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The Nation Beneath the Soil: Extractive Nation-Building and Ecological Belonging in Amitav Ghosh's The Nutmeg's Curse

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Abstract

The idea of nation-building is frequently attributed to political sovereignty, economic growth, territorial consolidation, and prospects for the future. However, not all the events contributing to this concept are positive. They include various activities related to the history of plunder and the life and work of ordinary people. Amitav Ghosh, in his book The Nutmeg's Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis (2021), describes the impact of imperialism and colonial exploitation on nature and ordinary folk. This paper aims to demonstrate how the author relates current developments with their colonial preconditions, changing the then-presented perception of the concept of extractive nation-building.

Consequently, this paper examines the author's thesis about colonialism's unfairness towards nature and local inhabitants through the lens of modern colonialism's growth and development. Firstly, Ghosh begins the discussion by introducing the objective history of the plunder of products and resources connected with the nutmeg. In his account, one can notice an attempt to document all the stages of resource exploitation, starting from the conquest of the island by the Portuguese and ending with the author's observations of today's nature. This approach allows the readers to look at the processes from a micro perspective and see the long-term consequences of colonial exploitation.

Furthermore, the problem presented in the book is approached not only from the historical and geopolitical point of view but also from the ecological one. The author tries to describe the importance of nature for the survival and development of nations and states. In this regard, Ghosh

introduces the concept of "ecological belonging" that implies the relationship between people and their country. However, the ecological approach goes beyond just belonging to a state; it covers all components of nature that people encounter in their lives. Therefore, the author concludes by saying that for the sustainability of nations, it is essential to rethink the current processes of colonialism and extractivism.

In conclusion, this paper illustrates the main theses and arguments of Amitav Ghosh's The Nutmeg's Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis (2021). The book provides readers with an opportunity to view history from the perspective of ordinary people and nature. The author combines the narration of past and modern events to outline the relationship between humanity and the environment. In his search for the essence of nation-building, Ghosh presents an idea that can be called "ecological belonging." Moreover, the author offers a solution to the existing environmental problems, drawing attention to the necessity of changing the current trajectory of development.

Keywords; Nation-Building, Colonialism, Ecological Belonging, Resource Exploitation, Environmental Sustainability

INTRODUCTION: METEOROLOGY AS LITERARY EXPERIENCE

What lies beneath the making of a nation? Nation-building is commonly understood through sovereignty, territorial boundaries, economic development, infrastructure, and collective identity. Yet these structures depend upon a material history of mineral extraction, cash-crop cultivation, forest appropriation, water control, and landscape transformation. Thus, national development is inseparable from relationships with land and the human and non-human lives affected by i

Amitav Ghosh's *The Nutmeg's Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis* (2021) provides a significant framework for examining this relationship. Beginning with the Banda Islands and European demand for nutmeg, Ghosh demonstrates how the spice's commercial value transformed the region's ecological and social life. Dutch efforts to monopolize the trade involved both commodity control and the violent disruption of local communities. Nutmeg therefore becomes a point where nature, commerce, territory, violence, and political power intersect, revealing the connection between ecological transformation and political domination.

This study develops the concept of "extractive nation-building," referring to developmental frameworks in which prosperity becomes tied to the appropriation and extraction of natural resources. Such frameworks understand land primarily through its economic potential, transforming forests into timber, mountains into mineral deposits, rivers into energy resources, and territories into spaces for expansion. Ghosh's movement from colonial nutmeg trade to fossil-fuel modernity demonstrates the persistence of this relationship between resources, territory, and power while locating environmental crisis within longer histories of human interaction with nature.

The study's second concept, "ecological belonging," offers an alternative to this extractive framework. While extractive nation-building treats land as something to possess and utilize, ecological belonging understands communities as relationally embedded within landscapes, other forms of life, and ecological systems. Belonging therefore extends beyond political territory or cultural identity to include ecological dependence, memory, responsibility, and more-than-human relationships.

Ghosh's engagement with Indigenous and non-Western understandings of nature strengthens this conception by challenging views of nature as a passive resource or backdrop to human history. *The Nutmeg's Curse* instead emphasizes the role of landscapes and non-human forces in shaping human experience.

The study consequently examines how *The Nutmeg's Curse* reveals the ecological foundations of nation-building and how ecological belonging may contribute to alternative understandings of sustainability. It argues that national development is shaped not only by institutions, borders, and economies but also by relationships with land and resources. Ghosh ultimately encourages a movement from extraction toward relationship, possession toward belonging, and

human-centered development toward ecological imagination.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This study examines Amitav Ghosh's *The Nutmeg's Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis* through postcolonial ecocriticism and environmental humanities, situating ecological crisis within colonial expansion, commodification, territorial control, and resource extraction. Focusing on the Banda Islands and fossil-fuel modernity, it develops "extractive nation-building" and "ecological belonging" to examine resource, power, and human-environment relations while highlighting literature's potential to imagine sustainable alternatives.

The study specifically aims:

- To critically examine the representation of colonial extraction, commodification, and ecological transformation in Amitav Ghosh's *The Nutmeg's Curse*.
- To analyze the relationship between natural resources, territorial control, economic development, and political power in Ghosh's narrative.
- To conceptualize "extractive nation-building" and "ecological belonging" as a framework for conventional narratives of national development and prosperity.
- To investigate Ghosh's representation of Indigenous ecological knowledge and alternative understandings of human-nature relationships.
- To examine how Ghosh's literary mode of storytelling connects historical ecological violence with contemporary environmental crises.
- To explore how literature can contribute to reimagining sustainable forms of development, nationhood, and human-environmental relationships.

Chapter 1 - The Making of the Extractive Nation: Colonialism, Commodity and the Transformation of Land

In *The Nutmeg's Curse*, Amitav Ghosh uses nutmeg to reveal how colonial expansion, commercial monopoly, territorial control, and ecological transformation intersect. The Banda Islands consequently illustrate the relationship between commodity, territory, and power.

Before European demand, nutmeg was embedded in the ecological and social life of the islands. Its incorporation into international trade made control over the spice inseparable from control over its territory.

This transformation informs “extractive nation-building,” in which territory gains value through its extractable resources. Land becomes a storehouse of commodities, and extraction becomes a means of organizing territory and human relationships. Dutch attempts to monopolize nutmeg involved the displacement of the Bandanese population and the reorganization of territory for external commercial interests. Ghosh therefore shows that extraction begins not only with resource removal but with a worldview that evaluates landscapes through profitability.

Nutmeg ultimately reveals the intersection of nature, economy, and power.

The Nutmeg As A Political Object

One of the most productive ways of reading Ghosh's narrative is to understand the nutmeg not simply as a spice but as a political object. Its transformation illustrates how natural entities acquire political significance when they enter systems of global exchange.

The movement can be represented as (see fig. 1):

Plant → Commodity → Monopoly → Territorial Control → Violence

Figure 1. Move from Natural Ecology to Extraction. Diagram by author, based on Amitav Ghosh, *The Nutmeg's Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis*, University of Chicago Press, 2021.

The process unfolds through five stages: ecological, as nutmeg exists within a particular environment; economic, as European demand gives it exchange value; political, as control over production becomes desirable; territorial, as production requires control of geographical space; and finally, human, through the resulting social consequences.

This sequence challenges the idea that commodities exist independently of political history. Nutmeg, despite appearing as an ordinary commodity, carries histories of colonial competition and violence.

Ghosh therefore complicates the distinction between natural and political resources. Once unequal access allows a resource to generate wealth and power, it becomes politically significant and landscapes become objects of geopolitical interest. Nutmeg thus reveals the broader transformation of ecological relationships into relations of possession.

From Living Landscape To Extractable Territory

The transformation of the Banda Islands reveals a shift in the meaning of territory. For its inhabitants, the landscape was embedded in everyday life, cultivation, memory, and community; under colonial commercial logic, it was increasingly valued according to what it could produce.

This shift represents a movement from land as habitat to land as asset. Extractive systems superimpose economic value upon existing cultural relationships, making what the land can yield more important than what the land is.

The title “The Nation Beneath the Soil” captures this hidden dimension of nation-building. Beneath visible structures such as cities, industries, and institutions lie material processes involving soil, forests, minerals, water, crops, and energy. The nation therefore remains materially dependent upon the ecological world.

Colonialism And The Reorganisation Of Nature

The history of nutmeg demonstrates that colonialism involved more than occupying foreign territory; it also reorganized environments according to external economic priorities. Ghosh connects the violent transformation of landscapes with the destruction of communities and a worldview that treats nature as available for exploitation.

Within this framework, environmental transformation can be deliberate: forests may be cleared for plantations, diverse ecosystems simplified for profitable monocultures, and communities displaced when they obstruct resource extraction. Thus, ecological and political histories are not parallel but deeply entangled.

CHAPTER II - DEVELOPMENT AS EXTRACTION: COMMODITIES, FOSSIL FUELS AND THE MODERN NATION

If the Banda Islands reveal how colonial power transformed ecological resources into commodities, *The Nutmeg's Curse* extends this history into modern resource extraction. Ghosh examines what happens when extractive logic becomes embedded in development, while distinguishing postcolonial development from colonialism. He instead identifies a continuing worldview in which land, energy, and natural resources underpin economic growth and geopolitical power.

The modern nation is often defined by its capacity to transform territory through roads, dams, mines, power stations, and ports. Although such projects may serve social and economic purposes, environmental humanities ask what

ecological relationships they alter. Ghosh therefore presents planetary crisis not as an isolated environmental problem but as the consequence of historical relationships among societies, resources, power, and the non-human world.

From The Commodity To The Energy Regime

Nutmeg provides the historical point of departure, while fossil fuels expand extraction into the foundation of industrial civilization. Coal, oil, and gas supply energy for transportation, manufacturing, urbanization, agriculture, and military systems.

Ghosh's concern is not merely excessive energy consumption but the historical conditions that made fossil fuels appear indispensable. Their transformative benefits have also created dependencies whose ecological consequences extend beyond extraction sites.

This reveals the distinction between resource extraction and resource dependence. Once development requires continuous extraction, economic growth, infrastructure, industries, and political institutions become structurally dependent on uninterrupted flows of energy and materials.

The result is what this chapter identifies as the extractive developmental cycle (see fig. 2)

Resource → Energy → Development → Increased
consumption → Increased extraction

Figure 2. The Extractive developmental cycle.
Diagram by author, based on Amitav Ghosh,

The Nutmeg's Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis, University of Chicago Press, 2021.

The cycle is difficult to interrupt because development itself creates new material demands. A larger economy requires more infrastructure; infrastructure requires materials; materials require extraction; and extraction creates new ecological pressures. Ghosh's history of the planetary crisis becomes important precisely because it makes this cycle visible.

Fossil Fuels And Geopolitical Power

Ghosh's treatment of fossil fuels demonstrates that extraction is inseparable from political power. Because energy resources are unevenly distributed while industrial societies require continuous access to them, the geography of energy becomes a geography of geopolitical relations.

The history of oil therefore extends beyond economics to questions of territory, military power, international alliances, and national security. Ghosh situates these relationships

within his broader argument concerning the political structures underlying the planetary crisis.

This produces another transformation (see fig. 3):

Commodity value → Resource control → Energy security →
Geopolitical power

Fig. 3. Fossil fuels to Geopolitics, Diagram by author, based on Amitav Ghosh, *The Nutmeg's Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis*, University of Chicago Press, 2021.

Resources therefore become more than sources of wealth; their availability becomes linked to state stability, sovereignty, and economic security. Yet the ecological consequences of extraction rarely remain within national borders. Carbon emissions circulate through the atmosphere, rivers cross political boundaries, ocean systems connect distant coastlines, air pollution travels across regions, and climate-induced displacement affects populations far from extraction sites. The planetary environment consequently exposes a contradiction within the traditional nation-state: political boundaries are fixed, whereas ecological processes are not.

The Human Cost Of The Extractive Imagination

The extractive model concerns both nature and people. Resource extraction can cause community displacement, cultural disruption, livelihood loss, and altered relationships with place. Ghosh connects environmental transformation with histories of human displacement and violence.

This reveals the link between environmental and cultural dispossession. Forests, rivers, and mountains carry knowledge, memory, livelihood, and identity beyond their material resources. Extractive projects therefore transform both environments and cultural relationships, making ecological belonging a necessary recognition of the connections that sustain communities.

The Crisis Beneath The Idea Of Progress

Ghosh's central intervention is that planetary crisis cannot be treated merely as a side effect of development; it is also a crisis of imagination. *The Nutmeg's Curse* questions how nations define progress, wealth, and resources, and what forms of life become invisible when progress is measured through material growth.

By placing ecological anxiety within longer histories of colonialism, fossil fuels, and Indigenous knowledge, Ghosh argues that sustainability requires reconsidering how

modern societies understand nature and their place within it. The movement from nutmeg to fossil fuels therefore marks not simply a change in commodities but a transition from localized extraction to a global developmental system.

CHAPTER III - FROM EXTRACTION TO ECOLOGICAL BELONGING: REIMAGINING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN NATION AND NATURE

The first two chapters trace two interconnected movements in *The Nutmeg's Curse*: the transformation of nature into commodity through colonial extraction and the extension of extractive logic into modern development and fossil-fuel civilization. These histories raise the question of how communities might imagine their relationship with nature differently. Sustainability therefore requires not only technical responses but also cultural and ethical reconsideration of land, resources, and human–nature relationships.

This conceptual framework introduces “ecological belonging,” in which communities understand themselves as embedded within ecological relationships rather than standing outside nature as its owners or managers. It does not reject the nation but asks whether national belonging can coexist with responsibility toward the landscapes and life that sustain communities, marking a shift from possession toward relationship.

From Possession To Belonging

The distinction between possession and belonging is central to understanding the alternative proposed in this chapter. An extractive worldview tends to organize the relationship between humans and nature through a possessive structure (see fig. 3):

We own the land → therefore we control its resources →
therefore we determine its use.

Figure 3. Extractive World View. Diagram by author, based on Amitav Ghosh, *The Nutmeg's Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis*, University of Chicago Press, 2021.

Ecological belonging proposes a different relationship (see fig. 4);

We inhabit the land → we depend upon it → we are shaped
by it → therefore we have responsibilities toward it.

Fig. 4. Ecological Belongingness. Diagram by author, based on Amitav Ghosh, *The Nutmeg's Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis*, University of Chicago Press, 2021.

The distinction is between land as an object of ownership and use and land as a network of relationships sustaining human life. *The Nutmeg's Curse* highlights this contrast through extractive systems and Indigenous and non-Western understandings of nature. Ghosh critiques not only environmental damage but the worldview that treats nature as external, measurable, controllable, and transformable.

Ecological belonging challenges this separation by replacing “What can this landscape provide for us?” with “What relationships sustain us within this landscape?” This shift has important implications for sustainable nation-building.

Indigenous Knowledge And Alternative Ecological Imagination

Ghosh's engagement with Indigenous knowledge systems challenges the assumption that Western extractive relationships with nature are the only model of modern life. *The Nutmeg's Curse* presents understandings in which humans remain connected to other forms of life, making visible relationships obscured by extractive worldviews.

Indigenous ecological knowledge develops through long-term relationships with particular environments, encompassing plants, animals, soil, water, seasons, and landscapes through practices, stories, rituals, and collective memory. Ghosh consequently asks whether environmental knowledge should involve not only knowing nature but learning to live within it. While modern development often treats knowledge as a means of controlling nature, ecological belonging understands it through relationships and limits, emphasizing the conditions that sustain human existence rather than more efficient extraction.

Storytelling As Ecological Recovery

Ghosh's storytelling is significant because *The Nutmeg's Curse* approaches climate change beyond a narrowly scientific framework, combining history, travel, political reflection, ecological observation, Indigenous narratives, and personal encounters to connect distant places and periods.

This method constitutes “ecological recovery,” recovering not only lost landscapes but lost relationships. The history of nutmeg connects plant, landscape, community, commerce, colonialism, and violence, while fossil-fuel history links energy, industry, development, geopolitics, and climate crisis. Ghosh thus reveals environmental crises as crises of memory and imagination. Literature bridges these gaps by connecting the abstract with

the intimate and the planetary with the local, making ecological relationships storyable.

Reimagining Nation-Building Through Ecological Belonging

Ecological belonging returns to the question of nation-building. If development has historically involved controlling and utilizing territory, sustainability requires reconsidering this relationship without abandoning development, national identity, or sovereignty. It instead questions whether prosperity must depend upon expanding extraction.

The distinction emerges through two models. Extractive nation-building treats land as resource, nature as external, territory as possession, and development as extraction, defining security through resource availability and progress through accumulation. Ecological belonging, by contrast, understands land as relationship, humans as ecologically embedded, territory as responsibility, and development within ecological limits, emphasizing more-than-human perspectives and ecological well-being. These are analytical categories representing competing approaches to development.

The Nutmeg's Curse contributes to nation-building debates by encouraging reconsideration not only of environmental protection but of the historical relationships through which nature became something requiring protection.

Toward An Ecological Nation

The idea of an ecological nation emerges from this tension. It need not reject industry, technology, cities, or development but understands them as embedded within ecological systems. This requires three shifts: from extraction to relationship, recognizing the cultural and ecological dimensions of resources; from ownership to responsibility, where sovereignty entails responsibility for ecological continuity; and from human-centered progress to ecological interdependence, where national success includes ecological health, community well-being, environmental justice, and intergenerational responsibility.

These shifts offer a conceptual foundation for sustainability rather than a fixed policy programme. Literature is significant because it can question narratives of progress, recover neglected histories, foreground marginalized experiences, challenge definitions of value, and imagine relationships beyond existing political and economic frameworks.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Amitav Ghosh's *The Nutmeg's Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis* (2021) has attracted scholarship across environmental humanities, postcolonial studies, Anthropocene studies, Indigenous studies, and climate discourse. Much of this criticism connects the contemporary ecological crisis with longer histories of colonialism, capitalism, and Western modernity, emphasizing that environmental devastation cannot be separated from political and economic power.

Debajyoti Biswas examines the relationship between colonialism and the Anthropocene, arguing that Ghosh exposes the historical connection between colonial expansion and environmental crisis through a mechanistic worldview that enabled the domination of colonized peoples and the non-human world. His analysis identifies the transformation of the Banda Islands, the destruction of Indigenous communities, and "terraforming" as central to colonial modernity's ecological consequences. Biswas also emphasizes storytelling and Indigenous knowledge as possible responses to planetary crisis.

Another strand of scholarship examines *The Nutmeg's Curse* through ecological imperialism and colonial environmental violence, emphasizing the continuity between imperial extraction and contemporary ecological destruction. Such readings demonstrate that colonial domination transformed both political structures and the environments inhabited by communities.

Karmakar and Chetty examine the text through cognitive injustice and decoloniality. They argue that Ghosh challenges Eurocentric epistemological structures that separate human and non-human worlds while marginalizing Indigenous knowledge. Their analysis connects the categorization of nature and Indigenous peoples as objects of domination with ecological and epistemic violence. Ghosh's discussion of the Banda Islands, land, and rivers consequently

enables broader debates on alternative human-nature relations and challenges to anthropocentric ecological thought.

Scholarship has also connected *The Nutmeg's Curse* with climate justice through Rob Nixon's concept of "slow violence," highlighting the gradual and unequal environmental effects experienced by marginalized communities. These approaches shift attention from spectacular disasters toward the prolonged social and

ecological consequences of extraction and inequality. Existing criticism addresses colonial extraction, ecological imperialism, Anthropocene discourse, Indigenous knowledge, epistemic injustice, non-human agency, and climate justice through colonial ecology, decoloniality, and environmental justice.

This study shifts attention from extraction as colonial environmental consequence to its role in shaping territorial power, development, prosperity, and national identity. It proposes “extractive nation-building” to describe national prosperity based on the appropriation and transformation of ecological resources. Its second concept, “ecological belonging,” connects Indigenous ecological knowledge with national belonging, extending it beyond citizenship and territory to include ecological dependence and responsibility.

Positioned within postcolonial ecocriticism, environmental humanities, and studies of nation and development, the study reads Ghosh’s commodities and landscapes as critiques of national prosperity’s material foundations. Its central trajectory is from extractive nation-building to ecological belonging.

CONCLUSION

Amitav Ghosh’s *The Nutmeg’s Curse* begins with the nutmeg but reveals broader histories of wealth, territory, political power, and ecological transformation. The Banda Islands demonstrate how commodity production can be inseparable from land, violence, displacement, and changing relationships between human communities and the more-than-human world.

This study has used “extractive nation-building” to describe a model in which land becomes territory, territory becomes a source of resources, and resources become instruments of economic and political power. Ghosh’s movement from the Banda Islands to fossil-fuel modernity demonstrates that extraction extends beyond a particular historical period, while also distinguishing colonial extraction from postcolonial development. The persistence of an extractive imagination lies in valuing ecological systems primarily according to what they can produce or supply.

In contrast, “ecological belonging” offers an alternative relationship between nation and environment. While extractive nation-building emphasizes possession, control, and resource use, ecological belonging emphasizes inhabitation, dependence, memory, and responsibility. It

does not reject development or national identity but situates them within the ecological conditions that sustain human societies. Soil, forests, rivers, oceans, plants, and atmospheric systems therefore cannot remain external to national understandings of prosperity.

Ghosh’s significant contribution is his understanding of ecological crisis as also a crisis of imagination. Addressing climate change requires more than technological or economic solutions if relationships between humans and the material world remain unchanged. His engagement with history, Indigenous knowledge, landscapes, and ecological memory creates possibilities for imagining relationships beyond domination and extraction.

Ultimately, *The Nutmeg’s Curse* challenges familiar ideas of progress and national prosperity. Its history of nutmeg demonstrates that commodities have histories, landscapes have memories, and development has ecological consequences. Reading the text through extractive nation-building and ecological belonging consequently shifts the question from what a nation can take from its territory to what it owes the ecological worlds that sustain it.

Sustainable nation-building therefore requires reconsidering belonging itself. To belong to a nation is also to assume responsibility for the ecological worlds through which it exists. This research portrays that nation can exist forgetting that it belongs to the earth.

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