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## Book Review of The Nutmeg's Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis by Amitav Ghosh

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# Amitav Ghosh. *The Nutmeg's Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis*. Chicago. The University of Chicago Press 2021. ISBN 9780226815459, Price \$25.00 (Cloth). 339 Pages

Cynthia T. Fowler<sup>1</sup>

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Amitav Ghosh, a celebrated author of fiction and nonfiction, earned a doctorate in social anthropology from Oxford. In this iteration of his nonfiction oeuvre, Ghosh's mapping of the historical entanglement of human rights abuses and environmental exploitation is framed upon the pillars of postcolonialism and posthumanism. Many of the processes he writes about in his acclaimed book *The Nutmeg's Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis* overlap with the interests of *Human Ecology* readers. Chapters 4 "Terraforming," 5 "We Shall be Gone Shortly," and 6 "Bonds of Earth" may feel familiar to students of environmental histories and aficionados of Alfred Crosby and William Cronon. In these chapters Ghosh shows how colonial violence occurred in parallel fashion in the Bandas and the Americas through variations on colonizers' erroneous terra nullius misperceptions, the egotism of human exceptionalism, anthropogenic ecological change, biological warfare, usurpation and commodification of natural resources, hijacking of local trade networks, and more. Ghosh traces the history of the trade in nutmeg and other spices from the first Dutch contact with and subsequent brutal colonization of the Banda Islands of Indonesia in the first quarter of the seventeenth century and draws illuminating parallels with the contemporary social and environmental histories of the Americas.

Readers who appreciate logical risk-taking may enjoy Ghosh's speculative style of reasoning. Other readers may find themselves hoping for more evidence to support propositions or wishing they had more confidence in conclusions reached. Regarding evidence, a statement on page 67 places the Yamasee in Virginia rather than in their homelands along the South Carolina-Georgia-Florida coast. A major example

of Ghosh's interpretive license is the interpretation of the story about nutmeg as containing a set of lessons about the current global environmental crisis. Colonialism and capitalism justify violence by stripping organisms (nutmeg, humans, etc.) of meaning and converting homelands into wildernesses resulting in the ruination of Planet Earth. Violence predates empire and trade, however, in Ghosh's view and militarization is the underlying driver of all other "-ations" and "-isms" (imperialism, exploitation, commodification, capitalism, ecological ruination). The reasoning Ghosh uses to make these connections and draw these conclusions may appeal to readers to a greater or lesser degree depending on their methodological and epistemological preferences.

One minor example of speculative reasoning in *The Nutmeg's Curse* is Ghosh's proposition, citing Lewis and Maslin's (2015) article in *Nature*, that the depopulation of Indigenous Peoples' territories due to direct and indirect violence perpetrated by European colonizers caused afforestation and a subsequent decrease in atmospheric carbon that was impactful enough to initiate the Little Ice Age. Ghosh admits, "This hypothesis is by no means proven" (p. 53), citing a critique of the idea by Degroot (2019). In my understanding climate change is a long-term process and the factors leading to the Little Ice Age were in motion for many years prior to its onset in 1303. While human activities were possibly already influencing climate change prior to the twelfth century despite the much lower population levels, anthropogenic climate forcers were at a different magnitude than they have now reached, when they are undoubtedly influencing global warming.

Ghosh uses the term "terraforming" to describe process of re-fashioning ecosystems in his discussion of the effect colonizers had in the Banda Islands and the Americas (Ch.4). If the Anthropocene began with colonialism and "terraforming" also began with colonialism, then it is indeed sensible to employ the concept of terraforming to

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historically contextualize anthropogenic climate change as he does. Ghosh describes how changing demographics through violence and displacement, disrupting societies through crop destruction and burning of settlements, and renaming of places were techniques of colonialism in both North America and the Banda Islands. Ghosh identifies “terraforming” with the parallel belief among the Bandanese Islanders and the Pequot, Diné, and Cayuse of North America that the Earth can speak.

The expectations for this book will not be met for readers who, judging from the title, plan to dive deeply into Indonesian ethnobiology or to follow nutmeg on a historical journey through ancient trade routes. Rather, Ghosh takes readers down many paths from the Bandas to Native North American communities, to logistics hubs in the Middle East, Bangladeshi migrants in Italy, Black Lives Matters activists, to the climate change denying descendants of settler colonists. Ghosh leads readers along a journey from Bandanese traditional knowledge, to Greek mythology, to carbon footprint propaganda, geoengineering biases, growth and accumulation ideology, and the Gaia hypothesis. Connecting all of these paths and by-ways are colonial violence and capitalistic exploitation as well as the persistence of life-affirming ethics, the potential for cooperative communities, and the agency of nonhumans (particularly, nutmeg, fossil fuels, cloves, and opium). Like so many good books, the meaning of the title deepens as one progresses through the 19 chapters towards an “aha!” moment in the end when we see how beliefs in dark magic are widespread, powerful motivating forces and how horror stories about microlevel events reveal patterns in global atrocities.

At the end of his book in Chapter 19, Ghosh refers back to the incident that is the source for the title of Chapter 1 — a lamp falling in the night — he also makes it relevant to today’s readers by connecting the incident to recent nightmares and enlightens readers to the meaning of the book’s subtitle: *Parables for a Planet in Crisis*. In a similar style as earlier chapters, the brief 12-page conclusion to this 339-page book, connects the vicious execution of marginalized peoples to witchcraft beliefs embedded in religious fundamentalism and links the seventeenth-century Dutch usurpation of the nutmeg trade to the monopolies of the

twenty-first-century oil trade. This is where Ghosh calls upon his readers to accept the reality of nonhuman agency and to act by including nonhumans’ voices in our stories or better yet by truly hearing their stories. As William Shakespeare wrote in *The Tempest*, “What’s past is prologue.” This truism can be interpreted to mean that the present is constituted by the past. In Act 2 of *The Tempest*, Antonio utters this phrase as a means for justifying a murder he and Sebastian are on the verge of committing. The past set the stage for their future actions. In *The Nutmeg’s Curse* the climate crisis is the current predicament where anthropogenic activities have led already to the premature death of far too many individuals and populations of humans and nonhumans, the extinction of entire species, and the defilement of atmospheres, lands, and oceans. In *The Nutmeg’s Curse*, Ghosh traces some of these past atrocities — starting but not ending with the geocide of Bandanese — to the current climate crisis and urges readers to adopt alternative lifeways through which we could save the Planet.

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