

In Quest of a Missing Link: Exploring the Colonial Co-Evals of Eco-crisis and Epistemic Violence from a Post-Colonial Perspective, with Special Reference to *The Nutmeg's Curse* (2021)

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The planetary crisis posing a menacing threat to human civilisation has been broadly linked to the idea of anthropocentrism. One could refer to the observation of Bruno Latour that the driving “impulse of modernity” may be traced to the “partitioning” between Nature and Culture; the non-human “actors” which participate actively in the production of our world have been gradually excluded from popular discourse (Latour 10-20). Another proposition that radicalises the study of the present ecological crisis is connected to the systematic, structural, orgiastic, colonial violence committed on the indigenous/native people and their epistemologies, preserved and circulated through myriad beliefs and cultural rites. Intractable swathes of wild landscapes and ecological resources have attracted foreign settlers to infiltrate and invade lands across the planet. Such settlement and colonisation has remained the perennial source of resource extraction and the contested site of coercive control and exploitation. The biotic-abiotic interaction which was conspicuously present in the indigenous eco-spheres has subsequently been erased across geographies in a lethal manner. The settler communities, especially the European traders, resorted to different punitive measures to marginalise and segregate the indigenous communities and dispossess them of their lands. Extractive capitalism as a colonial operative mechanism has inflicted severe ecological injustice which has mostly been disappeared from public discourses, as well as from the routine of international climate summits. Those summits mostly obsess with hyper-technical or scientific debates about carbon-emission policies, blame games, imposing sanctions or climate reparations, as we have seen in the very recent COP27 Summit held at Sharm El Sheikh, Egypt. On the other hand, locating the entanglement of colonial ecologies with the long history of European colonialism remains the eluded topic. This entangled history of ecological imperialism, when delinked from the crafts of historical forgetting, could mark the beginnings of a revisionist study of the ecological crisis.

The colonial impact inducing ecological transformation, devastation in the colonised lands can be seen as concurrent with and metonymic of the epistemic violence visited on traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) and eco-sustainable cultural practices of those peoples. This epistemological annihilation goes beyond delegitimising alternative knowledge systems preserved in first nations beliefs and practices. It extends to deterritorialization - an anti-planetary practice of the invaders eliminating the indigenous inhabitants embedded inextricably with the geo-space through their own unique nous-inspired cultures. The term “deterritorialization”, conceptualised by Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus* (301-303), follows the idea of reterritorialization that refers to the replacement of collective structures – social, cultural or economic – expressed in the socio-cultural mores of the indigenous or native peoples by the European settler communities.

When visited through such ideological prisms, the colonial expansionist policy is unravelled as having leapt beyond the coercive measures of control, ruling or trading on the life of the conquered peoples. Much supporting archival evidence of genocidal incidents orchestrated by the European traders-turned-conquerors survives. Amitav Ghosh’s *The Nutmeg’s Curse* (2021) outlines how the Dutch trade monopoly represented by VOC or the *Vereenigde Oostindische*

Compagnie finally morphed to the war of extermination in the Bandan islands. The archipelago with its pristine volcanic ecologies attracted European traders, “first the Portuguese and Spanish, and then the Dutch” (Ghosh *The Nutmeg’s Curse* 13), particularly for spices like nutmeg and mace. The bio-geography of the Bandan islands is exceptional for the occasional volcanic eruptions from Gunning Api, a volcano still active, which helped create a forest with exotic and rare botanical plants and species. In the toxic monopolising matrix of extractive capitalism, this small Banda Island, part of the Maluku region, had been subjected to colonial genocide. Albert Bickmore, an American Scholar, after visiting Bandan Island, summarised the 1621 Banda massacre in his book:

The Dutch then began a war of extermination, which lasted eighteen years, and was only brought to an end by a large expedition from Java, conducted by the governor-general in person.... All [the Bandanese] who were left alive fled to the neighbouring islands, and not a vestige of their language or peculiar customs is known to exist at the present time. (Ghosh *The Nutmeg’s Curse* 40)

Almost around the same time, in 1637, across the oceans, another massacre at Mystic was executed by the British soldiers, as a result of which the North American Pequots were blotted out from the discourse of imperialism. These were all preemptory actions in the European noble/savage dichotomy. Such clone colonial encroachments on the lands and livelihoods of the indigenous were looked upon as “liberal interventionism” by the Europeans (Ghosh *The Nutmeg’s Curse* 27).

The genocidal violence was not restricted to inhabitants of the land but it made extinct or nearly extinct the indigenous culture of man-nature reciprocity. The philosophy of inter-species co-existence was throttled by colonial intervention. Visionary environmentalist Raymand Dasmann in his book *Called by the Wild* (2022) has classified the people of the world into two categories, eco-system people and bio-sphere people. The “eco-system people” have managed to live in proximity to nature. “Traditional “primitive” societies are eco-system dependent, meaning that they occur within a single eco-system or at most make use of a few eco-systems, and are subject to the ecological controls within an eco-system” (Dasmann 153). On the other hand, globally dominant cultures across geo-spatial boundaries continue to disrupt the ecological components and traditionally inherited knowledge systems of the eco-spheres to sluice resources from the bio-sphere. In near alignment with Dasmann’s logic, Madhab Gadgil and Ram Chandra Guha in their book *Ecology and Equity* (1995) divide the people into “eco-system people” and “omnivores”. The unsustainable approach of the omnivores towards the environment produces fatal ecological consequences. The “eco-system” peoples / indigenous peoples mostly suffer in silence, having been uprooted into unspeakable precarity from their bio-regions, stripped of their land, culture and ecological frugality.

The epistemic injustice which has been instrumental to the overhaul of indigenous ecological knowledge has emerged from the colonial “ideology of conquest”. Camouflaged in the doctrine of extractive capitalism, the colonialists proclaim indigenous cultural practices, ways of life and rituals closely knit with their specific eco-systems as delusional, or representative of “primitive superstition” (Ghosh *The Nutmeg’s Curse* 39). The colonial exclusion of indigenous ecological epistemology mostly transmitted through their symbiotic enmeshment with nature stems from “hermeneutical injustice”, a term Miranda Fricker uses to refer to the denial of the knowledge or experience of others, considering them “uncomprehended” or weird (Fricker 1). This leads to *epistemicide* of vast terrains of knowledge systems along with the natural world they

connect to. Histories of the indigenous people are mostly assimilated into their environmental geographies. As Lawrence Buell in the *Environmental Imagination* contends, “the nonhuman environment is present not merely as a framing device that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history” (Slovic 93).

Alfred Crosby in his book *Ecological Imperialism* (1986) observes that “the success of European imperialism has a biological, an ecological component” (Qtd. in Slovic 93). The colonial stride upon conquered lands has brought about major topographical transformations and environmental degradation. The Bandan massacre in 1621 by the VOC which arose out of Dutch trade-monopoly is also linked to the European idea of envisioning the Earth as a “vast machine made of inert particles in ceaseless motion” (Ghosh *The Nutmeg’s Curse* 37). Even in their own countries, the politics of control and subjugation led the capitalist economy to expand their expropriation, validated by the Enclosure Act in eighteenth century England. Since European enlightenment, a rapid shift of human consciousness from bio-logical agency to the geo-logical had done away with the earlier approaches of considering nature untamed. This geological agency of human beings envisaged the world as a domain of human control and unregulated extraction. The post-enlightenment idea of freedom, “concerned with how humans would escape the injustice, oppression, inequality, or even uniformity foisted on them by other humans or human-made systems” (Chakrabarty 208), has gradually relegated the “non-human forces and systems” from “this calculus of liberty” to peripheral insignificance (Ghosh *The Great Derangement* 159).

The ideology of conquest propagated by the European settlers has wiped out myriad kinds of eco-composition including oral stories, fables, ecological insights and the like. The Bandan massacre launched by the Western powers took its toll on an entire eco-sphere. In this archipelago, volcanic ecology incubated a repository of ecological knowledge which complied with a planetarist non-exclusionary thinking that placed the abiotic as an intrinsic part of their web of living. In the Indonesian popular imagination of the islanders, volcanos are “a spiritual and geo-thermal entity – a vengeful and angry spirit” (Ghosh *The Nutmeg’s Curse* 33). This kind of eco-sophical belief, often refuted for its uncanniness and ecological excess beyond chartered reason, is linked with the indigenous practices of climate mitigation tools. The ecological harmony between the volcanic geography and the social geography has been transmitted from generation to generation producing an storehouse of TEK fecund in oral discourses and metaphors and cues to eco-sustainable approaches.

In java, volcanos are considered connected to human society to achieve a universal harmony between society, nature, and the cosmos. Although most Javanese people are aware of scientific explanations for natural phenomenon, they prefer to draw on explanations that relate natural events to the social world. (Valentin 140)

The vestiges of “devout relationship” (Valentin 140) with the volcanos in this region are still perceived in the ritual visit of the politicians to “the spiritual guardian of Mount Meropi” during the election season (Ghosh *The Nutmeg’s Curse* 33). Gunung Api, the volcano of the Banda Island, had been integrated into the islander’s life and living there had roused a register of “omens and portents” planted with ecological implications orally passed on down the ages (Ghosh *The Nutmeg’s Curse* 34). But the Dutch, primarily tempted to trade on the botanical species, i.e., nutmeg, made an incursion into their bio-region and geosphy. The Dutch invasion into Banda Island destroyed their place of dwelling, belonging. Their life enmeshed with the local volcanic geography

was delinked by the extermination policy of the Dutch invaders. Not only were they brutally slaughtered, but “they perished [too] of starvation, disease, exposure and mass suicide” (Ghosh *The Nutmeg’s Curse* 41). The structural violence targeted their daily subsistence and the very “material basis of their lives – their settlements, houses, food-stocks, tools, even their boats” (Ghosh *The Nutmeg’s Curse* 41). Along with the humans, the conquest eliminated an interlinked bio-centric connect of the Bandan people with the non-humans.

The Mystic Massacre in 1637 connotes a pattern of colonial outrage and extinction policy similar to that which unfolded in the Banda Island almost during the same period. As we come to know, “the Pequot, the indigenous tribe built the first known village on the river on the crest of a hill overlooking the western bank of the Mystic River, then called the Siccanemos” (Fought 11). The Pequot gradually extended their habitat from Pawcatuck River in the eastern region to the Connecticut River in the west. This territory along the Mystic Riverbanks became an important hub for the Dutch and other European traders because it had “navigable waterways” (Fought 12), besides being littoral. As it happened with nutmeg, the botanical species which attracted the European encroachment, invasion and annihilation of the rich eco-sphere of Banda Island, there was a mutual trade-exchange of two important commodities in this case – furs and wampum. The initially friendly trade-exchange soon took the violent turn. John Mason in his *A Brief History of the Pequot War* (1736) chronicles how the Pequots were massacred and perished after the English soldiers had stormed into their territory and burned them to death. Although the rising conflict started with the Dutch settlers in that territory, the English settlers came into conflict with the Pequot. After the violent massacre of the Pequots, the colonial process of elimination did not spare their identity: the use of the name Pequot was outlawed. This elimination shaped by policies of racial supremacism has done irreparable damage to the “prior meanings of conquered landscapes” (Amitav Ghosh *The Nutmeg’s Curse* 49). Besides the spectacular version of colonial violence, this involves a no-less-lethal semantic violence, a consistent curve of terra nulliusisation that had sabotaged the long lineage and identity of the Pequot rooted in that very geography.

The revisionist Native American history shows historical evidence of the gradual obliteration of bio-regional inhabitation which creates “stories and different modes of discourse” (Slovic 71), a particular kind of value-system and practices bonding the human and non-human in a sustainable way. The Navajo, the Native American people of the Southwestern United States, also known as Dine, were driven out of their territory in 1864 under the leadership of Colonel Kit Carson and the US Army. Their creation myths, the story of the Glittering World and other forms of bio-regional literature, and most importantly, their lives and livelihoods connected to the geo/bio-graphical terrain were all subject to the coercive process of eradication. The Navajos lived there, guided by the environmental ethics of their scriptures which were inspired by their long attachment to the land. These connected stories of the colonial extinction of lands and people bring out the larger trajectory of terra-forming, the idea of ‘land-making’ or ‘land-moulding’ as a process. Garbed in the policy of resource extraction, the re-making of land by the European settlers in the regions cited above had severely disrupted the ecological matrix through the transformative impact wrought on local eco-spheres.

Terra-forming had not been exclusive to the white settlers. In his radical research titled *The Biggest Estate on Earth: How Aborigines Made Australia* (2011), historian Bill Gammage of Australian National University contends that the vast landscapes of Australia which were

encountered by the pioneer white settlers of the late eighteenth century could not have represented the unharnessed accidental wilderness that they imagined to have discovered. For centuries, the First Nations peoples of Australia, through their controlled play with the pace and intensity of bushfires, had cultivated the continent as a complex mosaic of grasslands and diverse vegetations. He compares the Australian landscape to a “terra-formed” park or vast estate, which featured every possible kind of topos – such as the swamps, mangroves, dense forests, grasslands, woodland – carefully patterned and spaced so as to preserve species and secure pastures. The Anglophilic world and Europe are used to associating such scapes with the white gentry or the leisured class. Yet the indigenous people’s landscaping of Australia illustrated the terra-forming of a continent, which aimed to preserve every species of local flora and fauna in their diverse habitats, while making the aborigines a “free people”, free to braid their leisure and corroborees into their day and work. This alternative indigenous set of technologies and politics of terra-forming did not seek to exclude or annihilate, but to conserve and create, towards an ethics and aesthetics of inter-species planetarity.

The European land-moulding in contrast was annihilatory, exclusionary in praxis. Faced with their policies of war and voiding the land, not only had the indigenous peoples been able to anticipate and discern the ecological consequences, but they also attempted to resist the Europeans’ onslaught on their land. The post-enlightenment European doctrine of conquest guided by the policy of “resource extraction” and a somewhat anthropocentric Christianity which foregrounds the idea of dualism between man and nature (Slovic 61) drove the settler Europeans in colonies primarily to extract natural resources, and then to occupy, to de-territorialize and re-territorialize the land of their settlement according to their pre-conceived notions of harnessing land to being “productive” and useful. If not, the topography could be “improved” by means of sheer destruction, in the form of geographical transformation, deforestation which usually ends up in the extinction of certain ways/web of life/nature. The Foucauldian bio-political imperative implicit in the settler’s ecological interventions finds its distinctive presence in the conflictual battle between Algonquian tribes, one of the North American natives, settled along the Atlantic coast and the English settlers in the middle of the 17th century. The tribes there perceived their ways of life at stake due to the European process of land-making. North American eco-system that markedly differs from the European’s was being re-engineered; the bountiful nature that sustained the tribes faced ecological disruptions in the available plenteous food-chain. In 1642, an anti-colonial alliance was formed by the Algonquian tribes against the European settlers. The nucleus of this conflict was based on the environmental changes brought into their territory. This conflict known as King Philip’s War (1675-1678) testifies to the hegemonic control of Algonquian’s land and the ecologically untenable practices of the Europeans. They (the Europeans) harnessed their own idea of terra-forming – the land that could be made “productive”, tethered to growing profit-making crops, enclosed with fences that would subdue the wilderness, and turned into the grazing ground for the cattle – to the alien eco-system of North America. The kind of “disequilibrium” that first nations people encountered after the gradual territorial conversion into the land-making notion of the settler was exacerbated by the “companion species” of the settlers. The cows and pigs – the European settler’s “companion species” – rapidly changed the pattern of the land: the soil erosion increased; native grass was eliminated from the land; the micro-climate in the region changed. “By competing with local fauna, clearing away under-brush, and converting native grasses into marketable meat, imported animals assisted in the transformation of forests into farmland”

(Anderson 4,5). The non-human agency accelerated the ecological disruptions of the North American Indian Territory. Richard Grove points to the colonisation of the native lands as a kind of green imperialism in his book titled *Green Imperialism* (1995). This kind of European doctrine imposed upon the occupied land led to the annihilation of local ecological practices. The drastic changes ushered in the colonised land of the Europeans, as Alfred Crosby points out in *Ecological Imperialism*, is the outcome of “the Europeans and all the organisms they brought with them” (270). The omnicide caused by these colonial interventions had arboreal underpinnings too. The traditional botanical knowledge – endemic of a particular geography – sunk into oblivion; the indigenous systems of utilising the land through practices they held sacred, which connected the rhythms of nature to the people around were erased amidst conflicts and erasures of the defeated.

In *The Nutmeg's Curse*, Amitav Ghosh observes through his exhaustive case-studies that these indigenous people – the Bandan, the Peqout or North Americans and a few more – were bound in an aligned ecological discourse that resonates with the modern-day Gaia hypothesis. It is rooted in a kind of synergistic co-evolving of biotic and abiotic components of the eco-system, since these diverse groups also attached vitalist principles attributing “anima” (soul) to the non-human elements around them. This eco-consciousness was challenged by the anti-environmental temperament and practices co-eval with colonialism. To the colonisers, nature was “inert” whereas it remained a heave to the indigenous peoples on the brink of erasure. As Tagore said, “The West seems to take pride in thinking that it is subduing nature; as if we are living in a hostile world where we have to wrest everything we want from an unwilling alien arrangement of things” (Tagore 29). This imprudent colonial thinking devastated many non-western knowledge systems.

Contrary to the supremacist, anthropocentric principle which permeated the colonial imperative and later on, the late capitalist neo-liberal economy and globalisation viral across the globe, a number of eco-humanistic approaches are to be found in “the Far Eastern tradition of Taoism, Confucianism and Zen...”(Ghosal 54). The tradition of trans-species co-existence and eco-environmentalist ideas resonates when we find that Yaqui the Indian sorcerer intends to learn hidden wisdom from birds, beasts and trees, and the first-century Chinese Book of Rites warns against the polluting of our surroundings(Ghosal 58). The Buddhist traditions are marked by a deeper embeddedness between sentient and non-sentient beings. It positions “Nature” at the heart of the Buddhist principle that denies any “intrinsic reality” to it. The boundary that seemingly distinguishes between “Nature” and “not Nature” is blurred in the Buddhist realm of thought in which one can only be heard with purification of the mind. A third-eyed vision into the deep reality of Nature co-exists with the enlightened state of the human mind, connoted by the Buddhist insight of compassionate ecology. The attainment of “bodhi” in Sanskrit, meaning “awakening” or “enlightenment”, also comes from looking upon both the sentient and the non-sentient beings compassionately, not doing harm and disrespect to them, and looking upon them as equal. This ecological knowledge of trans-species unity and inter-dependence evidenced in Buddhist schools of thought is foremost exemplified in the non-human agency of the “Bodhi tree” under which Buddha attained his enlightenment. This symbolic tree has been a transformative agent and synecdoche for some deeper reality of ‘Nature’. With its transcending role, wilderness occupies a revered space in Buddhist traditions of trans-species harmony.

A core difference between Western and Indic ecological thinking as propounded in Tagore’s literary repertoire can best be summed up in the following lines excerpted from his essay

“Shakuntala”, “In *The Tempest*, nature assumes the shape of man yet is not bound to him by the heart’s ties; in *Shakuntala*, trees, birds and beasts retain their own shapes yet unite with man in a pleasing relationship” (Chaudhury 240). This flare of compassionate ecology has played a formative role in traditional Indian ecological thinking down the ages. Kalidasa’s *Abhigyanam Shakuntalam* reflects the sometime-cherished Indian ethos of compassion and love towards the wild, in the text king Dushyanta who stalls his hunting entourage at sage Kanva’s hermitage is instantly forbidden to shoot his arrow to hunt the deer of the hermitage. Indian epics exude ecological thinking. For example, an eco-narratological reading of Ravana’s Ashok Vatika in *Ramayana*, where Sita was held captive by Ravana, shows the concept of a grove-like bio-sphere with its natural splendour and trans-species ‘efflorescence’, with the refuge of trees like *seeta ashok* (*Saraca asoca*) or *nagkesar* (*Mesua ferrea*) etc. *The Bhumi Sukta* of *Atharava Veda*, a verse composed in sacred awareness of Mother Earth, urges minimal disturbance of the surrounding environment before stepping onto the earth: the stepping seems to constitute almost a transgression. Some of the earliest ecological declarations in a balanced vision of man-environment interaction is preserved in the Vedas. Again, the emblem of *kalpataru* – the wish-yielding tree – in Indian tradition and ritual, images the sacred, significant space of the plant species in popular and collective imagination. The hypothesis continues to be replicated through Kalpataru Diwas – the day celebrated by devotees of sage Ramakrishna as the date when he made himself into a Kalpataru or the “wish-fulfilling tree” on 1st January, 1886, still observed every year on the same day.

The ecological consciousness runs deep in the Indian sacred grove tradition. Usually on the outer precincts of a locality, the patches of forest, “delimited and protected by human societies” (Malhotra 2) used to be dedicated to deities or ancestral spirits. The sacred and the ecological braided together has helped to retain rare flora and fauna, different species untamed unharmed, in the sacred groves. A study by C.P.R. Environmental Education Centre shows that there are 10,377 sacred groves spread across India (Amrithalingam 65). Some of them have been converted into contemporary “bio-diversity hotspots”. River as a life-nurturing divine entity has been integral to the collective Indian consciousness. There are many more Indian eco-sophical perceptions/practices driven by the imagination and politics of a planetarist kinship between man and his environment. The gradual elimination of these eco-friendly practices now-a-days is largely due to the consumerist propensities aggravated by the huge pressure of population. Also, the British imperialist measures undertaken in India have accelerated the ecological crisis in “[Western] Enlightenment’s predatory hubris in relation to the Earth and its resources” (Ghosh *The Great Derangement* 75). One such example that illustrates persuasively the ecological impact of the British colonial idea of agriculture and “intensive monoculture” is the case study of Berar in Central India in the nineteenth century. The systematic degradation of the common lands and grazing field in the region was brought about by the colonial imperative of ploughing up the land for massive cotton production led by the imperial textile-industry driven market-economy. The pattern of land-use is resonant with the ecological imperialism elucidated above, in case of the North American indigenous territories during the era of European colonisation.

The Eurocentric de-default discourse axiomatized in the colonising project as “liberal intervention” introducing the savage oriental illiberals to Western knowledge, science and many enlightened principles, tends to tenaciously overlook the colonial politics of perpetrating recurring ecological decimation across erstwhile colonies. There is ample evidence of a concurrent, partial or complete overhaul of the episteme of the colonial subject, as critiqued in this paper, and the

European coloniser's erasure of the man-nature symbiosis often envisioned in her knowledge systems. The epistemic violence which the European traders/colonialists unleashed on the First Nations has delegitimised, repressed their eco-sophic knowledge systems. Even as the late capitalist-economic link embossed with a heavy human foot-print brews unsustainable development at the cost of eco-catastrophes in our times, the colonial epistemic violence has irrevocably altered and damaged local eco-sustainable cultures and practices in the erstwhile colonies. An ecological exploration of the colonial transaction with the ex-colonies could redraw, transform the contemporary ecological debates, with a nudge towards recovery of the eluded alternative modes of trans-species difficult solidarities, planetarities as limned in local knowledge systems and globally resonant insights of the once-colonised, almost forgotten.

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