trading and commerce. In contrast, while the traditional Banda did see the commercial power of nutmeg, they also saw the spice and their natural environment “not as land, but rather as Land” (Deal 129). They viewed, nutmeg— the spice and natural environment ‘not as a land of less importance’, but rather as a ‘Land of tremendous importance’. In the same way, the reviewer— Sujata Byravan in “*The Nutmeg’s Curse*’ Review: Listening to Nature’s Voice” argues:

Amitav Ghosh opens *The Nutmeg’s Curse* with soldiers from the Dutch East India Company unleashing their savagery on the people of the Banda Islands in the 17th century. Bandalese chiefs were mercilessly massacred, and the extermination of the people lasted 18 years, with “not a vestige of their language or peculiar customs” remaining. Ghosh then moves from Indonesia to the heinous crimes of genocide of Native Americans in North America. His polemic links settler colonialism and its barbaric values to the sustained culture of domination and destruction of the land and people. (n. p.)

The review published in *The Hindu* newspaper of India by the reviewer—Sujata Byravan sheds light on how Dutch people came to loot the Banda Islands in the seventeenth century. Bandalese chiefs and locals were mercilessly dominated and massacred for economic purposes. Saswat Samay Das shares her opinion about the text which has both aesthetic and political messages. Das argues, “His narrative creatively engages with archives of colonial history, yet does not stand as a full-fledged transgressive act. At an aesthetic level, his engagement displays a radical shift as he re-narrates the history of colonial exploitation in the form of anecdotes . . . archetypical postcolonial criticism that seeks to capture colonialism as a mesh of eco-exploitative practices” (1). Das suggests that *The Nutmeg’s Curse* can be studied in two levels: aesthetic and political. The available reviews indicate that the text is one of the best examples of how colonial force dominated both humans and nature. However, these reviews have not explored this issue in detail and since the book is a recent publication, it has not received much reviews and criticism yet. Thus, I attempt to locate how the genocide that occurred on the Banda Islands led to the planetary crisis.

Methodology

The research design in this paper follows qualitative interpretative methods to analyze data collected from the primary text *The Nutmeg’s Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis* by applying ecological perspectives countering colonial projects of muting and savagery. The ecological crisis due to the violence in nature has been an important topic in literary scholarship. In a world where human anti-ecological activities have not been checked, it is normal and natural for disasters to fall. Amidst such context, I have chosen the non-fiction text – *The Nutmeg’s Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis* (2021) by Amitav Ghosh. For the exploration of the research issue, I have used theoretical insights from Ramachandra Guha, Maria Miles, and Carolyn Merchant. Furthermore, I have used Norman Naimark’s concept of nature and genocide, Prasenjit Duara’s concept of crisis in modern times, and Greta Gaard’s Ecological Politics to analyze the content from the primary text.

Trade, Genocide, and Environment

The Banda islands were blessed with nutmeg and mace spices. They are so valuable from the economic perspective that the Dutch people wanted to have a monopoly plantation over the islands. Everyone wanted to go there because of the nutmeg tree. In

medieval Europe, a handful of nutmegs could make a person rich. To obtain them, the European settlers went there using coercion. They understood that there could be no trade without war, “There can be no trade without war” (Ghosh 42). This is the reason why they wanted to have dominion over the nutmeg plantation and Bandalese people.

The Dutch forces burnt everything related to the dwellings of Bandalese and destroyed their remaining boats so that they could go nowhere. Their settlements were also ravished. This event occurred in 1621 when the majority of Bandalese were killed. Ghosh argues, “It is not known for sure how many Bandalese survived the massacre of 1621. Coen was a Dutch governor who imposed colonial authority over the Banda islands and it was all his design to have a monopoly market over the nutmeg by killing whoever came on the way. Coen himself believed that no more than a few hundred fugitives escaped from the Bandas” (41). Out of the total Bandalese, the majority of them were killed, some of them were enslaved and some others died of starvation. Those who survived went to the jungle and neighboring islands, “All the Bandalese were left alive fled to the neighboring islands” (40). It was the resistance they showed while protecting their land and nutmeg. They were also enslaved as they had no other option except to surrender. Phillip Winn also talks about the historical horrible event of 1621 that killed the Bandalese and enslaved the survivors. In “Slavery and cultural creativity in the Banda Islands”, he argues, “This followed the final brutal conquest of the islands in 1621 by the quasi-sovereign VOC, which sponsored a major military expedition under Jan Pieterszoon Coen to seize possession of the still extensive areas not yet under its control as a result of earlier conflicts. The expedition succeeded, after decimating the local population and razing their fortified settlements” (367). The mission to conquer Banda islands was succeeded and they decimated the local population. The survivors were easily enslaved. After the victory, the Dutch signed the contract for the provision of slaves, “This trade intensified dramatically after the arrival of Europeans, most notably the Dutch, who signed contracts with local rulers in Maluku in the early seventeenth century for the provision of slaves, as well as acquiring them directly or by proxy” (370). The conquering of Nutmeg extended and reached the point where both the Bandalese and Banda islands were conquered by Dutch people. While reviewing *The Nutmeg Curse: Parables for Planetary Crisis*, the reviewer [Ashutosh Kumar Thakur](#) talks about how nutmeg was a target for Europeans:

As the nutmeg made its way across the known world, they became immensely valuable - in 16th century Europe, just a handful could buy a house. It was not long before European traders became conquerors, and the indigenous Bandalese communities - and the islands themselves - would pay a high price for access to this precious commodity. Yet the bloody fate of the Banda islands forewarns of a threat to our present day. (1)

The quote highlights how a handful of nutmeg was so valuable that it could buy a house or ship in medieval Europe. The bloody fate of the Banda Islands due to genocide in the name of having a monopoly on nutmeg plantations forewarns of a threat to our present day and future times.

Thakur further talks about how Europeans came to Banda islands for trade and colonialism, “When the nutmeg was discovered by the rest of the globe, European traders quickly conquered the islands, causing indigenous tribes on the Banda islands to pay exorbitant rates for the product” (1). After the discovery of the nutmeg, European traders quickly conquered the islands, causing indigenous tribes on the Banda islands to pay exorbitant rates for the product and they lost their life and their culture.

The genocide began as the Dutch official Mattijin Sonck was suspicious of Bandalese that they could also attack them with their natural weapons. He heard a faint sound of a lamp falling which he misunderstood as an attack of Bandalese. In this regard, Gosh notes, “To this day nobody exactly knows what transpired in Selamon on that night, in Selamon on that April night, in the year 1621, except that lamp fell to the floor in the building where Martijn Sonck, a Dutch official was billeted” (5). He was sure that the war had just been started and ordered the firing, “He and his panicked counselors snatch up their firearms and begin shooting at random” (7). Firing at random, of course, resulted in genocide.

Amitav Ghosh brings reference to the UN convention to talk about genocide. According to the UN Convention of 1946, genocide means, “acts committed with intent to destroy in whole or in part a national, ethnical, racial or religious group as such” (41). The Dutch officials who came to Banda islands with the intention of trade destroyed the islanders and their surroundings. Not only did the Dutch systematically depopulate the islands through genocide, but they also tried their best to bring nutmeg cultivation into plantation mode, and for this, they used force through violence. Ghosh further asserts, “As this passage makes clear, colonialism, genocide, and structures of organized

violence were the foundations on which industrial modernity was built” (116). The vital connection between war and trade was of course perfectly understood by early empire builders like Jan Coen who said that there could be no trade without war. Talking about Coen, Joella van Donkersgoed explicates, “One central figure embroiled in the events of 1621 when the monopoly on the trade of nutmeg and mace was established by violence, is Jan Coen” (272). For Coen, the genocide and trade of nutmeg go simultaneously as he established a monopoly on islands through violence.

The connection between genocide and trade is highlighted as Naimark talks about genocide as the destruction of a nation or ethnic group. He states, “By ‘genocide’ we mean the destruction of a nation or an ethnic group. This new word, coined by the author to denote an old practice in its modern development, is made from the ancient Greek word *genos* (race, tribe) and the Latin *cide* (killing), thus corresponding in its formation to such words as *tyrannicide*, *homicide*, *infanticide*” (11-12). By genocide, he means to say that it’s all about killing the entire race or tribe. It also involves destroying the nation, and terrifying inhabitants. The colonial mentality of European settlers was responsible for the genocide as the colonial subjects like Bandalese could do nothing except die while protecting the land. Naimark further insists, “The colonial powers were ultimately responsible for genocide, and therefore sometimes this phenomenon is known as colonial genocide. Settler genocide makes more sense here to indicate that armed civilians, organized militias, and possesses, carried out the bulk of the killing” (57). Naimark opines that the colonial mindset intends to kill the innocent native people for their vested interest. Thus, it can also be referred to as colonial genocide where armed civilians and organized militias could go to the extent of depopulating the entire population. Thus, in the book, Ghosh mentions, “The Dutch official Martijn Sonck “seized the best houses for his troops, and he has also sent soldiers swarming over the villages, terrifying the inhabitants” (6). He intends to destroy the whole population so that he can have ownership of the nutmeg plantation, “He has come to Selamon under the orders to destroy the village and expel its inhabitants from this idyllic island, with its lush forests and sparkling blues sea”(6). Selamon is a village in Banda islands with its lush forests and sparkling blue seas. Sonck’s intention to destroy the villages means to destroy the villagers as well. The Bandalese were not aware of the massacre that they had to face. Even in the peace, genocide occurs. Naimark states, “Even during periods of peace, the threat of war or the ostensible need to prepare for war can instigate

genocidal situations. War is not a necessary precondition for genocide, and genocide does not necessarily occur during war. Still, genocide is most often associated with wartime intentions, policies, and actions” (25). The quote states that the declared war is not only the precondition for genocide. It occurs when one powerful group like colonial powers intends to kill the native people for their motive. As seen in the Banda islands, the attack from the side of Sonck and his people was beyond expectation for Bandalese.

The reason for the massacre was the economic motive due to nutmeg as I already stated above. Ghosh observes that the Banda islands were rich sources of nutmegs, “In the case of the Banda Islands the gift... the tree that produces both nutmeg and mace” (8). It was not the Dutch who only tried to conquer the islands but the other Europeans like the Portuguese, and Spanish who tried to have domination over the Bandalese, “Yet the Europeans— first the Portuguese and Spanish, and then the Dutch— have for more than a hundred years insistently pursued the goal of establishing a monopoly over the islanders’ most important products: nutmeg and mace” (13). Thus, the European settlers tried their best to conquer the land, forests, nutmeg, mace, cloves, and Bandalese without thinking about what happened to nature.

Ghosh critiques the idea of conquering nature without thinking about the Earth as a living entity, “But initially the idea that the Earth is a living entity in which life maintains the conditions for life aroused skepticism and even hostility within the scientific community” (86). The scientific community of the modern age considers nature as a dead thing waiting for humans to give life form to nature. As I discuss how trade and genocide are interlinked, now let me discuss how these concepts can have a direct impact on the environment.

Phillip Winn highlights the collective identity of Bandalese associated with land which they take as sacred one, “The forms of collective representation existing in the Bandas are fundamentally local, they do express an identity linked to place” (73). Their identity, as Winn argues, is linked to place. For them, their land is blessed and it is sacred. Winn discusses Bandas’s coming into the interaction with the sacred by appreciating the sense of place that is a core aspect of the Bandalese life world, “In the Bandas and Lonthoir, a significant aspect of this sense involves particular kinds of practices, which can be seen as interactions with the sacred” (73). They interact with the sea, and trees, and appreciate the sense of place which after the Dutch massacre disappeared.

After the genocide, interactions between Bandalese to nature disappeared, and their skills to deal with natural phenomena were also erased. Unlike the Dutch settlers, they lived observing and following the laws of nature as Joella van Donkersgoed and Muhammad Farid write in their article, “At the outset, they lived heathen lives while observing and following the laws of nature” (418). They followed the rhythm of nature and had harmonious relations with nature which after the conquest of the land by the Dutch was ignored. They talk about three instances to show how Bandalese people were connected with nature:

The first is when a brother falls asleep under a tree and, when he awakens, he realizes that the sea has receded and left the beach strewn with food resources. A second example is when the sister realizes how the sun traverses through the sky and relates this to the ebb and flow of the sea. At that moment they are residing on Mount Kilsarua, which means looking at the sun. The third is the well-known legend of the discovery of a water source on the island of Banda Besar, which was created when the sister stumbled and her feet met the ground. The water source was discovered by the brothers when they noticed a wet cat coming out of the bushes. They decided to settle near the water source. (418-19)

As the quote clarifies the Bandalese siblings (brother and sister) realize and communicate with natural objects to conclude. After waking up under the tree, the brother sees the sea receded leaving bountiful food stuffs for him. Sun traveling through the sky and its shadow appearing in the sea relates this to the ebb and flow of the sea. In the same way, in the third example, the brother sees the cat coming from the bushes and he immediately realizes that there is a water source as the cat had lived there. And they decided to settle near the water source. It tells us that humans cannot live without natural blessings bestowed on them. For them, the sea is not merely the source of food stuffs, it provides religious and cultural networks, “The sea not only provides food, it also brought religious knowledge and trade relations. The sea and the ability to navigate the marine environment is therefore an essential part of life” (421). The native people used boats to navigate through the marine world. Boats, sea, native knowledge, and skills are essential parts of their life.

Colonial genocide designed for economic motives is best gained at the cost of environmental degradation. Environment and industrialization stand in sharp contrast to each other. Industrialization in the modern period, due to the rapid growth of the

economic mindset of treating the earth as a resource owes much to colonialism. Ghosh clarifies, “After all, what happened in the Banda Islands was merely one instance of a history of colonization that was then unfolding on a vastly larger scale on the other side of the earth, in the Americas” (18). Treating nature as a resource paves the way for environmental crises. Nutmeg’s movement from its native Banda islands reveals a prevalent colonial attitude of domination of human life and the environment that persists today in different forms. Ghosh observes, “The modern era, it is often asserted, has freed humanity from the earth and propelled it into a new age of progress in which human-made goods take precedence over natural products” (18). The ecological degradation that the present world is facing is the result of the imperial world of the past that continues in different forms. Ghosh links the origins of our current planetary crisis (COVID-19) to Western colonialism’s ruthless exploitation of human life and the natural world.

Prasenjit Duara highlights how the reckless use of environmental resources can have negative consequences on the environment, “In the large societies of contemporary China and India, the continued patterns of present use and consumption of environmental resources will have incalculable consequences upon the world’s environment” (32). The problem of environmental degradation is seen in the world including Asian countries like China and India. The act of controlling nature is harmful as it does not provide any alternative solution to protect the world, “In modern Asia, the mainstream obsession with pursuing the goal of controlling and manipulating nature has not provided us with too many helpful examples of efforts to realize alternative goals” (33). The point Duara is making is that the government or the mainstream obsession with pursuing the goal of controlling and manipulating nature does not involve any rational logic if seen from an environmental perspective. The crisis has led to environmental movements. Duara posits:

This was also reflected to some extent within Asia where the effects of high-speed growth in much of East and Southeast Asia upon the natural conditions of livelihood and environmental degradation led to the emergence of environmental movements in the 1980s. In the second type, the developing countries, the impact of industrialization and urbanization was found to be felt most acutely by marginal populations, particularly peasants, forest and fishing communities, and those displaced by large construction projects. (40)

High-speed growth in the name of development has adverse effects on the conditions of livelihood and the environment. It will have more impact on the marginal communities that are displaced by large construction projects. The colonial mentality as discussed by Ghosh goes on destroying not only inhabitants but also dwellings. Jan Coen's activity of killing the Bandalese and extracting the nutmeg proves this "To burn everywhere their dwellings" (23). Coen destroyed the dwellings of inhabitants so that the survivors could not survive anymore. He ravaged the village, "He took village's bale-bale or meeting hall which he requisitioned as a billet for himself and for his counselors. Moreover, he has occupied the most venerable mosque, where Bandalese could pray and worship" (21). As the quote tells the Dutch official Coen took control of the village's meeting hall, and mosque to detach the Bandalese with cultural ties. The fleet that he brought to this island was the largest as it consisted of 18 Dutch ships with more than two thousand men. He ordered all the inhabitants to leave the land peacefully. However, this plan does not work well, "But the plan does not go smoothly; instead of surrendering, large numbers of islanders flee into forests" (21). The forests were the natural home of the Bandalese. They respected the land and forests. However, as they were either killed or displaced, the treatment of land as a mother has changed into a mere resource.

Thus, Amitav Ghosh identifies the beginning of the planetary due to the total exploitation of both lands and people for trade and profit which became the prevailing mode of growth in the world economy causing severe damage to the natural world.

Colonial Projects of Muting and Savagery

Ghosh talks about how Dutch officials were interested in the politics of muting and savagery. For them, banda islanders and nature are similar because they are mute and savage. Ghosh vehemently critiques this idea and asserts that even nature has sounds that make meanings. He argues, "Until then, no matter that they have tongues, voices, and languages, brutes are effectively mute, like Nature itself, which also makes sounds but makes no meanings. In this view of the world, the sounds of Nature are not equivalent to utterances; they are the products of mechanical responses and reactions" (189). The Bandalese were brutes to Dutch people who had come to conquer the islands. Despite having tongue and language, these people were considered brutes by the Dutch. By this discourse, the Dutch people went on to create colonies to have a monopoly over the nutmeg trade. They thought of nature as having no agency. Ghosh further observes,

“Colonization was thus not merely a process of establishing dominion over human beings it was also a process of subjugating and reducing to muteness an entire universe of beings that was once thought of as having agency power of communication and the ability to make meaning animals, trees, volcano and nutmegs” (190). The quote highlights that the colonial project was not only a process of establishing dominion over the human world but equally was a process to dominate and exploit the natural world by reducing them to the stage of muteness having no agency to communicate and exchange their experience. This helps colonizers to reduce nature and inhabitants’ value as brutes, “It is by representing a vast continuum of human and nonhuman beings as brutes that the colonizer turns into resources, to be used as slaves, servants, and commodities” (190). From the politics of brutes, the colonizers understood and treated nature as a mere resource.

The problem associated with the politics of brutes is that it promoted environmental degradation because when islanders were deprived of their natural right to communicate with trees, jungles, and nature, the ecological balance was disturbed. In this regard, Ghosh asserts, “At this moment in time, when we look back on the trajectory that brought humanity to the brink of a planetary catastrophe, we cannot but recognize our plight is a consequence of how certain classes of humans – a small minority have actively muted others by representing them as brutes as creatures whose presence on earth is solely material” (195). It is through the logic of savagery and brutes, that the colonial projects made a small portion of the population have dominion over the majority of people like Banda islanders. They have actively muted other people like Bandalese by representing them as brutes as creatures whose presence on earth, as they assume, is solely material and physical to serve the colonizer. Non-humans are not as mute as the Dutch thought of them. They unmute themselves at the right time As reflected by Ghosh, “Non-humans too are no longer as mute as they once were. Other beings and forces – bacteria, viruses, glaciers, forests, the jet stream, have also unmuted themselves and are now thrusting themselves so exigently on our attention that they can no longer be ignored or treated as elements of inert Earth” (196-197). The different life forms that which colonial mindset rejects as beings unfold their voices, and unmute themselves, thus they cannot be ignored. With this concept, the forest areas have been opened up to meet the objectives of capitalism.

Ghosh pours his dissatisfaction against administrators, and missionaries who promote colonial projects calling indigenous relation to land superstitions, “Forest peoples’ sacred mountains have been desecrated, their lands have been swamped by dams and their beliefs and rituals have come under attack as primitive superstitions—the same term used by colonial administrators, scientists and missionaries” (196). The lands are swamped by dam construction, the sacred mountains have been desecrated and their rituals are thought to be superstitious practices.

The discourse of muting and unmuting helps colonizers rationalize their colonial project. They take the muteness of nature and Bandalese as savagery and uncivilization. It leads to an ecological crisis as nature is subdued, controlled, and used as a resource in the name of muteness. Theoretically, this has been highlighted by Chad Anderson in these words, “Using the tools of civilization, namely, cartography and writing, Europeans claimed lands and peoples whose purpose in history was to wait for European discoverers” (490). Europeans’ doctrine of discovery suggests the agency of civilized European explorers who can control the native people by hook or crook due to the passivity of natives. Ghosh also highlights this issue in his text.

Nutmeg and (Monstrous) Gaia: A Blessing or A Curse?

The Nutmeg’s Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis revolves around a conflict between white settlers and Bandalese due to the nutmeg—a spice that is used for medicinal purposes and also functions as an identity marker for rich people in medieval Europe. Ghosh in the text highlights trade networks developed across the world due to nutmeg, “The nodes and routes of these networks, and the people who were active in them, varied greatly over time, as kingdoms rose and fell, but for more than a millennium the voyage of the nutmeg remained remarkably consistent, growing steadily in both volume and value” (9). The trading networks stretched across the Indian Ocean. It has a long history from the 16th and 17th centuries to modern times.

Europeans went to Banda islands through the Indian Ocean and tried to impose monopolies over the nutmeg trade. For them, the easy solution to have dominion over the Banda islands was to eliminate 15000 Bandalese by killing, enslaving, or forcing them to leave the land. Why the story of the Banda islands was so significant because the tree was a blessing for islanders for centuries but finally it turned out to be a curse. It became a curse because it was viewed as a resource by the Europeans which they

snatched through genocide. Nature despite being benevolent, revolts back to humans if they go on treating nature as crossing the limit.

The image of Earth as the mother Goddess is highlighted by Carolyn Merchant. In *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution*, she observes how nature was worshipped as a mother Goddess, “Central to the organic theory was the identification of nature, especially the earth, with a nurturing mother; a kindly beneficent female who provided for the needs of mankind in an ordered, planned universe” (2). Nature was considered a life-sustaining force yielding necessary things for human beings. The metaphorical implication of earth as mother gradually disappeared as scientific worldview started to consider nature or earth as resources to be used and explored. The nature-mother affinity is also discussed by Greta Gaard:

Moreover, arguments that appeal to the biological “closeness” of women and nature are more often used to justify women’s “natural” role as caregivers and child-bearers rather than as bricklayers or politicians. In sum, essentialist arguments tend to become regressive, and they do nothing to challenge the dualisms of patriarchal thought, which associate men/reason/culture and define them in opposition to women/emotion/nature. (20)

Just like a mother, Gaard asserts that nature and women are naturally assigned the role of caregivers and child bearers. The dualistic principle is an outcome of a past colonial mindset that continues in different forms.

In the same way, the Indian ecologist, Vandana Shiva’s idea of double domination of nature and marginal groups is continued in developmental activities guided by anthropocentric culture, “In fact, however water, soil fertility, and genetic wealth are considerably diminished as a result of the development process” (73). Due to the developmental activities, soil fertility is diminished and bio-diversity is affected. It poses a threat to the whole world harmonious relationship between nature and humans is degrading. She shows humanity suffers more when there is environmental degradation. Her idea is assimilated in the idea of Ghosh who speaks against the development designed at the cost of bio-diversity. In the same way, Maria Miles worries about nuclear weapons and bombs produced by science. She mentions, “The ecology movement, ... repeatedly campaigned against the construction of nuclear power plants because nuclear power is a source of energy so dangerous that it cannot be controlled by human beings” (91).

The quote clarifies that the construction of nuclear power are result of colonialism and it destroyed nature and human life. When this power is exercised, human beings cannot control it. It results in human casualties.

Timothy Luke brings the image of Earth First to talk about the biocentric approach to dealing with life. He talks about the Earth First project, “Earth First! pursues goals that are not mainly economic; instead it consciously struggles over the power to socially construct new identities, to create democratic spaces for autonomous social action, and to reinterpret norms and reshape institutions” (30). He does not prefer the economic struggles to gain profit at the cost of ecological disaster. Thus, he brings reference to biocentrism, “Earth First! envisions its program as being substantively “posthumanist” or biocentric” (40). Biocentrism is an earth-centered approach that was practiced by Banda islanders. When the Dutch came to conquer the islands, anthropocentrism began to take its sharp shape. They ignored Earth and treated her as a resource. Earth was a mother goddess and a sacred place, “Our argument in this chapter is that the making of capitalism as a mode of production was inseparable from the coeval processes of violent subordination that took place in Asia at the hands of the Europeans” (Anievas and Kerem 221). They argue that capitalism is the source of violence that prepares the ground for ecological destruction.

According to Greek myth, Gaia is considered for Earth. It is the symbol or personification of Mother Earth or nature. Since Earth is bountiful, it has motherly qualities and feeds those who nourish her. Indeed, she is gentle. However, she is also cruel and can show her terrifying figure in different forms. Her resentment and dissatisfaction are revealed through a series of disasters. She creates different life forms and destroys them as well, she is not a dead entity as the colonial project once thought, and she remains a strong life forever.

Ghosh praises the beauty of Banda islands as they are blessed with such fertile and diverse land. Land for Bandalese was more than a place that was blessed with nutmeg. Bringing reference to indigenous thinker Max Lioiron, Ghosh talks about the Banda islands. The land is significant as having meanings in itself, “The unique entity that is the combined living spirits of plants, animals, water, humans, histories, and events” (36). However, for Dutch official— Jan Coen, the islands are nothing more than a resource, “For Jan Coen and the VOC, on the other hand, the trees, volcanoes, and landscapes of the Bandas had

no meanings except as resources that could be harnessed to generate profit” (36). This concept of treating nature as a resource is the root cause of the environmental crisis. Though colonialism ends the colonial mindset to dominate or exploit nature remains constant. Ghosh observes that this is prevalent in the modern world, “As the ideologies of modernity were rising to dominance, the war against vitalism would go hand in hand with the expansion of European projects of colonialism and conquest” (87). The project of colonialism continues to dominate the natural projects.

Ramachandra Guha talks about how the landscapes were reshaped in the 18th and 19th centuries to promote industrialization, “In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the landscapes of England was reshaped by the industrial revolution. Coal mines, textile mills, railroads, and shipyards were the visible signs of an enormous expansion of industry and trade...” (10). The trade that started in the pre-industrial society supported colonialism and industrialization. Guha further brings the point to the fore, “Strikingly, this hostility extended to indigenous forms of land use, that is, to the varieties of pastoralism and cultivation practiced by African and Asian communities in territories recently colonized by Europeans” (30). The areas cultivated and planted by local people are now recently colonized by white settlers.

Guha brings reference to an artist, art critic John Ruskin whose idea of water and land pollution makes Guha aware of how earth has been used as a resource, “This destruction, he thought, owed itself to the fact that modern man had desacralized nature, viewing it only as a resource of raw materials to be exploited and thus emptying it of mystery, the wonder, indeed the divinity with which pre-modern man saw the natural world” (13). The idea of Guha related to earth resources is also highlighted by Ghosh, “The project of terraforming enframes the world in much the same way that the Banda Islands came to be seen by their conquerors: this is the frame of world-as-resource, in which landscapes (planets) come to be regarded as factories and nature is seen as subdued and cheap” (73). The conquerors in the Banda islands viewed the world as a resource as they captured the islands for the nutmeg which they used to earn money using it as a resource.

Ghosh makes a comparison between white men and local ones who perceive nature as Mother Earth. White settlers say that nature means a savage wild area which Ghosh never agrees with, “Only to the white man was Nature a wilderness and only to him

was the land infested with wild animals and savage people. To us it was tame. Earth was bountiful and was surrounded with the blessings of the Great Mystery” (64). It indicates that for the Bandase, the Earth was bountiful and they were blessed with beautiful things that they could use for their livelihood. Earth was Gaia and a living entity.

Talking about Gaia, Ghosh mentions that she is both benevolent and monstrous. She is a kind and motherly deity because she can give birth and nourish with care. She is the epitome of love and affection, and yet the same time, she is monstrous as well. She can plot against the force she hates. With the help of her son— Kronos, his father’s genitals are cut off. Her anger is targeted at Uranos whom she mates to produce many children but when he hides them under her, she cannot bear any longer. Ghosh is concerned, “Gaia tires of this and finally- groaning within, she conceives a cunning evil trick. She makes a serrated sickle out of an indestructible element, adamant, and shows it to her children” (88). The revolutionary nature of Gaia indicates the fact that she can take back whatever she has given to the world, “But what Earth gives, it can also take away” (159). She endures patiently but when the limitation is crossed, she shows her angry nature as S.P. Lohani writes, “Yet—she endures” (176). The ruthless exploitation of her unfolds many crises which we have to face.

To show the current predicament of humanity, Ghosh talks about COVID-19 as an outcome of climate change which has its links to colonial projects of the past because he explains that the infectious diseases are the results of economic activity like nutmeg trade, “I began writing this chapter in early March of 2020, at just the time when a microscopic entity, the newest coronavirus, was quickly becoming the largest, most threatening, and most inescapable presence in the planet” (14). The seemingly insignificant microscopic entity, the coronavirus, is creating havoc, threatening the whole world. Ghosh was writing this book when the virus was making its voyage across the world. He shows the links between climate change and COVID-19:

There is of course no direct causal relation between climate change and the Covid – COVID-19 pandemic; they are not unrelated issues either. Just as global warming is the result of ever-increasing economic activity; it is clear now that outbreaks of infectious diseases are also a hidden cost of economic development brought about by changing land use and human intrusions upon wildlife habitats. (133)

Ghosh means to say that climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic are related issues. Just like the ever-increasing economic activity is responsible for global warming, the outbreaks of infectious diseases are the results of changes in landscapes and terraforming. He opines, “The usual conclusion is that disasters and outbreaks of new diseases will not only take a terrible toll on lives in the poor countries but will also lead to riots and uprisings that could culminate in the collapse of state structures” (138). The lines indicate the possible violence along with the outbreaks of new diseases that take a terrible toll on lives.

Treating the earth as a resource brings problems. The newer forms of ecological disasters keep unfolding across the world, “The point is that the newer forms of ecological disasters unfolding across the globe tell that it is harder to believe that earth is an inert body that exists merely to provide resources to humans” (83). The quote mentions that treating the earth as an inert body is problematic; it is a dynamic entity that is a platform for many creatures to evolve and co-evolve. He reflects that what is going on around the world from the dawn of European colonial conquests to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic is the result of economic viewpoints that dominate Earth. Ghosh suggests, “In that sense climate change events and the Covid-19 pandemic are cognate phenomena, and the paths taken by the pandemic suggest that the planetary crisis too will unfold in surprising and counterintuitive ways” (133). He foresees that the world is going through a crisis in the days to come because people have not understood the real meaning of Earth as Ghosh argues, “The planet will never come alive for you unless your songs and stories give life to all the beings; seen and unseen that inhabits a living Earth –Gaia” (84). So it is attitude how one treats Mother Earth. He further talks about omnicide. The vision of the world as a resource leads not only to genocide but to omnicide, “An excess that leads ultimately not just to genocide but an even greater violence an impulse that can only be called omnicide- the desire to kill everything” (7). The omnicide means destruction of all life forms including human beings.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Banda islands massacre involved ruthless exploitation of both nature and the human world by Dutch settlers which resulted in killings, enslavement, and escaping of Bandalese. As the Bandalese were either killed or enslaved, their cultural implications associated with nature were also erased as Dutch colonialism understood

nature as the only resource. For the Bandalese, nature was a sacred land; it was a blessed land that was full of diversity. The exploitation of islands by Dutch people imposing monopolies on nutmeg trade by killing native people poses a threat to ecology. The journey of nutmeg from Banda to the rest of the world through the global networks that began with genocide has resulted in omnicide. Indigenous understanding of nature was that it was a living entity. In this modern era, people have started to think of nature as an inert object that has no power to act. The earth does not care about us; it will be there even if we all are gone. It remains completely indifferent to our being or not.

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