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Altered Visions: Parables of Environmental Crises in Amitav Ghosh's Works.

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Courtesy Firstpost/Taniya Sarkar

Suhasini Vincent

I

n Amitav Ghosh's fiction and non-fiction, the parable as an art of rhetoric, revels in its capacity to figure, configure and reconfigure official Western versions of history, politics, and cultures. Ghosh molds, shapes, and casts the form of the postcolonial parable, as one capable of providing an alternative source of knowledge about the world. Ghosh's parables with their didactic messages serve as another epistemology capable of conveying a larger message of the environmental crises that preoccupy postcolonial literature of our time that is "writing that emerges from peoples who were colonized by European powers, (that) now have some form of political independence but continue to live with the negative, economic, and cultural legacy of colonialism" (Gallagher 4-5).

In his work of fiction, *Gun Island* (2020), Ghosh writes that stories passed on through the oral tradition have life cycles when they are active or dormant due to the times of turmoil and colonial disruption. He refers to the 17th century when European explorers discovered the East and established their first colonies.

“... some stories, like certain life forms, possess a special streak of vitality that allow them to outlive others of their kind ... And in public memory too the legend seems to go through cycles of life, sometimes lying dormant for centuries only to be suddenly rejuvenated by a fresh wave of retellings, in some of which the familiar characters appear under, new names, with subtly changed plot lines”. (Gun Island 7)

Ghosh retells the parable of the Gun Merchant, a rich trader who had stirred the wrath of Manasa Devi, the goddess of snakes. His human error of ignoring the deity has its consequences. His flight from the goddess's snakes, leads him to Bonduk-dwip or the Gun Island in the Indian ocean. Once again, the Goddess appears in a literary twist from the pages of book. After further turmoil at sea, the merchant vows to build a temple on Gun Island, if he is set free of the Goddess's curse. The parable narrates how the Goddess rewards the merchant with fair winds, good tides, and immense fortune. She permits him to return with his spoils to build a rock temple in her name. He is bestowed with the title of BondukiSadagar or the Gun Merchant. The parable is passed down through the centuries in song and verse and the boatman-parable-teller in *Gun Island* sings:

*“Kolkataeytokhonnachhiloloknamakan
Banglarpatanitokhonnagar-e-jahan
Calcutta had neither people nor houses then
Bengal's great port was a city-of-the-world”. (Gun Island17)*

The parable-song is a reminder of the erstwhile grand port of Calcutta and a warning about how land is being reclaimed by the sea. In his work *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (2016), Ghosh wonders if the present generation is deranged. He warns readers that “this era, which so congratulates itself on its self-awareness, will come to be known as the time of the Great Derangement” (*The Great Derangement* 11) and that it is time to pen and record our stories. In the Gun Merchant parable, Ghosh's last lines are “... some day, when the time is right, someone will understand it and who knows? For them it may open up a world that we cannot see” (*Gun Island*18).

Similarly, in *The Hungry Tide*, he highlights how the islands of the Sundarbans are dwindling as the sea slowly takes over land. In the fickle tidal landscape or *bhatir desh* of the Sundarbans, the passage of the ebb tide leaves an ever mutating and unpredictable terrain with “no borders to divide fresh water from salt, river from sea as the water tears away entire promontories and peninsulas; at other times it throws up new shelves and sandbars where there were none before” (*The Hungry Tide* 7). Ghosh insists on the need to record the tale for posterity as future generations would never know of the existence of the parable of Gun Island if not recorded.

In *The Glass Palace* (2000), Ghosh relates another parable of the Teak Tree in Burma, a story that is partly known and partly guessed. The river Irrawaddy is the lieu of colonial trade as it is transformed into a commercial watercourse by the British colonists. The *chaungs* rushing mountain streams that join the Irrawaddy River metamorphose into teak trade winds carrying huge teak branches and trunks down the river. In this parable, Ghosh recalls the existence of a teak tree in Pegu (Bago), a historical port city in Southern Myanmar. He describes an imperial teak tree with a 106-foot-long trunk from the ground to its first branch. He draws a comparison between the teak (*Tectona grandis*) and its relative the perennial mint herb (*Mentha*) and imagines what a mint leaf would look like if it grew to be a similar gigantic plant species. Further contrasts between the two botanical species in the parable, reveal the mint to be the size of a human thumb, whereas the teak leaf covers an elephant's footprint. While the former flavors soups and stews, the latter had the notoriety of having “felled dynasties, caused invasions, created fortunes, (and) brought a new way of life into being” (*The Glass Palace*71).

The parable that draws similarities ends with the protagonist admitting that “between the faint hairiness of the one and the bristling, coarse-textured fur of the other, there was an unmistakable kinship, a palpably familial link” (*The Glass Palace* 71). It establishes the tangibility between the

teak tree and other related flora like verbena, sage, thyme, lavender, rosemary, and basil. It weaves in the didactic truth on the necessity of protecting all kinds of flora to ensure their survival, be it the valuable teak tree, the humble mint, or the sacred basil.

In *The Hungry Tide* (2004), Ghosh recounts another parable of Bon Bibi and the Fishermen in the tidal land of the Sunderbans. Fokir, the fisherman, sings of the time of Bon Bibi (Bandevi), the guardian of the forests when the deity rendered the Sunderbans fit for human habitation. In this river parable “passed on from mouth to mouth and remembered only in memory” (*The Hungry Tide* 246), Dokhin Rai takes the form of the Ganges tiger with an insatiable craving for human flesh and stalks Dhukey a fisher boy. The parable chanted by the fisherman reveals the hostilities between humans and tigers. Bon Bibi wages battle against the demon-tiger-king Dokhin Rai and emerges triumphant. She divides the Sunderbans into two harmonious spaces separating humans and tigers.

The primordial laws of the ‘survival of the fittest’ are replaced by a new-found ‘law of the forest’, where tigers and humans live in harmony. Through the inclusion of the parable of Bon Bibi, Ghosh portrays the Sunderbans as an area capable of nurturing ‘human’ and ‘animal’ protagonists who claim equal land, space and territory thanks to an entitlement that can be traced back to roots in time. The parable is a didactic story for our present times insisting on the need to protect the ever-dwindling tiger species in India. Ghosh, the anthropologist, also traces the origin of the parable, and identifies it as one influenced by the rivers of language, legends, and scripture.

“For this I have seen confirmed many times, that the mudbanks of the tide country are shaped not only by rivers of silt, but also by rivers of language: Bengali, English, Arabic, Hindi, Arkanese and who knows what else? Flowing into each other they create a proliferation of small worlds that hang suspended in the flow. And so it dawned on me: the tide country’s faith is something like one of its great mahonas, a meeting not just of many rivers, but a circular roundabout people can use to pass in many directions – from country to country and even between faiths and religions”. (*The Hungry Tide* 247)

In *The River of Smoke* (2011), Ghosh’s parable of a Botanical Babel is an account of how nature survives despite material exploitation. The Western plant hunter in the parable searches for rare plants like the golden camellia. His botanical explorations result in him transporting seeds, saplings, plants, and horticultural-rare species from the East to the West. His quest to discover new plant genus, leads him to the famed Botanical Gardens of Pamplemousses, near Port Louis in the Mauritius Islands. The famed garden of Eden in the parable, is neglected, and left in a shabby state of disorder “where African creepers were at war with Chinese trees, (and) one where Indian shrubs and Brazilian vines were locked in a mortal embrace. This was a work of Man, a botanical Babel” (*The River of Smoke* 39). Ghosh refers to founders and curators of botanical history who helped preserve, transplant, and propagate rare flora in other parts of the world. He pays tribute to 18th century French horticulturists like Pierre Poivre who identified the true black pepper and Philibert Commerson, who discovered the bougainvillea. During the passage by ship, the plants from the East meet the plants in the West. The sea-borne horticultural garden hosts varying flora like antirrhinums, lobelias and georginas from the Americas to medicinal plants from the Far East like camellias.

“If botany was the Scripture of this religion, then horticulture was its form of worship: tending a garden was, for Pierre Lambert, no mere matter of planting seeds and pruning branches – it was a spiritual discipline, a means of communicating with forms of life that were necessarily mute and could be understood only through a careful study of their own modes of expression – the languages of efflorescence, growth and decay: only thus he had taught Paulette, could human beings apprehend the vital energies that constitute the Spirit of the Earth”. (*The River of Smoke* 82-83)

The plant hunter Penrose, and his aide the orphaned Paulette, keep the plants alive despite bad weather at sea. While Penrose collects rare flora, Paulette who had been taught by her father Pierre Lambert to love nature, strives to understand the inner vitality of each plant species. Ghosh's parable describes the work of Penrose as "handiwork of a diligent nurseryman—not a man who was a speculative thinker, but rather a practical solver of problems, someone who looked upon Nature as an assortment of puzzles, many of which, if properly resolved, could provide rich sources of profit" (*The River of Smoke* 83). Like the horticulturists Poivre and Commerson, Paulette names un-named flora giving them an identity despite their muteness. [1] The parable features nature's aptitude of survival, its capacity to flourish if nurtured, and the need to protect the flora of our time for the generations to come.

In his latest work of non-fiction, *The Nutmeg's Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis*, Amitav Ghosh's parable of the Nutmeg's Curse, poetically puts forward the idea that the nutmeg's two shells encase hidden meaning in today's world: one case portraying its commercial merits as a spice; and the other elusive crust remaining open to interpretation through parables passed on through the oral tradition.

"The modern gaze sees only one of the nutmeg's two spheres: that part of which is Myristica fragrans, a subject of science and commerce. The other half eludes it because it will only manifest itself in songs and stories. And in today's stories and songs, there is no place for the nutmeg; it is merely an inert object, a planet that contains no intrinsic meaning, and no properties other than those that make it a subject of science and commerce". (The Nutmeg's Curse 35)

Inspired by the tales of exotic spices in the travelogues of Marco Polo, and the accounts of navigators like Christopher Columbus and Vasco da Gama, European emperors of the 16th century financed voyages to the Far East, thus launching the 'Spice Race' of their time, one akin to our contemporary 'space race' of rocket billionaires. In the regatta to win an exclusive monopoly of the spice trade in the Indonesian Banda islands, the Dutch East India Company – the *Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie* (VOC) emerged as the winner.

In 1609, the Dutch technique of *brandschattingen* resulted in villages being massacred and burned. As they plundered the vegetation in pursuit of the much-coveted nutmeg, the Dutch invaders cut down and tried to erase other vegetation typical of the Banda landscape. The Molluca spice, the nutmeg, thus earned the name of a 'spice of curse'. In the parable of the Nutmeg's Curse, Ghosh relates how Martijn Sonck, a Dutch official stationed in Selamon, a village in the Banda archipelago, hears a lamp fall at nightfall. Imagining a surprise attack from the native Bandanese, Sonck and his counsellors begin shooting into the dark of the night at the invisible enemy. One wonders if they killed friend or foe!

Through this parable, Ghosh conveys the idea that an ambush on nature is a dual attack on humanity too. The VOC's ambitious plans of terraforming included isolating and segregating individual spice species to different Indonesian islands – nutmegs on Banda islands and clove trees on Ambon islands. As the Dutch imposed their footprints on alien thorny terrain, the trees fought back by demonstrating their ability to sprout back and thrive in more abundance. Today, nutmegs prosper the world over as in Barbados, the 'Nutmeg Island' and in Connecticut, the 'Nutmeg City'. Though it has no voice of its own, Ghosh's parable of the nutmeg's survival tells us that the "planet will never come alive for you unless your songs and stories give life to all the beings, seen and unseen, that inhabit a living Earth – Gaia" (*The Nutmeg's Curse* 84).

In Ghosh's works of fiction and non-fiction, the oceans have always silently witnessed unfair trade. [2] European colonisers have monopolized the waterways like the rivers and seas to transport Opium, Teak, and Spices from the East to the West. In his fiction, Ghosh shows how the West's fascination for the East as seen in the Orientalist's initial quest for spices like nutmeg, cloves, pepper, coffee, cacao, sugar, and tea, lead eventually to the discovery of the addictive narcotic drug 'opium'. [3]

It is interesting to refer to Carl Trocki's work *Opium, Empire and the Global Political Economy*, where he states that "the British Empire, the opium trade, and the rise of global capitalism all occurred together ... "gold and silver from the West crossed the Atlantic or the Pacific, it ultimately found its way to Asia (east of Suez) to purchase the "riches of the East" and to allow the otherwise deprived inhabitants of the northwest Eurasian peninsula to share in the fabled Oriental splendors" (Trocki 7-8). The postcolonial enterprise in countering what Edward Saïd describes as "the ineradicable distinction between Western superiority and Oriental inferiority" (*Orientalism* 881) is evident in Ghosh's fiction and non-fiction. [4] Ghosh writes back, and lays bare the materialistic colonial intent of the past through eco-parables. While erasing the landscape, the Dutch VOC invoked the principles of fair trade; the British declaration of war was waged in the name of freedom. Each coloniser justified the means of subduing the colonised.

"The war when it comes, will not be for opium. It will be for the principle: for freedom – for the freedom of trade and for the freedom of the Chinese people. Free trade is first conferred on Man by God, and its principles apply as much to opium as to any other article of trade. More so perhaps, since in its absence many millions of natives would be denied the lasting advantages of British influence". (The Sea of Poppies 120)

They considered themselves as agents in the pursuit of a higher good. This is a stance, typical of the Orientalist quest of bringing the gifts of civilization, freedom, and trade to the so-called unknown, uncivilized, and captive East.

By excavating the materialistic colonial past and reconfiguring them as parables, Ghosh conveys a powerful message. Through a portrayal of the colonial trade for spices, teak, and opium, he highlights the material impulses of colonials, the misappropriation of land and natural resources, and the transformation of the landscape from one yielding necessary crop to that of lucrative spices and narcotic drugs to balance the West's trade with the East. The parables strive to remember the materialist past, emphasise on the need to recall the long histories of injustice, insist on the need to remember the obstacles in the way of building a just society, and always to hold in view the prospect of a future. His eco-critical vision highlights the fact that "our best hope for universal emancipation lies in remaining unreconciled to the past and unconsolated by the present" (Parry 193). In today's world the nutmeg and its sister spices no longer enjoy the status of coveted commodities. Oil and other fossilized botanical matter have become invaluable sources of energy. Man continues to depend on nature in its various forms and will continue to do so. Ghosh insists that "It is essential now, as the prospect of planetary catastrophe comes ever closer, that those nonhuman voices be restored to our stories. The fate of humans, and all our relatives, depends on it" (*The Nutmeg's Curse* 257).

Notes

[1] The quest to name un-named species can be considered as a creative endeavor and is elaborated in my paper - Vincent, S. « Narrating, Naming and Labelling the Environment in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* », *Ecocriticism and Environment – Rethinking Literature and Culture*, New Delhi: Primus, 2018, p. 173-185.

[2] My paper details how archives of unfair trade exist even in contemporary times - Vincent, S. « Archives of Unfair Trade in Amitav Ghosh's Fiction ». *Academia Letters*, Article 1185. June 2021. <https://doi.org/10.20935/AL1185>

[3] Further reading on narratives of displacement in my paper - Vincent, S. « Material Ecocriticism: Maritime Trade, Displacement and the Environment in Amitav Ghosh's Fictional Waterscape », *Negotiating Waters: Seas, Oceans and Passageways in the Colonial and Postcolonial Anglophone World*, André Dodeman & Nancy Pedri. (Ed.), Vernon Press, 2019, p. 149-165.

[4] A more detailed analysis is published in my paper - Vincent, S. « An Eco-Critical Analysis of Climate Change and the Unthinkable in Amitav Ghosh's Fiction and Non-Fiction », *Literature and Environment – The Cradle of Ecocriticism*, *Humanities* 2018, 7, 59, 2018.

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Suhasini Vincent defended her doctoral thesis on Experimental Writing within the Postcolonial Framework of Indian Writing in English through a joint-supervision programme between the University of Paris 3 – Sorbonne Nouvelle and the University of Madras in 2006. In 2009, she was awarded the 2nd prize for the best defended thesis on topics relating to the Commonwealth, organised under the aegis of the SEPC (Société d'études des Pays du Commonwealth). Her research focusses on the legal scope of environmental laws in postcolonial countries and explores eco-critical activism in the essays and literary works of Arundhati Roy, Amitav Ghosh and Yann Martel. Her research interests include the postcolonial dynamics of translation. She has interviewed Tamil authors like Ambai and Sivasankari, well-known translators and editors in the Indian literary scene. She is at present an Associate Professor (Maître de conférences) at the University of Paris 2 – Panthéon Assas since 2007 and lives in Reims, France.