

Devastating Dynamics of Colonialism, and Climate Change in Amitav Ghosh's *The Living Mountain*

Yash Pal Singh, Himanshu Sharma

Associate Professor
DoE, Dyal Singh College, University of Delhi
yashpalsingh.english@dsc.du.ac.in

2-Associate Professor
DoE, Dyal Singh College, University of Delhi
himanshusharma.english@dsc.du.ac.in

Abstract:

This paper investigates the damaging role of colonialism in disrupting ecological sustainability leading to alarming climate degradation in Amitav Ghosh's seemingly tiny, but pithy and deep novella *The Living Mountain, a Fable for Our Times*. The trajectory of the complex and elusive mechanism of colonialism is illustrated in a form of a parable that exposes misdeeds of the colonial powers. The pristine world of the warring folks of the villages high in the Himalayas, unbeknown to the geography and people beyond their borders, is disturbed by the invaders in a very subtle manner. The paper showcases how the manipulative and exploitative practice of colonialism dethrones the sense of unity, self-sufficiency and eco-ethics of the mountain folks. By demeaning the indigenous folk knowledge system, which helped them survive since time immemorial, and projecting the ideas of supremacy motivated by immorality, avarice and plunder, the *Anthropoi* of this narrative initiate irreversible environmental loss. Unlike the earlier narrative styles, *The Living Mountain* is narrated in lucid and graspable manner, but with deeper nuances with an attempt to revert what Amitav calls "failure of imagination".

Keywords: Colonialism, Nature, Anthropocene, Eco-ethics, Imagination.

Amitav Ghosh extensively published his famous works on the themes of fundamentalism, communal violence, nationalism, partition and loss, but for more than a decade he has been seriously devoted to the issues of climate change and environmental degradation in his literary works. His critically acclaimed oeuvres on climate change include *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (2016); *The Nutmeg's Curse* (2021) and *The Living Mountain* (2022). When it comes to environmental degradation, Amitav Ghosh warns the world of the gravity of this ever-increasing man-made calamity. The scientifically and technologically advanced human being is at the center of this devastating phenomenon, which initiated with the wrongly conceived idea of progress and advancement, and is, therefore, bound to bear the brunt of it. Ghosh has also been consistently critical of the ways and methods adopted to engage the issue of climate change by several authors and film makers. According to him, narratives woven around such issues appear to be hollow and falling flat due to lack of a set of narrative skills which could help imagine this emergency in its intensity:

If certain literary firms are unable to negotiate these torrents, then they will have failed- and their failures will have to be counted as an aspect of the broader imaginative and cultural failure that lies at the heart of a climate crisis. (*The Great Derangement*: 8)

He narrates the complex structure of modern world in a more approachable and comprehensible manner. Nick Admussen (qtd. in Chaudhari) in his "Six Proposals for the Reform of Literature in the Age of Climate Change" talks about the failure of present-day culture in telling the right stories that could prepare us to understand and address the planetary crises we face today. Admussen further elaborates:

"Yet we lack the ability to visualise these problems, to locate their source in our own actions and lives, to tell and transform the stories of the interactions between our behaviour and our biome. This is not a failing of science; the science is quite clear: it is a failing of culture." (Chaudhari)

Nature was believed to be alive in all pagan religions, and supposed to balance out the wrong done to her. Every aspect of human life was governed by the laws of Nature with which life survived, sustained and flourished. The rhythm of life was

synchronized with that of Nature. The arrhythmia occurred when man turned away from these laws in favour of economic laws, prioritizing greed over need. Ghosh reaffirms this state of Nature, and vehemently reinforces that every catastrophe has been a form of retaliation by Nature to our disrespect to her. The writing around this topic unlike others must not be treated as merely a cultural production just for consumption. Rising of temperature, melting of glaciers, desertification, flooding, cyclones, wildfires are not automatic and beyond human understanding, but are result of Anthropocene or drastic and ruthless exploitation of nature. Amitav adopts a new emphatic method to trace the genesis of Anthropocene that has initiated an unending crisis.

The Living Mountain has been written in a form of a parable wherein the world portrayed is the world of natural and unmechanical folks who fight among themselves for establishing dominance over each other heedless of the geographies beyond their territories. This form of war and tussle never disturb their environment and surrounding as it is not for controlling resources or overpowering the surrounding. Amitav's canvas in this story is very enriched offering a collage of different elements of pre-colonial and pre-industrial world, where lives are not governed by machines and desires. Two book club buddies Mansi and her unnamed friend, with their different pursuits, come across an unfamiliar word 'Anthropocene', and strive hard to find its exact meaning and conceptualization. Meanwhile, she has a 'most horrible dream' which unsettles her to the extent that she visits her therapist who advises her to write it down. Mansi sends a copy of this dream story to her book buddy thereafter. Mansi's residence in New York and her origin from mountainous country Nepal offers a suitable model to trace the genesis of climate change from an old ecologically enriched space to the highly unsustainable and oppressive capitalist economy. Nepal symbolizes the region abounds in mountains, hills, valleys, rivers, streams, fountains and beautiful flora and fauna contrary to the city of New York, which is an embodiment of exploitation, commercialization, and ruthless capitalism. Mansi's dream offers an insightful instance of how the Western powers through subtle process of lucrative colonization set in motion climate crisis. The villages described in the dream are

situated high in the Himalaya signifying the ancient ways of habitation in small clusters where folks live as an organic whole with their centuries' old wisdom, traditions and rituals. The inhabitants of these small villages, despite their human fallibility of hate, pride and war are bound by a sense of unity when it comes to their revered Mahaparbat, which is believed to be alive. The Mahaparbat, blanketed in perennial snow, and wreathed in clouds, promises to protect them, provided they celebrate, sing, dance and narrate the stories about the mountain, and never trespass the bounds:

“One of the binding laws of the Valley, respected by all our warring villages, was we were never, on any account, to set foot on the slopes of the Great Mountain.” (LM:7)

Ghosh underscores the importance of environmental ethics in unassuming folks' worldview. Their oral narratives carrying eco-ethics are deeply rooted in culture and value system, and serve as a primary source of guidance during times of trouble. The rare medicinal trees, herbs, miraculous vegetation grows along the streams descending from the Mahaparbat fulfil their basic needs of food, shelter and cloth. The rare of the rarest nuts and honey are available to them. The oral tales which the Mahaparbat desires them to sing and dance with are the only fundamental link with the Mahabarbat as a binding-force and carrier of indigenous knowledge system. The process of singing and dancing is, performative, entertaining, educative, informative and healing that engenders ecological and existential sustainability in contrast to the crisis the world of advancement faces.

Trading is one of the essential activities among societies and civilizations whereby two or more different cultures meet and exchange commodities as well as valuable ideas with mutual understanding. Amitav undertakes trade as a vital starting point in the story. Notwithstanding all differences among themselves, the Valley people never permit any outsider to enter their territory; the entrance to the Valley is always covered with thick layer of snow safeguarding their precious world. *Eldermen* and *Elderwomen* as the only persons to meet the merchants cautiously to exchange the goods in the *Trading week* without divulging secrets of their land and mountain illustrates how traditional knowledge is of paramount importance for existence. The

Trading Week symbolizes the time of elation and exuberance as the folks harvest the crops and collect the precious natural herbs; trade the excess commodities, not for profit but for necessity. It also offers opportunity to have some interaction with the people of different cultures. Their dealings do not involve capital, gain, profit and loss as these ideas are foreign to them. It is primarily a symbiotic relationship. Pre-colonial world was the world of happiness, despite hardships and challenges. Colonial and Imperial powers shrewdly entered these territories to seize the resources, and accomplished their objectives by executing their latent plans through complex system involving mechanical knowledge, “hegemony” and “cultural imperialism”. The European explorers, traders, cartographers etc. strived harder to control new territories for the sake of sheer plunder. The history of European colonization and post-World War II American colonization, as allegorized in *The Living Mountain*, is central to the story. Colonization was purely motivated by unethical acquisition of the resources of the native and indigenous population. Benjamin Disraeli considered the East as a career, although with varying degree of interpretation. In the European imagination, the East was splendid and exotic land with abundance of precious resources. The Postcolonial theorists critique the manner in which the East had been depicted in the canonical literature. Edward Said in his groundbreaking book *Orientalism* endeavours to expose the European praxis during colonization, and attempts to recover the true beauty and essence of the pre-colonial East. Dipesh Chakrabarty finds that:

The problem of humans’ ecological footprint, we can say, was ratcheted up over the last 500 years with European expansion and colonization of faraway lands inhabited by other peoples, and the subsequent rise of industrial civilization. (106)

After *Trading Week*, the Valley people celebrate; and the *Adepts*, who are the most skillful dancers, claim that “they had felt the Mountain speaking to them through the soles of their feet. (LM: 10)” In tribal and ethnic world, people worship their trees, rivers, birds and overall nature; they commune with the spirit of Nature; they disapprove any idea of infiltration what Nature is supposed to deny them. Their environment is as alive and interactive as they themselves are. Nature is considered as

an extended family, and treated with reverence. But as the narrative cannot further in linear form, therefore, a distressing turn occurs. The strange people called *Anthropoi* from far off land, who have heard of the products of the Valley, express desire to visit the Valley. The Valley elders being wise and circumspect foil the attempts of the servant of the *Anthropoi* to enter their valley against the “Law of the Valley”, but innocently revealed some secrets about their Mahaparat, which the servant recorded in the book. Amitav Ghosh very minutely describes how the system of writing and documentation was very crucial for colonial powers. The documentation about geographical features, routes, ethnicities, identities, habits, cultures etc. helped them record and reproduce precious information, which assisted the empire to chart elaborate planning. This documentation helped them to locate more geographical minorities particularly in the global south. The ecocritical framework in *The Living Mountain* offers that the culture and tradition of the Valley people are primarily eco-centric in contrast to the Anthro-centric approach of the *Anthropoi*. Their institutions are supported by the idea of coexistence and sustainability; whereas the institutions of the West had strong underpinning of exploitative tactics. This fundamental dichotomy between the model of capitalist, exploitative approach, and the eco-sustainability model puts into perspective the devastating role of colonialism. The manner in which the servant of *Anthropoi* returns is threatening and intimidating. The strangers remain outside for few years, and plan to assail the valley:

Then suddenly one morning the Great Mountain began to shake and heave; avalanches came roaring down its slopes and rifts opened up in the Valley. (LM:13)

Adepts, the excellent dancers and communicators to their environment, declare that the ‘cycle of time has ended, and another has begun: the Cycle of Tribulations’ as the strangers with deadly weapons start entering the Valley. It shows that the presence of any ominous and foreign is felt by the living Mahaparat before its inhabitants. *Anthropois* are illustrative of the modern American army equipped with the state-of-the-art weaponry with a well-thought-out strategy to achieve their target. The Mahaparat, according to them, is only a resource replete with precious “riches, minerals, and metals” to be utilized, which the Valley people due to lack of modern

knowledge can not use. The idea of reverence to the Mahaparbat is ridiculed, and concerted efforts by the Valley people are thwarted by all types of conniving:

Some of our villages were defeated in battle, some were tricked into attacking their neighbours, and others were reduced into acquiescence with drugs that sent them into dream like trances. (LM:15)

The intersectionality of the exploitative and the ecologically sensitive offers an insight into the onset of climate change. The strong guards of *Anthropoi* called *Kraani* subjugate the folks and termed them as *Varvano*i, who are attributed with the adjectives of weak, perverse, feeble, degenerated and unsuitable. An act of dethroning the indigenous system of knowledge help colonial powers to disintegrate the enabling-force of connectedness among the natives. Stories, songs, dances and all the other forms of celebrating gaiety are put to abhorrence and inferiority indicating ignorance and idiocy. *Anthropoi*'s climbing the Mahaparbat appears fascinating and exciting to the *Varvano*i. Amitav holds both the colonizer and the colonized responsible for climate change. The dynamics of the old society of the villages slowly changes, as it could not withstand the force, and eventually new paradigms take shape. This paradigm shifting offers more conducive circumstances to the invaders. Their disregard to the Mahaparbat, and scorn of the ways of the pliant folks offer an analogy to the empire whose servants demeaned the native language, culture and worldviews. The indigenous folk begins imitating the colonizers, forgetting their own worldviews, which Amitav foregrounds and problematizes in this fable. Greg Garrad in his book 'Ecocriticism' says that concentrating on images of natural beauty and emphasizing the 'harmony' of humanity and nature that 'once' existed, the fable at first presents us with a picture of essential changelessness, which human activity scarcely disturbs, and which the annual round of seasons only reinforces. However, pastoral peace rapidly gives way to catastrophic destruction:

Then a strange blight crept over the area and everything began to change. Some evil spell had settled on the community: mysterious maladies swept the flocks of chickens; the cattle and sheep sickened and died. Everywhere was a shadow of death. (Garrad:03)

The Mahaparat is no longer an object of regard. It rather becomes a sight of adventure and exploration. Old wise leaders and elders lose their relevance in face of the ever-increasing realm of *Anthropoi* endorsed worldviews. New leaders, who are ignorant, are given responsibilities to lead the malleable folk. The process of adopting the ways of *Anthropoi* manifests the inability of the natives to understand that they themselves are transforming into what once was a threat to their world. Amitav reiterates that the colonized also perpetrate on Nature in a similar degree to sustain the edifices modelled on the designs of the colonizers. The Mahaparat, at the end of the narrative could no longer endure the damage done, and starts shaking furiously indicating catastrophe and doom. The knowledge of *Anthropoi* fails to offer any interpretation and defense against the doom; only traditional wisdom could explain which the mountain folk have themselves forgotten. Amitav emphasizes the need of turning back to the ways of the indigenous folks and stop further damage to the environment.

The age of *Anthropoi*, Amitav Ghosh vehemently declares, is the age of consumerism and threatening human intrusion leading to unimageable. As has been seen in recent Los Angeles fires where Nature reaffirms her invincibility and seems to take revenge upon the erring human being. In a study Dr Clair Barnes, from Imperial College London said, "Climate change increased the risk of the devastating LA wildfires,"(BBC)

Conclusions:

The paper concludes that the onset of climate change begins with the age of Anthropocene, and the deadliest form of exploitation can be seen with the European colonization followed by industrialization. Amitav demonstrates how literature and art has the capability to portray this unimageable, and evokes desired response from the people. The principle of capitalism and commercialism are anti-Nature as they promote individualism, prosperity and hedonism putting the environmental sustainability at risk. Deforestation, mining, excessive chemicalization, radiation, etc. are man-made crises only. Through this parable, *The Living Mountain*, the entire

history of Anthropocene has been narrated by exposing and criticizing the myth of progress and enlightenment. Sensitization of mass to adopt eco-ethics is the prime concern of the author. The advanced economies could not be the torch-bearer to address the issue of climate change. Only the ways of the folks depicted in the narrative are sustainable and ecofriendly. The major events of climate change are reminders to think hard, and take emergency steps before the revered Mahaparbat starts shivering.

Works Cited:

- Ghosh, Amitav. *The Living Mountain*. India, Fourth Estate India, 2022.
- , *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*. United Kingdom, University of Chicago Press, 2017, p.8
- Chaudhuri, Rajat. "The Living Mountain: Amitav Ghosh tells us stories about ourselves we can no longer ignore." *Scroll.in*, 21 May 2022, <https://scroll.in/article/1024406/>
- Chakrabarty, Dipesh. "Whose Anthropocene? A Response." *RCC Perspectives*, no. 2, 2016, pp. 106. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26241365>. Accessed 9 Mar. 2025.
- Garrard Greg. *Ecocriticism*. London, Routledge, 2004, p.03
- Said, Edward W. *Orientalism*. Vintage Book, New York. 1979.
- Buell, Lawrence. *The Future of Environmental Criticism*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2005.
- McGrath, Matt. "Climate change made LA fires worse, scientists say" *BBC*, 29 January 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cd9qy4knd8wo>

Authors' bio-note:

Dr Yash Pal Singh is an Associate professor of English at Dyal Singh College, University of Delhi. His area of research interest include Postcolonil Studies, Postmodernism and Ecocriticism.

Dr Himanshu Sharma is an Associate professor of English at Dyal Singh College, University of Delhi. His research area include Modern European Drama and Indian Writing in English.
