Amitav Ghosh, *The Nutmeg’s Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis*

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REFERENCES


1 *The Nutmeg’s Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis* by Amitav Ghosh marks three decades of a profoundly influential oeuvre that includes fiction, non-fiction, and works that lie somewhere in-between. Pushing further an intellectual trajectory increasingly visible since his three essays on the Tsunami of 2004, Ghosh uses *The Nutmeg’s Curse* to recollect, contemplate, warn, and counsel us about the planetary consequences of global modernity, considered from a particular vantage point in Asia: the Indonesian archipelago of Banda, home of the nutmeg tree. This primarily didactic function has certain formal repercussions, which are signalled by its self-description as “parables.” How do we read and enjoy “parables”?

2 The first work by Ghosh I read was *In an Antique Land* (Ghosh 1992). I was doing my PhD at Cambridge, on matters seemingly far from the worlds he was describing in that genre-defying work—medieval travels across the Arabian Sea, as retrieved from documents on Jewish life contained in the Cairo Geniza collection. Yet it was that same Geniza collection, now part of the Cambridge University Library, that I passed every day while climbing up to the bookstacks on the library’s sixth floor, where the old works on Germanic philology lived. And Ghosh’s impassioned account of his scholarly methods as an ethnographer in Egypt, which forms the other strand of *In an Antique Land*, resonated with my excitement about doctoral research as discovery. Suddenly, no worlds seemed disconnected; past and present, Europe, Asia, and Africa, all revealed interconnections that made perfect sense through Ghosh’s imaginative matrix. The library and the world outside it came together. Words were the rabbit hole through
which we, each an Alice in Ghosh’s wonderland, willingly entered strange realms, learning from him how to make them our own.

3 Ghosh followed up *In an Antique Land* with a steady stream of novels that have been my constant companions in a learning process. He has infused research-fed curiosity into the novel form to write philosophical histories of our linked world, in narrative guise. He has revealed as modernity’s connective tissue that which we would consider as a separating force: empires that fuelled the machine of global capitalism, wrenching people away from their loved ones, loved places, and loved things. The strongest thread running through Ghosh’s novels is that, despite the vagaries and vicissitudes of empire, or even because of them, people find ways of connecting, of building new communities. In the process they — and we, the readers — rediscover what is meaningful for human existence. Ghosh’s characters are not just cogs in the monstrous wheels of history; they make those wheels turn. We follow them moving across vast geographical swathes, making choices, forging relationships. Our hook is the device which Ghosh is master of: emplotment. It is the keystone for his sweeping narrative arcs that interlock the micro-stories of humans with the macro-movements of the machine – not just in his novels, but also his earlier non-fiction – whether *In an Antique Land*, or his immensely readable essays on Cambodia and Burma (Ghosh 1998).

4 However, Ghosh has increasingly written non-fiction that jettisons the scaffolding of a plot. This development arises from two, linked convictions: that the biggest crisis of our times is climate catastrophe, portended already by the tsunami of 2004, and that he must raise awareness about impending planetary collapse by mobilising authority untrammelled by the delightful yet dispensable intricacies of emplotment. The connection surfaces most clearly in *The Great Derangement*, his first novel-length non-fiction work which does away with sustained storytelling (Ghosh 2016). Realist fiction cannot tell stories of climate change, is Ghosh’s perspicacious, meta-narrative explication, because it shores up the very bourgeois universe of wants and desires that climate activism must decry. In turning away from storytelling, ironically, Ghosh nevertheless tells a story: of how he, too, has failed to integrate climate crisis into his complex plots. In *The Nutmeg’s Curse*, Ghosh knows what he must do to escape the temptations of narrativizing: unlike *In an Antique Land*, where personal and historical strands run in equivalence through the work, here he will offer tantalising slivers of both, but only as a frame.

5 The book begins with a gripping account of events around the infamous Dutch massacre of the people of Selamon village on Lonthor, the largest island in the Banda archipelago. It is April 21st, 1621, and a lamp has fallen on the floor of an indigenous building that the Dutch have converted into a billet. We are in a precise place, at a precise moment, with a precise person: Martijn Sonck, who has been sent to destroy the village and expel its inhabitants — all for the sake of nutmeg, which grows here and nowhere else in the world. In a master stroke, Ghosh intertwines the mysterious agency of that fallen lamp with his own pandemic-era isolation in Brooklyn; in the account of how he solved the problems of translating seventeenth-century Dutch, we recognise the same philological delight Ghosh took in decoding language as connector, that irradiates his work from *In an Antique Land* to “The Ibis Trilogy” (Ghosh 2008, 2011, 2015) and beyond. But the web of words and stories that conjures up Banda constitute just the first three chapters and the final one of a nineteen-chapter work.
In between, Ghosh’s authorial voice rehearses connections between British and Dutch empires, expounds on capitalism’s planetary devastation via the problems with European desire for nutmeg, and points out the explosive and violent agency of Nature as vengeful yet necessary resistance. Certain words and phrases recur through the work: “terraforming” has brought humanity to the midst of “the great acceleration,” a distinct phase of planetary history which converges with the will towards “omnicide.” Our most effective antidote is “vitalism” – a term that Ghosh resurrects from ancient and medieval European philosophy to shorthand the geo-cosmogonies of Native Americans as representative of indigenous populations crushed underfoot by Empire’s onward march. “There are times when words seem futile, and to no one more so than a writer,” Ghosh had ruminated at the close of his essay recounting his visit to the Andaman and Nicobar Islands in the wake of the tsunami (Ghosh 2005, n.p.). In The Nutmeg’s Curse, he has found the words he once lacked in the face of ecological disaster; but, have we somehow lost the plot?

“Parables” don’t have narrative complexity; they have morals. The title alerts us to what Ghosh himself admitted in The Great Derangement: that realist fiction and climate activism make difficult bedfellows. Our grand author is in the midst of fervent experimentation with the most appropriate form for his urgent messages: extending his own, earlier, novel, The Hungry Tide (Ghosh 2004), to the unstable terrain of Gun Island (Ghosh 2019); writing a Jungle Nama in English to emulate the folk poetry of the Sundarbans (Ghosh 2021); and now, luring us to seventeenth-century Banda only to withhold from us the pleasures of narrative consumption while educating us, instead, about our planet in crisis. We are all guilty of wanting more of a good thing, and this desire, alas, lies at the very heart of our shared darkness: capitalist modernity.

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BIBLIOGRAPHY


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