



Colonial Roots and Climate Crisis: Contextualizing Environmental Deterioration in Amitav Ghosh's *The Nutmeg's Curse*

Nazneen Khan¹, Rajkumar Singh²

¹Professor, Department of English and Modern European Languages, University of Lucknow, UP, India

²Research Scholar, Department of English and Modern European Languages, University of Lucknow, UP, India

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Abstract— *The climate crisis is often perceived as a modern phenomenon, driven by industrialization and consumerism. However, Amitav Ghosh's The Nutmeg's Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis (2021) challenges this prevailing narrative by tracing the origins of environmental degradation back to the colonial era. This paper conducts a critical analysis of Ghosh's work, positing that the exploitation of natural resources and indigenous populations during colonialism established enduring patterns of violence and extraction that persist in the modern world. Through the examination of the nutmeg trade in the Banda Islands of Indonesia, Ghosh elucidates how the commodification of nature and the marginalization of indigenous knowledge systems have contributed to the current ecological crisis. The paper explores three key concerns in Ghosh's work: i) the role of colonialism as a foundational cause of environmental degradation, ii) the suppression of indigenous knowledge systems and their critical role in addressing ecological challenges, and iii) the portrayal of the climate crisis as a continuation of colonial violence. This paper underscores Ghosh's advocacy for a paradigm shift away from exploitative practices and towards a more reciprocal relationship with the natural world. The paper concludes that the climate crisis can be effectively addressed not only through advancements in technology and policy but also through a comprehensive examination of the historical legacies of colonialism and a rethinking of humanity's position within Earth's ecosystems.*

Keywords— Colonialism, Exploitation, Slow Violence, Climate Change, Global Warming

Climate change and global warming have emerged as significant challenges of the Anthropocene, an epoch characterized by humanity's substantial influence on Earth's ecosystems. The growing scientific consensus on human-induced climate change has highlighted the cultural and literary dimensions of the crisis as vital for addressing the issue. Literature serves as a reflective and imaginative medium to explore the ethical, emotional, and existential aspects of climate change, while critiquing dominant ideologies and promoting ecological awareness. Ulrich Beck's concept of modern society as a 'risk society' underlines the continuous issue of climate change in the modern world (Mythen 5). Beck, in his 1986 book *Risk*

Society: Towards a New Modernity (translated in 1992), asserts that contemporary societies, particularly those that are post-industrial, have transitioned into a phase wherein the risks arising from advancements in technology, industry, and science, such as pollution, nuclear hazards, and climate change, are of greater significance than the conventional social risks of poverty, warfare, and inequality (11).

Climate change has brought significant global attention, with the onset of colonization, concurring with the advent of European invasions. The root cause of climate deterioration can be traced to the excessive consumption patterns of nature by human societies



worldwide (Kang 23). In her article entitled “Climate Change as Climate Debt: Forging a Just Future,” Cynthia D. Moe-Lobeda examines the historical emergence of climate change, attributing its origins to the disproportionate utilization of natural capitals by economically disadvantaged communities (27). She writes, “Climate change may be the most far-reaching manifestation of white privilege and class privilege to face humankind. Caused overwhelmingly by high-consuming people, climate change is wreaking death and destruction foremost on impoverished people, who also are disproportionately people of colour” (27).

In the age of scientific advancements and industrial growth, environmental degradation affects the scientific community as it deals with critical societal issues. The world faces increasingly severe weather events, aggravated by human-induced climate change, impacting the globe at large (Fisko 4). The expansion of human activities; such as deforestation, canal construction, and the damming of rivers, has resulted in extensive environmental disruptions (Gupta J.). As a result, the earth is currently grappling with environmental crisis and the specter of global warming (Fremaux and Barry 199). Timothy Clark, through his paper “Scale,” highlights the apparent neglect of environmental concerns and challenges within contemporary political systems. He characterizes it as “unmolested use of individual property and exploitation of natural resources” (153). Cynthia D. Moe-Lobeda examines the origins and ramifications of climate change, focusing on the populations most affected; specifically coastal communities, subsistence farmers, and inhabitants of islands, who are disproportionately impacted by climatic alterations. This disparity has been termed ‘climate debt’ (28-29).

The term ‘climate debt’ encapsulates the environmental inequity between those most affected by climate change and those who contribute significantly to the crisis. This situation emerges due to scientific advancement, economic development, and population growth, resulting in a shift towards greed and reduced concern for the environment. Notably, Noam Chomsky and others, in their work “Climate Crisis and the Global Green New Deal” (2020), assert that addressing the environmental crisis requires the establishment of a framework that prioritizes sustainability over the profit-driven mentality dominant in the capitalist ideology (53). This viewpoint theorizes that contemporary state capitalism prioritizes socializing costs and risks while privatizing profits, necessitating restrictions on current economic rationality to address the ecological crisis. Furthermore, it emphasizes the importance of

incorporating the humanities alongside science in confronting issues like global warming.

Amitav Ghosh, in “Writing the Unimaginable,” elaborates, “Given the implications of climate change for our future, the subject should universally occupy the prerogatives of fiction writers worldwide. One could argue that fiction addressing climate change is largely dismissed by serious literary journals” (44). Adeline Johns-Putra stresses the necessity of integrating environmental crises into literature and climate studies to raise awareness and inspire younger generations to find solutions, ensuring a more secure planet and safeguarding the natural world (267).

In recent decades, a significant body of literature on climate change has created a new academic field called eco-criticism, with notable works like Margaret Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake* (2003) and *The Year of the Flood* (2009), and Amitav Ghosh’s *The Great Derangement* exploring humanity’s connection to nature and the consequences of ecological neglect (Grimbeek 4, Gupta 633). These literary texts not only illustrate the physical transformations occurring on our planet but also explore the psychological and ethical dilemmas encountered by individuals and communities in response to these changes. Donna Haraway in *Staying with the Trouble* writes, “Narrative is not just a reflection of reality; it is a tool for shaping it. Stories have the power to challenge dominant ideologies and imagine new ways of being” (67). This emerging trend in academia explores the intersection between literature and the environment, examining historical narratives from pastoral themes to nature and ecology, and progressing through environmental fiction and climate fiction (Schneider-Mayerson 474). Arpna Gupta, in her paper “Climate Change and The Unthinkable: An Ecocritical Study of Climate Fiction,” rightly points out that the shift in interest towards climate change has not been confined to the realm of fiction and non-fiction alone; it has permeated into the realms of poetry, drama, and theatre as well (629). She writes:

Literature has been a potent tool for expressing the fears, moral quandaries, and emotional reactions that come with environmental issues, from early warnings of environmental degradation to dystopian visions of a future devastated by climate change. As the field of ecocriticism grows, it explores more deeply how literary works—particularly those written in English—address the unimaginable effects of climate change, like increasing sea levels, mass extinctions, and environmental collapse. (Gupta 629)

The study of literature in relation to climate change is closely linked to ecocriticism, which explores the relationship between literary works and the environment (Gupta 628). Notable scholars like Lawrence Buell, Ursula K. Heise, and Timothy Morton have advanced this field by examining the 'Anthropocene,' marked by human influence on Earth's ecosystems. This significant transformation has given rise to Climate Fiction, commonly referred to as Cli-Fi; a term coined by Danny Bloom (Andersen 1). Cli-Fi as a distinct literary genre explores futures shaped by climate change, prompting reflections on historical awareness and the cultural impact of environmental issues while emphasizing solutions and increased awareness (Andersen 1, Gupta 628). Adeline Johns-Putra notices a major increase in the study of climate fiction and its perceptions. She calls it a 'cultural phenomenon' in contemporary literary and critical studies. Johns-Putra writes:

...climate change is no longer a marginal topic in literature and literary studies. Climate change fiction, or cli-fi, has gained considerable public and critical attention. Climate change in literary studies, particularly in literary or critical theory, is also now being heralded as a discrete subfield of literary studies. This is more than just a matter of perception and of naming: there has been an actual increase in literary engagements with climate change, and literary scholars have been busy exploring both these texts and the concept of climate change as a cultural phenomenon. (Johns-Putra 266)

Cli-fi, unlike traditional science fiction, focuses on the real and often devastating effects of global warming, as seen in works like Paolo Bacigalupi's *The Water Knife* (2015) and Kim Stanley Robinson's *New York 2140* (2017), which depict societies facing resource shortages and climate-driven migration. These stories serve as cautionary tales and imaginative visions of future realities shaped by climate change. Amitav Ghosh, in his book *The Nutmeg's Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis* (2021), delves into the concerns of climate crisis and ecological degradation, challenging the contemporary narratives that have allowed for the expansion of industrial activities at the expense of environmental health (Gupta J.). In her analysis, Eliza Daley describes the exploitation of natural resources as "the creation of a dead world that is external and inferior to us, thereby justifying its exploitation" (2022). On this issue, Amitav Ghosh has questioned both scientists and writers. He criticizes them for "not mentioning climate change as it would banish them from the preserves of serious fiction. Future generations may conclude that our generation concealed the realities, as we failed to reflect

climate change in our work. Our era will be looked upon as the time of the Great Derangement" (*The Great Derangement* 23). Ghosh has further accentuated this point, asserting that climate change ought to be a paramount concern for authors, yet it is notably absent from the realm of literary preoccupations (*The Guardian*).

The Nutmeg's Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis addresses the onset of climate change and raises a multitude of issues. The blurb on the cover page mentions that:

...*The Nutmeg's Curse* argues that the dynamics of climate change is rooted in a centuries-old geopolitical order constituted by Western colonialism. The story of the nutmeg becomes a parable revealing the ways human history has always been entangled with earthly materials—spices, tea, sugar, cane, opium and fossil fuels. Our crisis, Ghosh shows, is ultimately the result of a mechanistic view of the earth, where nature exists only as a resource for humans to use for our own ends, rather than as a force of its own, full of agency and meaning. (*The Nutmeg's Curse*, cover page)

Ghosh highlights how European colonialism led to the exploitation of ecologically rich lands and addresses the challenges of rising refugee numbers. He examines the environmental catastrophe linked to industrial development from pre-colonial times to colonization, framing the climate crisis as a global issue (Khan 2). The Chicago University Press notes that *The Nutmeg's Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis* confronts the issue of planetary crises right from the era of European discovery of the New World through to the era of exploitation and consumption of natural resources by colonizers (Chicago). Ghosh argues that the issue of environmental disturbance has not occurred instantly but has been reflected in the long geopolitical construct and the power structure right from the seventeenth century.

Amitav Ghosh's book, *The Nutmeg's Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis*, critiques human impact on the environment through a mix of historical narrative, essay, and polemic, starting with the Dutch invasion of Banda Islands to highlight those accountable for today's ecological degradation. Ananya Jahanara Kabir views this book as a warning against the perils of global warming; highlighting how Amitav Ghosh skillfully uses the tale of nutmeg cultivation and trade to underscore humanity's past and present environmental attitudes (3). In *The Great Derangement*, he critiques the lack of depiction of climate concerns in literary fiction and calls for urgent action to protect the environment (Priya 616, Grimbeek 73).

In *The Nutmeg's Curse*, Amitav Ghosh examines various environmental challenges and pollution, emphasizing humanity's unsustainable relationship with natural resources. He explores the links between colonial exploitation and environmental disturbances, highlighting how the colonization process suppressed populations and exploited nature, leading to contemporary climate challenges and environmental degradation. Tracing the onset of the environmental crisis to the Europeans' arrival on Banda Islands around 1623, Amitav Ghosh, in the beginning of the book, describes the Dutch East India Company's brutal takeover of the islands, "He (Martijn Sonck) has seized the best houses for his troops, and he has also sent soldiers swarming over the village, terrifying the inhabitants" (Ghosh, *The Nutmeg's Curse* 5-6).

The European colonization was characterized by geopolitical dominance, resulting in the exploitation and violence against native populations, as highlighted by Ghosh in the introductory chapter of the book, which emphasizes their suffering and lack of agency in the face of European desires. He articulates:

The brutality of this plan is such that the villagers have not, perhaps, been able to fully comprehend it yet. But the Dutchman, for his part, has made no secret of his intentions; to the contrary, he has made it perfectly clear to the elders that he expects their full cooperation in the destruction of their own settlement and the expulsion of their fellow villagers. (Ghosh 6)

These acts of violence and aggression against the indigenous populations were not abrupt; rather, the locals endured prolonged period of coercion and threats. The impact of colonization extended beyond Banda Islands; many other islands and affluent nations suffered similar fates at the hands of colonial powers (Kang 36). Ghosh writes, "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, powers of communication, and the ability to make meaning— animals, trees, volcanoes, nutmegs." (190). He poses a critical question regarding the plight of the subjugated and suppressed populations, wondering, "HOW MUST IT FEEL to find yourself face- to- face with someone who has made it clear that he has the power to bring your world to an end, and has every intention of doing so?" (6)

The Nutmeg's Curse critiques colonial dominance and ecological destruction, highlighting the mechanization of empowerment and human intrusion into nature. Ghosh argues that the issue of ecological imbalance emerges from

historical violence and exploitation rooted in colonialism, echoing similarities to Naomi Klein's work *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. The Climate* that examines the impact of capitalism on the intensification of environmental crisis. He describes the nutmeg narrative as one of genocide and community extermination, emphasizing how profit-driven pursuits have devastated both human and non-human life. (41-42).

Amitav Ghosh highlights the exploitation of natural resources during the colonial era, focusing on the Dutch opium trade alongside their monopolization of cloves and nutmegs. He critiques the broader implications of Western colonialism, emphasizing the materialistic view that treats the Earth merely as a resource for human exploitation, which reflects a disregard for environmental sustainability (91). Ghosh juxtaposes the human-centred perspective of European colonizers, who perceive environment as a means to be controlled, with the animistic beliefs of indigenous groups, who regard nature as alive and sacred (Gupta 630). This resonates with the thoughts of scholars such as Eduardo Viveiros de Castro and Robin Wall Kimmerer, who in their writings, *Cannibal Metaphysics* and *Braiding Sweetgrass*, respectively, emphasize the interconnectedness of humans and the environment. Eduardo Viveiros writes, "The world is not a collection of objects, but a community of subjects" (76). Criticizing the colonizers' approach towards Banda Islands, Ghosh writes:

...Indigenous life in the upper Great Plains was destroyed again and again by processes of terraforming, most of all through the diversion and damming of rivers. The building of dams (...) has historically delivered some of the most devastating blows to Native communities. Flooding caused by dams dislocated entire towns and destroyed fishing sites, contributing to starvation and poverty inflicted by US policies. (69)

Ghosh refers the colonization of Banda Islands as a microcosmic illustration of the broader natural world, serving as a metaphor for the exploitation of the planet and a framework for comprehending humanity's historical tendency to exert control over marginalized communities, thereby exploiting their land and resources for individual benefit (Gupta 633). In his review of the book, Raghavendra elaborates on the more sustainable relationship that indigenous peoples and shamans maintained with nature, in stark contrast to the exploitative perspective adopted by civilizations that perceived nature solely as a resource (2021).

Amitav Ghosh contends that nature possesses its inherent power to sustain itself and sees the COVID-19 pandemic as a natural event. Moreover, he questions the way human development has unfolded, drawing a parallel to Kimmerer's perspective that humans must first understand the essence of ecological and cultural sustainability before we can even begin to move toward achieving these goals (97). Kimmerer rightly observes that "The land is the real teacher. All we need as students is mindfulness" (222).

As the environmental challenges become increasingly severe, Antonia Mehnert notes that the cultural domain offers a transformative approach to contemporary environmental issues such as climate change (167). This approach not only interjects into ongoing debates but also significantly influences their direction. Ghosh describes 'terraforming' (54) as the systematic exploitation of natural resources by colonizers, who left their native lands to seek valuable resources globally. This process involved not only resource extraction but also cultural dominance, leading to significant changes in landscapes and the extinction of indigenous species, as highlighted by Eliza Daley in the context of European colonization and the establishment of colonies (2022). Ghosh argues that colonization is the root cause of environmental degradation, leading to issues like deforestation, biodiversity loss, wildfires, and ecosystem disruption. He suggests that the ecological scars of colonialism are still evident in today's world (143).

Ghosh argues that colonialism was not just a historical event but a systemic process that altered humanity's relationship with the environment (78). He highlights how the exploitation of natural resources and indigenous peoples during this period led to lasting patterns of violence and extraction, exemplified by the commodification of nutmeg, which reflects a shift towards an extractive economic model prioritizing short-term profit over sustainability (196, 255). Scholars including Jason W. Moore and Rob Nixon, in their respective works *Capitalism in the Web of Life* and *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, have similarly argued that colonialism established the foundation for the global capitalist system. This system, in turn, perpetuates environmental degradation through continuous resource extraction and the generation of waste (Moore 56; Nixon 34). Jason W. Moore, in his book *Capitalism in the Web of Life*, writes, "The colonial project was not just about the extraction of resources; it was about the imposition of a worldview that saw nature as an inert resource to be dominated and exploited" (56). The concept of the "Capitalocene," as articulated by the author, underscores how the commodification of nature during the colonial era

established the foundation for contemporary ecological crises (Moore 78). In a parallel view, Rob Nixon, in his work *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, investigates the enduring environmental repercussions of colonial exploitation, particularly within the Global South. Nixon's term "slow violence" effectively encapsulates the gradual yet devastating outcomes of resource extraction and environmental degradation that were initiated during colonialism (45).

Amitav Ghosh provocatively posits the climate crisis as a continuation of the violence that originated in colonial times (156). The ideologies that justified the exploitation of colonized people and their territories, namely anthropocentrism, racial hierarchies, and the myth of perpetual growth, currently underpin the global systems that are propelling climate change (178). This viewpoint aligns closely with critics like Naomi Klein who, in the book *This Changes Everything*, examines the role of capitalism in intensifying environmental destruction, and Dipesh Chakrabarty, who investigates how the legacies of colonialism inform our present planetary challenges in his book *The Climate of History in the Planetary Age*. Chakrabarty asserts, "The climate crisis is not a natural phenomenon but a historical one, rooted in the violence of colonialism and the rise of capitalism" (23).

Amitav Ghosh argues that the climate crisis should be viewed as part of a long history of exploitation rather than a recent issue, as showcased in *The Nutmeg's Curse*, which critiques historical injustices and envisions a future focused on reciprocal relationships with nature, moving away from colonial exploitative mentalities (234). This call resonates with the arguments put forth by ecofeminists such as Donna Haraway, who in her book *Staying with the Trouble*, promotes the notion of "making kin" (67) with non-human entities and Bruno Latour, who in *Down to Earth*, stresses upon the necessity of reconsidering our position within Earth's systems (89). Ghosh connects environmental studies, postcolonial theory, and history to analyze the climate crisis origins, linking the exploitation of the Banda Islands to present ecological challenges. Through parables and storytelling, Ghosh reimagines our relationship with nature and suggests that narrative can act as resistance, prompting further examination of colonial histories' impact on current environmental policies in the Global South (130).

Thus, *The Nutmeg's Curse* illustrates that the environmental crisis is not a singular occurrence but rather the result of centuries of colonial exploitation. As Robin Wall Kimmerer, in her book *Braiding Sweetgrass*, articulates, "Indigenous knowledge systems offer a way of seeing the world that is not based on domination but on

reciprocity and balance" (45), Ghosh highlights Indigenous perspectives and calls for a broader worldview, suggesting a reparative and revolutionary approach to confront historical truths. He concludes that addressing the climate crisis necessitates the dismantling of colonial systems of control and extraction. Hence, Amitav Ghosh's *The Nutmeg's Curse* constitutes a noteworthy contribution to the growing body of scholarship focused on comprehending and confronting the interconnected legacies of colonialism and environmental degradation.

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