

WHAT POSSIBLE BEARING?": THE SCALE OF THE SMALL IN AMITAV GHOSH'S THE NUTMEG'S CURSE

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ABSTRACT

Amitav Ghosh's *The Nutmeg's Curse* repeatedly enlarges the apparently insignificant until it becomes planetary. The nutmeg, a small botanical object, carries within its movements histories of trade, conquest, ecological transformation, and modern dependence on fossilized plant matter. This article reads smallness not merely as subject matter but as Ghosh's literary method: the local object becomes a means of challenging the modern habit of separating large historical forces from the material lives that sustain them. In Ghosh's parabolic form, the planetary is approached not by leaving the particular behind, but by following it far enough.

INTRODUCTION

"What possible bearing could the story of something as cheap and insignificant as the nutmeg have on the twenty-first century?" Ghosh asks near the end of the opening chapter of *The Nutmeg's Curse* (18). The question is deliberately disproportionate. A nutmeg can rest in a palm; the crisis to which Ghosh connects it is planetary. The distance between those scales appears so large that the comparison should fail. Instead, that distance becomes the method of the book.

The Nutmeg's Curse is often discussed, rightly, as a history of colonial violence, an argument about climate crisis, and a recovery of forms of thought in which the nonhuman world possesses vitality and agency. These concerns are central to Ghosh's project. Yet the book's literary force also depends on something more formal: its repeated refusal to accept size as a measure of significance. A seed, a spice, a volcanic island, a buried forest, a breath of air, or a commodity route can become an aperture through which much larger structures appear. Ghosh does not begin with "the planet" as an abstraction and then search for examples. He begins with a thing and follows its relations until the planetary becomes unavoidable.

This reversal of scale matters because modernity often makes the large appear consequential and the small disposable. Empires, markets, wars, technologies, and climate systems seem to belong to one order of explanation; seeds, soils, forests, and local stories appear to belong to another. Ghosh's writing collapses that hierarchy. The apparently minor object becomes a carrier of historical force. The nutmeg is not simply a symbol of empire: its value, mobility, cultivation, and geographical specificity help produce the history in which empire takes shape.

THE SMALL OBJECT AND THE PLANETARY FIELD

Ghosh makes the relation between the miniature and the planetary explicit when he describes opening a nutmeg. Peeling away its coverings, he compares the fruit to a succession of atmospheres and geological layers until the spice appears as a "tiny planet." He then observes that, like a planet, a nutmeg can never be seen in its entirety at once: one hemisphere enters light while another remains hidden (10–11). The comparison is visually striking, but its importance lies beyond resemblance.

The nutmeg is small enough to be held, turned, opened, traded, priced, consumed, or classified. Yet none of those acts exhausts it. The object exceeds the frame through which it is momentarily approached. Its botanical life reaches into volcanic soil and climate; its commercial life reaches across the Indian Ocean; its colonial history reaches into massacre and plantation; its modern afterlife reaches into the fossil-fuel economy that Ghosh treats as another chapter in humanity's dependence on botanical matter. The nutmeg is therefore not small in the sense of being isolated. Its physical scale conceals the scale of its relations.

This is why Ghosh's question about its "possible bearing" is more than a rhetorical bridge from the seventeenth century to the present. The word bearing carries a spatial suggestion: what direction can this small thing give us? The nutmeg becomes an instrument of orientation. Following it alters what can be seen as historically connected.

Ghosh stresses that nutmegs travelled immense distances long before Europeans reached the Banda Islands. Their circulation generated networks stretching across the Indian Ocean and into Africa and Eurasia. European expansion did not create the nutmeg's world; it entered a world already made through botanical movement, cultivation, commerce, and knowledge. The small object thus reverses a familiar historical perspective. Instead of Europe moving outward and bringing remote regions into history, Europeans themselves are drawn toward the Bandas because the nutmeg has already moved in the opposite direction.

INSIGNIFICANCE AS A MODERN ILLUSION

The adjective "insignificant" becomes increasingly unstable as the book proceeds. The modern consumer encounters nutmeg as cheap, ordinary, and replaceable. That present-day triviality can obscure the histories that once made the spice extraordinarily valuable and the violence committed to monopolize it. Ghosh's narrative restores weight to what economic familiarity has made weightless.

The same operation governs his treatment of resources more broadly. Modern systems of classification and exchange make things legible by reducing them to usable properties: a plant becomes a species, a forest becomes timber, land becomes property, coal becomes fuel. Ghosh does not reject scientific description as such; his objection is to the narrowing of meaning that occurs when one description claims completeness. In one of the book's most suggestive passages, he contrasts the nutmeg as a culturally resonant *jâyaphal* or *pala* with the taxonomic *Myristica fragrans*. Under the latter name, he writes, the nut is subdued and muted, reduced toward the status of an inert resource (98).

The point is not that naming destroys life. It is that a regime of knowledge can make relations disappear from view. Once the nutmeg is apprehended principally as commodity or resource, its other bearings—its place in stories, songs, landscapes, ritual, ecological dependence, and historical violence—become easier to dismiss as secondary. Insignificance is therefore not simply a property of the object. It is produced by a way of seeing.

This gives the book's movement from nutmeg to fossil fuels a deeper coherence. Ghosh challenges the modern fantasy that technological societies have somehow escaped dependence on earthly matter. Coal, oil, and natural gas are themselves ancient botanical life transformed over geological time. The apparent movement from spice to fossil fuel is not a departure from the original subject; it reveals another scale of the same dependency. What modernity calls progress does not leave the Earth behind. It changes the forms through which dependence is concealed.

PARABLE AND THE MOVEMENT OF SCALE

Ghosh's subtitle, *Parables for a Planet in Crisis*, is crucial to this structure. He has explained that he uses "parable" partly because the book is parabolic rather than linear: it proceeds through disjunctions and wide-ranging connections rather than through a single continuous historical line. The form allows a small event or object to travel conceptually without being reduced to an illustrative example.

A conventional example is subordinate to the general rule it demonstrates. Ghosh's nutmeg behaves differently. The book does not already possess a complete theory of planetary crisis for which the spice merely supplies evidence. The movement through the spice generates the connections. The reader travels from Lonthor to European markets, from botanical life to colonial extermination, from plantation systems to fossil energy, and from the seventeenth century to the present because the object itself has acquired those relations historically.

The parable therefore protects the particular even as it enlarges its significance. The Banda Islands do not disappear into a generic story about colonialism; their specificity is precisely what allows the larger pattern to become visible. Likewise, the nutmeg does not cease to be nutmeg when it becomes planetary. Its smell, shell, mace, cultivation, price, and mobility remain material facts. The planetary emerges through accumulation of relations rather than through abstraction from them.

This is also why storytelling matters so deeply to Ghosh's environmental argument. A numerical description can tell us the scale of extraction, temperature change, emissions, or loss. Stories can restore the chains of relation through which those quantities acquire human and nonhuman meaning. Near the end of the book Ghosh argues that nonhuman voices must be restored to our stories (257). The demand is not ornamental. If the world has been rendered insignificant by being converted into resource, then narrative becomes one means by which significance can return.

CONCLUSION

The *Nutmeg's Curse* asks its readers to reconsider where historical magnitude resides. The planetary crisis is not accessible only through planetary-sized concepts. It is present in the trajectories of small things: in a spice carried across oceans, in soil made fertile by a volcano, in forests compressed into fuel, and in the local worlds reorganized so that commodities can move more freely than the people who cultivate them.

Ghosh's literary method consequently works against the hierarchy that separates the large from the small. The nutmeg matters not because it secretly stands for the planet, but because following its actual relations reveals how much of the planet is already gathered around it. Its apparent insignificance is the effect of distance, familiarity, and abstraction.

The question "What possible bearing?" can therefore be read as the book's methodological challenge. What happens if the supposedly minor is followed rather than dismissed? In Ghosh's hands, the answer is expansive: an object small enough to disappear into a kitchen cupboard can reopen histories of empire, ecology, violence, dependence, and survival. The planetary does not begin where the particular ends. It becomes visible when the particular is allowed to lead outward.

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