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The Spice of Life

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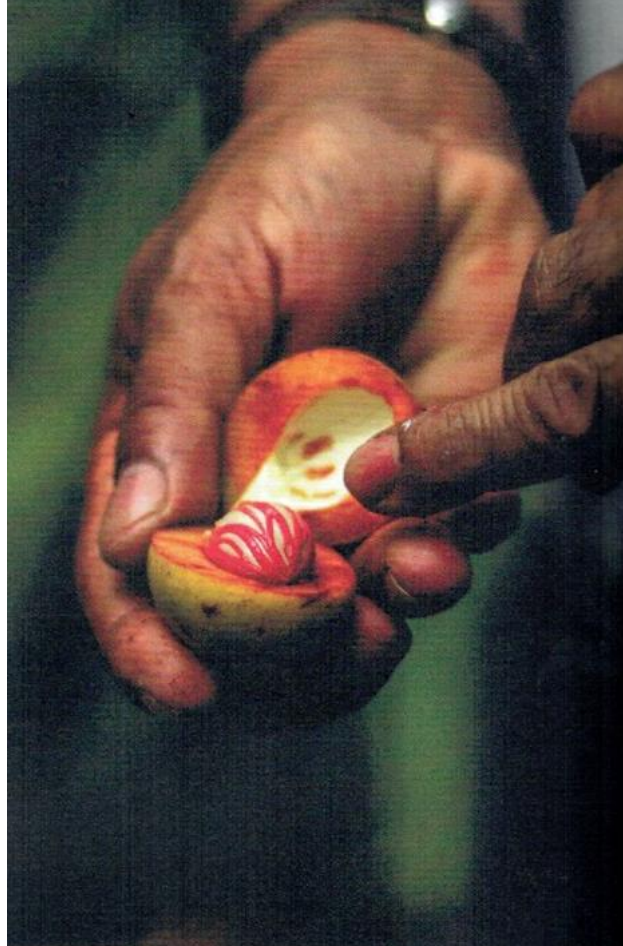
Suhasini Vincent reviews Amitav Ghosh's exploration of nutmeg

The Nutmeg's Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis

Amitav Ghosh

John Murray Press/University of Chicago Press, October 2021

ISBN: 9781529369465



In his latest work of nonfiction, Amitav Ghosh traces the history of the nutmeg (*Myristica fragrans*), a native species of the Banda islands, from colonial times to present-day. He puts forward the idea that the nutmeg's two hemispheres hold hidden meaning in today's world: one shell portraying its commercial merits as a spice and the other elusive crust remaining open to interpretation through parables passed on through the oral tradition.

Ghosh writes that the nutmeg prompted European navigators to break the Venetian hold on the trade of nutmeg, thus engaging monarchs of that time in the 'Spice Race', one that is similar to our present-day 'space race' of the rich and the powerful. The book discusses how, before the arrival of the Dutch East India Company in 1609, the Banda islands in Indonesia had already seen Portuguese and Spanish traders landing on their coasts. Their intent was to seal a treaty permitting them an exclusive monopoly to the island's nutmegs and the inner lacy coating of the nutmeg seed called mace. War between colonial powers over access to nutmeg wreaks devastation on local populations. This theme of the destructive power of colonial extraction will be familiar to Ghosh fans through his fiction.

The book continues by connecting history to the present. Ghosh writes that in the 17th to 19th century, trade wars were fought over plants and botanical matter. In today's world,

likewise, fossilised botanical matter is coveted as a source of energy. Ghosh's exploration of the nutmeg shows us that the stories of the Bandanese are like our present-day accounts of the environmental crisis. "The continuities between the two are so pressing and powerful that it could even be said that the fate of the Banda islands might be read as a template for the present, if we only knew how to tell that story".

Ghosh suggests that humanity should consider a transition towards an Earth-friendly industrial revolution. The book envisages an uprising of our times that will ensure ecological and cultural sustainability on our planet. He contends that during the industrial revolution of the 19th century, fossil fuels triumphed over other cleaner sources of energy as they had the potential of strengthening structures of power. Coal mines sprouted in industrial cities with cheap manpower, whereas water mills could function only near water sources like rivers, canals, and streams. Like the nutmeg, oil and coal have been transported around the planet. The solution, he says, lies in reducing our carbon footprints, phasing out fossil fuels and moving towards a greener economy where sources like the sun, air and water could manifest their immense liberatory power. The book advocates that every individual, be it a farm or a factory, could generate his or its own energy, thus preventing oil leaks on tankers, alleviating hard toil of workers in coal mines, and erasing long supply chains required for fossil fuels. Ghosh believes that our relationship with land cannot heal unless we hear its stories and restore non-human voices to our stories. This is the task that now "rests upon writers, artists, filmmakers, and everyone else who is involved in the telling of stories: to us falls the task of imaginatively restoring agency and voice to nonhumans".