



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

Environmental Colonialism: A Study of Amitav Ghosh's "The Living Mountain".

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Abstract:

Environmental colonialism are ways in which the coloniser has altered the landscape of the colonised land. It is about the coloniser gradually encroaching the land, learning the secrets of the land from the natives and taking control of the people and the land. In the process they not only manipulate the people but the land too. The end result is the coloniser causing unimaginable damage to the land. This paper will explore the colonial impact on the environment of the colonised in Amitav Ghosh's novel "*The Living Mountain*" (2022). The Anthropois are the invaders who invade the valley and conquer the *Mahaparbhat* the mountain by slaving the *Varvarois*, the natives. Though the natives are fascinated by the colonisers ideologies and share the secrets of the land, they do realise that their land has been exploited. The analogy is true to any colony of the imperial powers, during the colonial era and can be correlated to man's greed to acquire more wealth. It is a document that sends a signal to warn the world about man's selfish mindset.

Greta Thunberg, a young Swedish autistic environmental activist, in a landmark article gave a clarion call to arrest the damage wrought on the environment the world over at an unprecedented scale. Her lines echoed, "The climate crisis is not just about the environment. It is a crisis of human rights, of justice, and of political will. Colonial, racist, and patriarchal systems of oppression have created and fuelled it. We need to dismantle them

all. Our political leaders can no longer shirk their responsibilities." In doing so she was reiterating the findings made by scientists, researchers and writers, who have related environment degradation to excess of colonialism.

One of the greatest writers of all times, who brought to the fore the connection between colonialism and environment was none other than the playwright, William Shakespeare. It is through the character of Caliban in *Tempest*, whose island is captured and colonised brings out the profound truth of the impact of the coloniser have had on the colonised and the environment.

...you think the earth itself is dead ... It's so much simpler that way! Dead, you can walk on it, pollute it, you can tread upon it with the steps of a conqueror. I respect the earth, because I know that it is alive ... what do you think you'd have done without me in this strange land? ... I taught you the trees, fruits, birds, the seasons, and now you don't give a damn ... Once you've squeezed the juice from the orange, you toss the rind away!

(1.2.124-147)

— Caliban, from Aimé Césaire's *Tempest* (1969)

Colonialism began with the European expansion in the 15th century. The colonisers settled in North and South Americas were not the first ones to explore and exploit the land as history might indicate. Instead, the natives of the land who had their own identity and a thriving culture. In the later centuries, the Europeans expanded their colonies to Africa, Asia and Australia. They colonised the indigenous people and their lands. When that happened, the natives had to let go their traditional ways of life and forced to follow the coloniser as Caliban in *Tempest* portrays. That meant the beginning of the social, political and economic changes in the indigenous ways of lives and beliefs.

A classical citation is in Joseph Conrad's, 'Heart of Darkness', when the narrator, Marlowe says that he had "passed through several abandoned villages". The natives had moved away from their lands that they had worshiped and followed the coloniser's ways of life unaware of the real intent of colonisation. It started with the exploitation of natural resources such as ivory and rubber. Being a land of rich in natural resources, the resource ultimately became a curse for them. The coloniser was only interested in exploitation of natural resources and scant respect for nurturing the people or the land.

Another recent study on oil prospecting quote: “Industry insiders say six decades of oil exploration have made the Niger Delta, one of the most polluted places on earth and damaged a lot, including farmlands.” (Al Jazeera) The oil found on the Niger River Delta, which has more than 2000 kilometres of mangrove swamp, one of the largest wetlands in the world has had impacted the impacted unfavourably. The aftermath of colonisation for oil has been the decimation of the flora and the fauna of the rich Niger River.

Dominion Ibatou, a farmer said that he is yet to harvest anything from his farm in Ikarama because the plants are stunted due to the oil spill. This is yet another example of the impact of MNCs (a modern form of colonisation) continues to destroy and damage the nature and the natives. Therefore, it is very important for humans to forge a strong bond with the natural world that they live in. The continued exploitation by man has created tell-tale evidences of global ecological disaster in the making.

Shelley rightly pointed out in the poem, *Ode to a West wind*, the duality of nature. “Wild Spirit, which art moving everywhere; Destroyer and preserver; hear, oh hear!” Shelley’s work clearly indicate that mindless human activity has bearings on nature and is often a reminder to man to alter his current approach to nature. The bush fires in Australia in 2020; the severe drought in East Africa in 2019 has wiped out many lives and livestock; the deadly floods in Asia, which displaced 12 million people in 2019; the hurricane in America and the Al Niño phenomenon bringing Central America years of drought are all warning signals of nature to man. The result of the greed of man for land and resources.

Today, researchers and scientists picture dismaying picture of the harsh statistics of climate crisis wrought on the planet earth by the mindless exploitation of nature. The politicians though a limited effect have come together to mitigate the effect of the environmental havoc caused by humans. The writers have contributed their mite to create environmental consciousness required to create and sustain a bio centric view of life. Though the natural world has been the focus of study and critical enquiry, it was not considered a serious pursuit until the recent past. However, the study began to take root in 70s and 80s and it has now gain currency in every literary forum. From Ralph Waldo Emerson, Margaret Fuller and Thoreau, who returned to nature to renew self to Glen Darcy Wood’s recent work, *Tambora*, which studies about a volcanic eruption tells the tale of the close proximity of environment and humans. With reference to Indian literature, Indira Sinha’s book with the Bhopal Gas tragedy as the back drop is another example of the incalculable damage that can be caused when caution is

thrown to winds when it comes to environmental issues that have wide ramifications. A story no more of colonialism but of capitalism but both the narratives are about humans' wanton neglect of the environment.

Amitav Ghosh is one of the few Indian writers, who with his powerful narrative has warned the world about the importance of protecting future of our planet. His latest book "*The Living Mountain*" is about how mankind looks at nature as a resource for meeting his selfish needs. *A Living Mountain*, a novella that brings out brilliantly this aspect of the colonialism of the environment and the attendant disaster. '*The Living Mountain*' is very pertinent today as we are facing a climate catastrophe that is clearly staring at us.

"Mountain as a living being that cared for us: we saw the proof every day, all around us in the form of a tree that grew along the streams that descended from the slopes. This tree which grew only in our valley and nowhere else, produced things that were so miraculous and we called it the Magic Tree"

In the novel, Amitav Ghosh creates an image of the microcosm of the current reality of the world that we live in. A small world of the indigenous people living in the valley of a mountain called, *Mahaparbat*. This little world represents our world in which the natives of the land revered nature and the stories of their ancestors taught the natives to worship their land and in turn the land would protect and take care of them. It was a world where the natives lived in close proximity with nature.

Rabindra Nath Sinha in an article, '*Jal, Jangal and Zameen*' speaks poignantly about Indian tribes, People in '*Jal, Jangal and Zameen*' having faith in nature worship are the followers of this religion. They worship trees and hills and go all out to protect forests." – Rabindra Nath Sinha

"Tribal Outfits gearing up to restart stir on Sarna Religious Code Issue" (Newslick.in, 15 September 2022)

The people of the valley in the "*The Living Mountain*" hosted ceremonies of gratitude for the Great Mountain. Prayers were chanted, offerings were made and the whole valley feasted and danced. It was a way of thanking the mountain for receiving "the miraculous nuts, rare mushrooms, fine honey, herbs and the like" (9)

Natives had their own indigenous culture. The people of the valley worked hard for food, they loved to listen to the music of nature and most of all dance. The women would dance and move into a state of trance and hear the mountain speak to them. The *Adepts*, this is how they are called. They lived in harmony with nature. They knew the leaves and the trees in the valley and were aware of the medicinal properties of the herbs. Traders from lowland would travel all the way to buy it. Once in a year when the snow disappeared the Eldermen and

Elderwomen, who occupied the top of the social hierarchy would trade with the inhabitants of the mountain. After the trade they would safeguard the valley with guards at *portcullis*. Thus the natives protected and did not allow any stranger to enter the valley.

The valley created by Amitav Ghosh in the “The Living Mountain” may represent a self-sufficient lands with their distinct language and customs. Like the pre-colonial Africa with its rich oral tradition, tribal dances and music. They knew their land and thus the secrets of the resources of Africa until the Europeans colonised and changed the terrain altogether.

The colonisers of the valley were called *Anthropoi*. They had heard about the nuts in the valley and “all that it contained”. Though the Elderly people in the valley protested and told that it was against the Law of the Valley to exploit the resources, the stranger persisted saying “Tell me about the valley and about all the other valuable trade foods that it produces.”(11) The elderly people told the stranger about the beloved mountain “Mahaparbat”.The stranger listened intently and took notes about everything that was said.

Identical to the colonisation of India by the British, the valley was invaded by the *Anthropoi*. They stormed the *portcullis*. The invaders studied and were aware of the great riches of the valley. So did the British when they colonised Australia and Africa and used the resources.

Though there were pockets of resistance and the natives of the valley said, “We can’t do that” The natives decided to defend as all natives have done in history. Ghosh’s miniature world contains all the attributes that the colonised experienced in the period of the European invasion. The British, who came to India as traders were aware of the riches like the *Anthropois* did in the “The Living Mountain”.

The British landed in India as traders in 1608. They gradually understood the rich history and value of the wealth of India. The East India Company primarily traded in silk, cotton, indigo dye, tea and opium. Over a period of time they realised that India was a land of many kingdoms and they could be easily won politically. Though very few kings revolted, some of the kings were tamed by the British and the kings ultimately joined hands with the coloniser. The British were able to defeat them. The East India Company continued to grow and flourish. They conquered India politically and ruled India from 1757 to 1947.

Ghosh brings in a similar picture of the coloniser and the colonised in the novel. The natives of the valley like the kings India “fought valiantly but our efforts were to no avail”. Some of our villages were defeated in battles,

some were tricked into attacking neighbours and others were acquiesced with drugs that sent them into dream like trances.” The natives felt helpless and once they were subjugated, the *Anthropois* told them that they would be ruled by soldiers called Kraani. The Kraanis were like the overseers and they ensured the natives worked hard under their supervision. Slavery, a very ancient practice was prevalent among the natives. The *Anthropois* projected themselves as superior and behaved as though they were from a different planet. They were asserting themselves. They exhibited overpowering control. They established their own hierarchy. There was change in leadership. The elders, who guided the valley were replaced by an all men team.

The coloniser as ever underestimated the culture of the natives in the “The Living Mountain”. As in Africa, colonialism stimulated negative changes in the African Culture. The Africans believed that God is the explanation to all things around them. Therefore they asserted that environment is created with the help of God. Discussions on religion and values were closely knitted in African culture. The British underrated the culture of Africa and introduced individualism, corruption and oppression. Interfered and unsettled the belief system of the natives. Amitav Ghosh draws an exact parallel of such an event in the novel. The *Kraanis*, the invading soldiers, “forbade all our ceremonies and songs and stories and dances. They were all worthless they said, had brought nothing but doom upon us”. Thus the plight of the people in the valley was reduced to a state of “degradation and despair”. The people in the valley without made the natives toil in the fields to produce and provide supplies to Anthropois. The Kraanis dehumanised the natives by saying that “We were nothing but Varvoraoui (which was what they called us).

The natives while during the course of colonisation had a tendency to lean towards the coloniser in admiration. Ghosh’s lines “The lives of the Anthropois seemed infinitely more exciting than our own wretched existence in the valley” described exactly such existence in, ‘*A Living Mountain*’. Gradually, the culture of the natives was altered. The people of the valley, who worshipped the mountain in reverence instead began to attach romantic notion of the thrill of climbing the mountain. They were overwhelmed by the stories narrated by the Anthropois and were fascinated by the climb itself. The Varvarois (the natives) were porters, muleteers, and sherpas who laboured for the Kraanis. The Kraanis began to trust the natives more and more and the Eldermen began to think that they could grab the power from the Kraanis. In due course the elderly men began to rebel and when it time came for them to overthrow the Kraanis the Kraani disappeared and joined the Anthropois.

Colonisation often leads to internal conflicts. British divided India using territory and religion. The first major riots between Hindus and Muslims broke out in the aftermath of partition in 1947 happened in Jabalpur, Madhya Pradesh in 1961. The ripple effect of the impact of colonisation is even seen now and then today. Though the British have left the country divided and the divide is more prominent now than before. Ghosh creates a similar scenario in the living mountain when the inhabitants of the valley slaughtered each other and were very destructive by nature and new *Kraani* emerged from amongst the *Vavaroi*(natives). Having come together, they began to take up the challenge of climbing the summit. Though a difficult climb they never gave up. The attitude of the villagers is summed up as: “our hearts were full of courage and our resolve steadfast”. Many villagers joined the climb. They followed the footsteps of the *Anthropois* .They were even faster than the *Anthropois*. They even presumed that they might reach before the *Anthropois*. This event symbolically represents the imitation of the culture of the colonised. And it is at this point that the coloniser, very well knows that without the help of the natives it is impossible to navigate and explore the land. So the *Anthropois* joined hands with the *Varavois* in knowing the terrain of the mountain.

Very often, the natives absorb the attitude of the colonisers and thereby cause damage to the land. Here too the villagers’ outlook to the mountain changed from reverence to control. As a result they all climbed the mountain together and eventually resulted in a landslide and Avalanche killing vast number of people. Knowing that it was impossible to turn back. The natives joined hands with the colonisers and moved ahead. Gradually becoming insensitive to the fact that they had lost their kin and went on climbing the mountain. There came a point when crevasses began to open up and each step was starting a mudslide which was sweeping the *Anthropoi* away. The natives come to a point where they turn mindless like the colonisers. At that juncture the coloniser, the *Anthropoi* knew the danger of the ice melting. The natives felt helpless as they now understood the values of their own beliefs. They were reminded of the Adept words who always said a mountain could be understood by listening and using not our brains but the soles of our feet?

Ill-treatment and having an upper hand has been the pattern of behaviour of the colonisers from history. In the case of the people of the valley, it was more evident when they blamed the natives and has asked the natives to leave the mountain. They openly proclaimed that “We had no place in it”. The natives at this point began to protest and having come to the realisation that they have been exploited and the action of climbing will be self-destructive by nature. To hope for a change in the heart of *Anthropoi* was futile and as it was impossible for the

natives to return at this point because their kinsfolk down the valley was urging them to climb. Ironically, they were yet to realise the dangers of believing the Anthropois.

The Antropois realising that they would have to face a tragic end came running to the natives for help. Both the coloniser and the colonised realise that there was wisdom in the reverence the natives had for the mountain. Sadly most of the natives of the mountain have forgotten the songs and dances. Symbolically the natives forgetting their indigenous culture and moving away from nature. And finally when they found one among them perform the dance and the song, they felt the mountain move as if answering their song. They thus realise that the mountain is alive and the mountain teaches them a lesson. Both the coloniser and the colonised are thus taught a lesson by the mountain. Their wish to exploit the natural resources, which one was worshipped by the natives comes to an end.

“*A living Mountain*” thus is a reflection of the times when our understanding of man’s relationship with the natural world seems to be inadequate as the future of our planet is turning out to be bleak. Amitav Ghosh has penned a cautionary narrative to show how colonialism and mans greed can tilt the balance in nature. A book that is sending a very strong message of being aware of the future of mankind and mending our ways towards the environment. It leaves us with the hard-hitting truth that man should change the anthropocentric behaviour to eeocentricism.

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