The biopolitics of genocide and terraforming: Amitav Ghosh's *The Nutmeg's Curse* as a parable for contemporary modernity

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Abstract: Human history is defined, fashioned and determined by its inextricable entanglement with environmental forces. In *The Nutmeg's Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis* (2021) Amitav Ghosh explores the impact of colonialism and the 'civilising mission' of the West on planetary ecology. The paper argues that wars of extermination were essentially biopolitical in nature where non-human forces partake in the settler-colonial conflict leading to the displacement or annihilation of aboriginal population. Material forces and natural processes triggered into action by structured colonial strategies mediate destruction of the natural environment culminating in ecological collapse that has far reaching regional as well as planetary consequences. The nutmeg - one of the most coveted and valued of all spices - sets in motion a progression of invasion, warfare, genocide, and terraforming in the Indonesian Banda islands. The paper would investigate the evolution of the nutmeg as a parable for the contemporary climate crisis placing it in the larger context of the Anthropocene. The intersection between human and non-human forms of agency in our centuries-old geopolitical order, governed largely by mechanistic ideologies of conquest and colonisation, has invariably plummeted the planet into a climate catastrophe. The paper would argue that collective flourishing where human and non-human life forms live in consonance and mutual dependence is the key to saving our planet in the face of unrelenting apocalyptic violence. The non-human voices which are an integral and manifest part of our natural world need to be heard and restored into the narrative of contemporary modernity to survive the impending ecological collapse.

Keywords: colonisation, terraforming, genocide, modernity, biopolitics

Non-human forces and hyper objects have toyed with human destiny since the birth of the human race. Our inextricable entanglement with the forces of nature assumes significance in the Anthropocene,

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considering the detrimental ways in which humanity has impacted the planet over the past few decades. A race initially awed and subdued by the mysteries of nature, humanity emerged, slowly but steadily, from the manacles of ignorance about its natural world, evolving into a species with the potential to transform the destiny of the planet and all its life forms. This paper places in context Amitav Ghosh's, *The Nutmeg's Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis* (2021) and argues that the twin forces of colonisation and capitalism has reconfigured planetary ecology in unprecedented ways, simultaneously reconfiguring the lives and destiny of its innumerable species, both human and non-human. Extensively applauded for his unique treatment of the intersection of ecology and human agency, Ghosh sets in perspective the indubitable liaison between disease, conquest, extermination, genocide and terraforming within the larger project of Western colonial expansion.

Wars of extermination unleashed by Western powers in virgin soils were essentially biopolitical in nature. In *The Nutmeg's Curse*, Ghosh meticulously records the systemic violence unleashed by Europeans on the Banda archipelago situated at the southeastern end of the Indian Ocean. The Banda Island sits on the fault lines of the Ring of Fire that extends from Chile to the rim of the Indian Ocean and is one of the most active and alive geological terrain in the region. The Gunung Api which translates to "Fire Mountain" is seismically active and its frequent eruptions bring to the surface "alchemical mixtures of materials which interact with the winds and weather of the region . . . to create forests that team with wonders and rarities" (Ghosh 2021, 8). The nutmeg tree that produces both mace and nutmeg, is the gift of the Gunung Api to the Banda Islands, native to the Maluku region until the eighteenth century. Though the nutmeg trees remained home-bound in Maluku, their offspring, nutmegs and mace, Ghosh points out, were tireless travellers and played a key role in establishing and extending trading networks across the Indian Ocean, penetrating deep into Eurasia and Africa. Even as kingdoms and empires rose and fell, the nutmeg trade matured both in volume and value. In the Middle Ages, the nutmeg transmuted into a fetish, a symbol of luxury and wealth. In addition to their culinary uses, nutmegs, cloves, pepper, etc. were treasured for its medicinal properties. Elizabethan physicians used it to cure the plague that ravaged across Eurasia in the 16th century. The primordial allure of the nutmeg inspired European navigators to set off

on voyages to the Americas and the Indian Ocean, to conquer the lands that were home to the coveted nutmeg.

The Dutch, the Spanish and the Portugese had for more than a century insistently pursuing the goal of imposing a trade monopoly on the Bandanese, granting them the exclusive right to the island's nutmeg and mace. The Dutch, the relentless of the lot, repeatedly sent fleets to the island so as to force treaties on its inhabitants. The Bandanese were a small population, roughly around fifteen thousand in number and could not defy the imperial might of the Dutch navy. In 1609 the islanders resisted the Dutch in an armed ambush slaughtering forty-six Dutchmen including the leading officer. Jan Coen, a member of this Dutch party fortunately escaped the massacre and twelve years later returned to the Banda Islands as commander of the Dutch fleet. Governor General Coen's initial encounter with the fierce Bandanese fighters shaped his view of the Dutch engagement with the island, that "*die Bandaneezen* are incorrigible and that the Banda problem needs a final solution: the islands must be emptied of their inhabitants. Unless that is established the VOC will never be able to establish a monopoly on nutmeg and mace" (Ibid., 13-14). The extermination of the Bandanese will be followed by a resettling of the islands with Europeans and slaves to create a new economy in the archipelago. The obsession with nutmeg and the competition they faced from the English forced the Dutch to depart from their professed practice of focussing only on trade and avoiding territorial acquisitions. Conquering the islands became inevitable for the Dutch as the nutmeg trade, at that time, was synonymous with the Bandas.

Ghosh draws a parallel between what happened in the Banda Islands in the seventeenth century to the predicament of contemporary modernity. In the old world order, plants and botanical matter decided the fate of human beings and communities. Man was inseparably bound to Earth, and any change in the natural world affected him, often in unprecedented ways. Contemporary modernity has, however, proclaimed its freedom from the Earth, where man-made products take precedence over natural products. Ghosh points out that this human conviction of independence from material dependence on nature is a fallacy. Twentieth century humans, he asserts, are ever more dependent on the energy trapped in fossil fuels. Because of "our ever-increasing servitude to the products of the Earth", Ghosh asserts that the destiny that befell the Bandanese nearly five millennia ago "might be read as a template for the present" (Ibid., 19).

Extermination of indeginous groups was practiced and perfected by European colonisers since the Middle Ages. Sir Francis Bacon (see Spedding et al. 2011, 17-36, and quoted in Ghosh 2021, 26), who was the Lord Chancellor of England in his *An Advertisement Touching an Holy War* (1629) written around the time of the Bandanese massacre, lays down in unequivocal terms why it was imperative and lawful for Christian Europeans to terminate the existence of certain communities. He beliefs that these nations are "outlawed and proscribed by the law of nature and nations, or by the immediate commandment of God" and he argues that these wayward, savage countries were merely "routs and shoals of people, as have utterly degenerated from the laws of nature" and hence they were fully justified as a nation "civil and policed . . . [to] cut them off from the face of the earth". Christian Europeans deemed it their God-appropriated privilege to attack and extinguish the indigenous people in Africa, America and Asia. Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker (2000, 40, and quoted in Ghosh 2021, 26) in their seminal work on early European colonisation and capitalism, *The Many Headed Hydra*, identify this moment in colonial history as the crucial point where "genocide and divinity cross. Bacon's advertisement for a holy war was thus a call for several types of genocide, which found its sanction in biblical and classical antiquity". Bacon's sanctioning of this invasion of virgin lands and the brutal extermination of its people as a holy war informs the imperialistic ambitions of Western powers to this day. The Bandanese were intricately enmeshed with the landscape they inhabited. This mode of conceiving the natural world accorded it with a degree of agency - "to the landscape itself, and all that lies within it, including the entire range of nonhuman beings" (Ghosh 2021, 34-35). But for the invaders the landscape was simply a material resource that could be harnessed for greater profit. This subjugation of the human savages as well as an entire range of non-human entities like trees, plants, animals and landscapes through recurrent invasion and conquest established the notion of 'Nature' as an inert entity, which became a basic tenet of Western hegemonic thinking and imperialistic ambitions. The material resources that sustained the Bandanese settlements, their houses, food stocks, tools and boats were burned down. The mass slaughter forced them to flee to the mountains where they perished of starvation, disease and mass suicide. "In the broadest possible sense, the elimination of the Bandanese was brought about not just by targeted

killings of humans, but by destroying the entire web of non-human connections that sustained a certain way of life” (Ibid., 41).

Virgin soil epidemics played a profound role in the extermination of indigenous groups. The ‘Great Dying’ of indigenous peoples during the colonial invasion of the Americas was in part due to the diseases that fell on these virgin soils and decimated its populations, independently of human agency. The European settlers were convinced that pathogens were their most potent allies in this racial war. The variola virus or the small pox virus had a privileged place in late eighteenth century warfare. Elizabeth Fenn (2000, 1579) in her essay titled “Biological Warfare in Eighteenth Century North America” notes that as a weapon of mass extermination, smallpox had another advantage: “unlike rape, pillage, and other atrocities in which the intent and identity of the perpetrator could be made clear, the propagation of smallpox had the advantage of deniability”. The withholding of medical care and derisory nutritional provisions ensured the gravity of the decimation of indigenous people. Environmental historian Alfred J. Crosby argued that the *Columbian Exchange* – the large scale transfer of plant, animal and microbial species between the Europe and its colonies in the late 15th and the subsequent centuries – was responsible for the depopulation of the virgin soils. In his Pulitzer Prize winning work *Guns, Germs, and Steel* (1997) the acclaimed American polymath, Jared Diamond argued that the east-west orientation of the Eurasian continent helped its people develop resistance to new diseases as the continent became one giant pool of genetic sharing with widespread dissemination of crops, animals, and microbes. The indigenous people were vulnerable, immunologically defenceless to the diseases of the Old World as they had had no prior contacts with these pathogens. Hence virgin soil epidemics wiped out huge numbers of natives not just in the Americas but across the world as in Australia and Africa – an extermination strategy practised to perfection by the European Colonists. Thus another non-human agency, microbes, played a substantial role in determining the destiny of entire cultures and nations. Diseases, especially virgin soil epidemics like smallpox, measles, cholera, dysentery, typhoid, malaria etc. played a decisive role in the colonial enterprise of demographic take over and territorial expansion.

Alfred Crosby (1986, 97) coined the term “Neo-Europes” in his *Ecological Imperialism* to refer to the large scale changes wrought upon the flora, fauna, demography and terrain of Australia and Africa,

the Canary Islands and New Zealand. According to Ghosh the prevalence of the word "New" in colonial discourse points directly to one of the most significant aspects of colonial expansion, namely ecological and topographical transformation (Ghosh 2021, 52). Jack Williamson, the science fiction writer is credited for the coinage of terms like 'psionics', 'genetic engineering' and 'terraforming'. Williamson's neologism 'terraforming', first used in his 1942 science-fiction short story "Collision Orbit" published in Astounding Science Fiction, refer explicitly to the process of transforming or moulding the land or the earth, though the word is often used by sci-fi writers to refer to the large scale geological transformation or planetary engineering techniques adopted to make an extraterrestrial planetary environment congenial to human sustenance and habitation. Ghosh draws a parallel between the sci-fi concept of 'terraforming' and the expansionist impulses of the colonial enterprise, calling it "an extrapolation from colonial history, except that it extends the project of creating neo-Europes into one of creating neo-Earths. Consequently, narratives of terraforming draw heavily on the rhetoric and imagery of empire, envisioning space as a "frontier" to be "conquered" and "colonized"" (Ibid., 54). The biopolitical nature of terraforming warrants large scale environmental intervention culminating in massive ecological disruptions and substantial changes in climatic conditions in addition to the absolute extermination of indigenous population. Ghosh rightly regards the project of terraforming as "fundamentally conflictual" and as "a mode of warfare, of a distinctive kind" (Ibid., 55).

Biopolitical warfare has a fundamental distinction when compared to other forms of warfare. It relies heavily on material forces, non-human agencies and natural forces to decimate aboriginal population. Independent of human agency, the settler-colonial conflicts unfold in the domain of Nature, its results serving the colonisers interests and purpose. Ghosh observes: "Indigenous people faced a state of permanent war that involved many kinds of other-than-human beings and entities: pathogens, rivers, forests, plants, and animals all played a part in the struggle" (Ibid., 57-58). Diseases captured the popular imagination of the Native Indians of the Americas as early as the sixteenth century when the British colonised parts of the continent and established colonies in Virginia. According to Joyce E. Chaplin (2001, 356) the natives regarded diseases as weapons of war, quite explicitly referring to them as "invisible bullets" and the "settlers' kinsmen and

allies" (Ghosh 2021, 60). The Ojibwas recall being presented with a contaminated flag by traders as a mark of friendship, the unfurling of it resulting in an epidemic around 1770. Crosby (1986, 3220 quoted in Ghosh 2021, 61) narrates how the mythic hero of the Kiowa tribe encounters a stranger dressed like a missionary who claims to be "smallpox" and declares: "I come from far away, across the Eastern Ocean. I am one with the white men – they are my people as the Kiowas are yours. Sometimes I travel ahead of them sometimes I lurk behind. But I am always their companion and you will find me in their camps and in their houses". Ghosh enumerates numerous instances when the European settlers effectively employed pathogens in their wars of extermination. The variola virus that caused smallpox topped the list of preferred lethal agents. Thomas Macaulay (1914) famously dubbed smallpox as the most terrible of all ministers of death. The Pontiac's Rebellion of 1763-65 that challenged the authority of the British state and its attempt to abrogate the sovereignty of Native Americans was crushed by the British using a handkerchief and two blanket out of a smallpox hospital handed over as parting gifts to two native Indian emissaries at Fort Pitt. Shortly after, an epidemic broke out in Ohio extirpating large numbers of natives. Elizabeth Fenn (2000, 1579) observes that smallpox had an established place in late-eighteenth-century warfare. As a biological weapon it had a distinct advantage: "unlike rape, pillage, and other atrocities in which the intent and identity of the perpetrator could be made clear, the propogation of smallpox had the advantage of deniability".

Terraforming was central to the project of European conquest of virgin soils. The colonisers considered the virgin lands as wild and savage in need of ecological intervention in order to turn it into productive use. The indigenous people did not demarcate their lands into enclosures for private use and shifted their dwellings and cattle as and when the situation demanded such a displacement. Hence the settlers argued that the natives had no rights of ownership over their lands, which gave the settler Europeans the privilege of laying claims to the virgin territories and initiating the process of conquest and transformation. Ghosh (2021, 63) observes: "It was by planting, and creating "plantations," that the settlers claimed land. The right to terraform was thus an essential part of settler identity; their claim of ownership was founded on the notion that they were "improving" the land by making it productive in ways that were recognizable as such by Europeans". The historian William Cronon in his work *Changes in*

the Land: Indians, Colonists and the Ecology of New England categorically states that the European perception of the appropriate use of the natural environment and the resources therein contributed significantly to their ideas of conquest. Nature was one giant resource that could be appropriated to fulfil colonial ambitions. Once conquered, the conquered object exhausts the conqueror's imagination, turns inert and supine, loses its meaning and inspires a contempt that arises from familiarity which Ghosh finds deeply entrenched within contemporary cultures of modernity (Ibid., 76-77).

Ghosh draws an uncanny parallel between the current planetary crisis and the environmental disruptions subsequent to the environmentally mediated colonial conquest in the Americas and Australia. The ecological disturbances of today are re-enactments of the biopolitical wars of the past where "human agency is masked by "material forces" and "natural processes" (Ibid., 166). The global climate crisis is the Earth's response to the ecological transformations set in motion by the European project of conquest, colonisation and extermination. Joyce E. Chaplin (2001, 118) categorically states that modern science and its tools "explicitly supported empire, defining strategies for colonization". Conflict through inaction, a marked characteristic of biopolitical warfare that led to large scale extermination of indigenous races assume new significance in contemporary times as the poor and the non-whites are pushed further deep into the sacrifice-zones to bear the blunt of climate changes and public health scares. However the non-human bio-agents - the invisible allies in the colonial project – are no longer aligned with the humans in their projects of territorial supremacy. "Other-than-human beings, forces, and entities, both manmade and earthly, could be pursuing their own ends, of which humans know nothing", observes Ghosh (2021, 171). Western elite culture legitimised extermination as natural selection wherein the lower, mentally underdeveloped people of foreign lands succumbed to inevitable destruction when pitted against a stronger European race. This thought was sanctioned by Alfred Russel Wallace, who is considered as the co-founder of the theory of evolution, in his lecture on 'The Origin of Human Races' (Ghosh 2021, 184; Lindqvist 1992, 132).

Ghosh argues that the historical processes of conflict and colonization led to the emergence of the mechanistic conceptions of nature. He aligns with Carolyn Merchant, who in her seminal work *The Death of Nature* considers the mechanical torturing of witches as a

potent metaphor for mechanical interventions on nature, wherein nature was treated as an "essentially feminine domain of disorder that had to be conquered, subjugated, and indeed tortured in order to extract her secrets" (Ghosh 2021, 255). This in turn legitimised the exploitation of natural resources. This metaphysic of contemporary modernity is driving the planet towards implacable apocalyptic violence. The intersection of the human and the non-human forms of agency has been governed largely by mechanistic ideologies of conquest and colonisation. However Ghosh challenges the prevalent notion of regarding the Earth as an inert resource. He argues that landscapes are neither inert nor mute, but elusive and permeated with vitality, harbouring a latent force that manifests itself in climatic events of uncanny and unmatched vehemence and brutality. The nonhuman voices, muted in the centuries old geo-political social order, are to be restored to the narrative of contemporary modernity in light of imminent planetary catastrophe. Ghosh presents a sweeping account of the structured violence practised by the human race for centuries to exterminate large groups of people and to make decisive interventions in nature by way of terraforming. In fact extermination and terraforming, both vital aspects of the colonial project of territorial expansion and colonisation have placed the planet in a precarious situation. Ghosh vehemently critiques the role of Western colonial expansion in the dynamics of climate crisis. Contemporary modernity, entrenched within the Anthropocene, is marked by this precarity. Collective flourishing, recognising and accommodating the agency and voice of non-human life forms is the key to saving the planet from impending doom. The nutmeg's history is the history of genocide, conquest and exploitation, both of the virgin soils and its populace. The nutmeg's tale, thus, evolves from a detailed biography of the now-ubiquitous spice, into a parable of contemporary modernity.

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