



‘MESSING WITH NATURE’: REVISITING THE TRANSITION OF ENVIRONMENTALISM TO ANTHROPOCENE IN AMITAV GHOSH’S *THE LIVING MOUNTAIN*

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Abstract

The transition of anthropocentrism is interrelated to the evolution of culture and civilization. The contemporary age is torn between the movements of Anthropocene and Environmentalism and it is hard to strike a chord of balance between the two developments. If anthropocene focuses on human centeredness, environmentalism reaffirms the need to protect ecology as top priority. Amitav Ghosh’s novel *The Living Mountain* published in 2022 takes the reader on a unique insightful journey exploring how the neo-imperialists continue to find newer destinations to exploit nature and its resources. The present study examines the impact of anthropocentrism over people and their native habitat, and of the ultimate realisation that in order to survive humans need to re-think their priorities and change their lifestyle by embracing environmentalism.

Keywords: environmentalism, anthropocene, capitalocene, *The Living Mountain*, transition

Introduction

We live in a world on the brink of an environmental apocalypse of unimaginable magnitude. The continuous human intervention against nature has taken its toll and has altered our ecosystem forever. Anthropocentrism which has been the dominant view for decades has negatively impacted the environment and caused ecocide, nature imbalance, climate change / global warming, and environmental degradation.

The contemporary age is torn between the movements of Anthropocene and Environmentalism and it is hard to strike a chord of balance between the two developments. If anthropocene focuses on the human centeredness, environmentalism reaffirms the need to protect ecology as its most important priority. Since the transition of anthropocentrism is interrelated to the evolution of culture and civilization, there is an anthropological moral duty to re-establish values that protect nature. Presently, there is a growing human interest in nature conservation that advocates for a shift towards an environment friendly perspective that embraces not only cultural values and human rights, but also the intrinsic value and rights to life of nonhuman species.

The changing environmental structure invites us to re-examine and redefine the way in which we perceive nature. Often ecological crisis is the outcome of cultural crisis. Clearly, the solutions for the rapid changes in climatic conditions and environmental degradation require not only a shift in the way we utilize nature but also in the way we perceive it. A timely shift in our understanding of the environment can help us to change the many practices in our complex ecological and cultural system. A restructuring of the interactions between man and nature in literature and literary productions could pave way for a culture rooted in the preservation and protection of nature and also for producing the need for eco-sensitivity in all our activities.

Amitav Ghosh's novel *The Living Mountain* published in 2022 takes the readers on a unique insightful journey exploring how the neo-imperials continue to find newer destinations for exploitation of nature and its resources. The present study examines the impact of anthropocentrism over people and their native habitat. The novel highlights the importance of human self-realisation that in order to survive on Planet Earth the ultimate need of the hour is to re-think priorities and bring drastic changes in lifestyle by embracing environmentalism.

The question whether nature is an integral part of human life or whether it is the humans who are an integral part of the natural world poses the significance of the two terms-anthropocene and environmentalism. All ecosystems, past and present, have been subject to rapid environmental change resulting in new ecosystems. The present Anthropocene epoch too is characterized by rapid anthropogenic environmental change. Capitalist societies driven by lust for profit had steadily plundered the earth and its environs. The imperial motive of human-centredness marks a remarkable achievement in the various possible phases of development but often ignores the call for protecting nature. The transition of imperialism and the neo-colonial motives to establish hegemonic authority over developing countries had its recursions all over the globe. It is environmental consciousness and the hope for a better world that urges Amitav Ghosh to revisit the anthropocene in the backdrop of native ecology through the fictional scenario of *The Living Mountain*.

The narrative pattern of *The Living Mountain: A Fable for Our Times* comprises pictorial representations along with a combination of mythology and realism that provides the reader with the unique experience of revisiting the past and the present ages of explorations. The initial pages with the two different pictures of the mountain depict its liveliness. If one illustration shows a visible Mountain with a flowing river and a tree, another sketch reveals the hidden eye of the mountain that perceives everything. The two illustrations thus combine the elements of realism with the mythology that substantiate the existence of the hidden mystery behind the popular belief of the real world.

The search of the unnamed narrator and his online book club friend Maansi for the term 'anthropocene' lead us into this compelling fable. 'Anthropocene.' I rolled the word gingerly around my tongue. 'What on earth does it mean?' 'I don't know,' Maansi confessed. 'But I need to find out. My company's adopted it as its fashion theme for the year.' 'But Maansi,' I protested. 'It sounds like a made-up word. Do you even know how it's pronounced?' 'No,' she said, 'but we can easily find out.'" (6). The literal meaning of the term anthropocene and its pronunciation confused both the narrator and Maansi, and their search for the term forms the narrative structure of this short book. Through this deceptively simple yet searing fable, Ghosh shows how ideas of reverence, ownership and responsibility in the collective human conscience underlie our relationship with the natural world.

At the heart of *The Living Mountain* is a dream or an archetypal memory that can be viewed as an allegory for a universal environmental history. The book narrates how the peaceful lives of the indigenous Valley people living under the shadow of the mighty Himalayan snow-peaked mountain, the Mahaparbat gets shattered with the forceful imposition of the capitalocene, consequent to the advent of a different race-the Anthropoi.

The mountain was called Mahaparbat, Great Mountain, and despite our differences all of us who lived in the Valley revered that mountain: our ancestors had told us that of all the world's mountains ours was the most alive; that it would protect us and look after us - but only on condition that we told stories about it, and sang about it, and danced for it - but always from a distance. For one of the binding laws of the Valley, respected by all our warring villages, was that we were never, on any account, to set foot on the slopes of the Great Mountain. We heeded our ancestors and kept away from this mountain. Even though we Valley People fought over many things, we were all in agreement on one matter: strangers would never be allowed to enter our Valley(10-11).

It is such myths and rituals that helped the generations of natives to protect their societal and environmental values. In the story of Maansi, while the people of the Valley were often at war with one another, all of them revered the mountain, which provided them sustenance. The mountain nurtured the Magic Tree which provided them with miraculously produced things that could not be found anywhere else. The villagers traded these products with the visiting merchants but they were not allowed to enter the valley or climb the mountains per the unwritten rule of the Valley. The life of the valley people had never been easy but their dedication to remain close to nature helped them to maintain serenity and peace.

However, the curiosity of the outsiders to know the mystery behind the native land led a strange “new kind” of people called the Anthropoi to forcefully enter the Valley. In their eagerness to explore and learn about the Valley and the Mahaparbat, the Anthropoi with their modern military equipment and their helmeted soldiers -Kraani subjugate the Valley people by establishing a new age imperialism in the region with fateful consequences. The people of the Valley try to discourage the Anthropoi by pointing out the “Law of the Valley”(12). They even refuse to allow the hordes of Anthropoi to climb and exploit the riches of the mountain, but despite a valiant fight they are overpowered, conquered and subjugated. Some of them, the narrator says, were “reduced to quiescence” with drugs. The actions of the Anthropoi are similar to that of the colonials who prefer to know the native land first before its conquest. The Anthropoi dismiss the village elders and prevent the Adepts of the villages from practising their skills. In the latter part, their true imperial intentions are revealed but both the mountain and the valley people had by then been subjected to dreadful consequences for disturbing the balance of the nature.

The unexpected shaking and heaving of the mountain with landslides, avalanches, and rifts in the valley terrify the valley people. These sudden disasters compel them to find out the reason behind it. The Adepts “turned to us, ashen-faced. “A cycle of time has ended,” they said, “and another one has begun: the Cycle of Tribulation. Strangers are coming from afar, a horde of them, armed with terrible weapons.” (14). The shift in the cycle of time from one to the cycle of tribulation reminds the reader of W.B. Yeats’ poem “The Second Coming “where everything gets changed due to tribulations of modernity”.

Edward Said, in *Culture and Imperialism* writes,

Neither imperialism nor colonialism is a simple act of accumulation and acquisition. Both are supported and perhaps even impelled by impressive ideological formations that include notions that certain territories and people require and beseech domination, as well as forms of knowledge affiliated with domination: the vocabulary of classic nineteenth-century imperial culture is plentiful with words and concepts like “inferior” or “subject-races,” “subordinate peoples,” “dependency,” “expansion,” and “authority.” Out of the imperial experiences, notions about culture were clarified, reinforced, criticized, or rejected. (9)

The army of Anthropoi, the Kraani, kept all the sentries of the mountain, captive. The Anthropoi then make a thorough examination of the available details of the mountain before the attempt to conquer it. Rather than acquisition, they tried to assert their domination over the valley people by frightening them initially and then making them feel ‘inferior’. The Anthropoi army were only interested in their capital-making motifs. For this they first dismantled the social setting of the natives and in its place established their authoritative order to indirectly control the native land. Such imperial motives reduced the condition of the valley people to a “state of degradation and despair” (16).

The attempt of the valley dwellers to react against the Anthropoi army turned futile in front of the colonial schemes. Many of the villages got defeated whereas the remaining villages were misled to fight against their own neighbours. The strategies employed by the colonials to gain control over the land turned victorious making the valley people admit that the Anthropoi are “different species of being”(16). Such demarcations lead to the creation of binaries similar to those of have’s and have not’s. The intrusion of the Kraani to distort the cultural practices and social hierarchy of the natives to suit their purpose to exert control signify their hidden imperial capitalocene motives.

Jason W Moore in *Capitalism in the Web of Life* opines,

We can begin with a guiding distinction about this phrase: “a way of organizing Nature.” Capitalism’s governing conceit is that it may do with nature as it pleases, that Nature is external and may be coded, quantified, and rationalized to serve economic growth, social development, or some other higher good. This is capitalism as a project. The reality—the historical process—is radically different. While the manifold projects of capital, empire, and science are busy making Nature with a capital ‘N’—external, controllable, reducible—the web of life is busy shuffling about the biological and geological conditions of capitalism’s process. (14)

The Anthropoi are the epitome of the colonials who are only interested to attain political, economic and ecological control over other man's land. To attain it, they are ready to take drastic steps to dismantle the rules and regulations of society and decentre native authority. Their attempt to belittle the ancestral lore, ceremonies, stories and songs of the natives that glorify the living Mahaparbat became successful when the natives shift their reverence for the sacred Mountain to the foreign explorers. They made nature a free commodity that is meant to provide them with everything but is not ready to listen to the ancient teachings of the tribe to protect the land without encroaching on it. The process of capitalism intentionally treats nature as uncontrollable and reducible property rather than noticing its shift in geological conditions. The Valley people thus got reduced to the status of varvaroi, the weaker ones, although they are partially permitted to take part in the explorations. "Some of us Varvaroi witnessed the ascent more closely than the rest – they were the porters, the muleteers, the sherpas, all from the families of the chosen Elderman. The stories they told us about the ascent of the Anthropoi further inflamed our appetites" (19)

Watching the Anthropoi climb Mahaparbat, the villagers lose the reverence they had for the mountain. The transition from the myth of environmentally friendly life to the exploitative reality of capitalism poses a threat to the survival of its inhabitants. The profit-driven motives of the Anthropoi start to influence the elders of the valley to ascertain their chances of financial advantage in the capitalist colonial missions. The shift in the native culture to that of the Anthropocene made the elders think of the possibility "to usurp the Kraani's place" (19). The Mountain saw the Kraani of Anthropoi getting replaced by the Kraani of the Varvaroi. It was "another assault upon Mahaparbat" (21). Ghosh describes how "A great orgy of bloodletting filled our Valley, bringing slaughter and destruction on a scale far beyond that which the Anthropoi had inflicted on us in the past." Then the conquerors among the formerly conquered also climb the mountain. As they do so, the mountain becomes destabilised. But neither the indigenous valley dwellers nor the Anthropoi can or want to head back, their greed propels them although ruin follows.

In the article entitled "Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History and Crisis of Capitalism", Jason W Moore mentions,

The news is not good on planet Earth. Humanity-and the rest of life with it-is now on the threshold of what earth system scientists call a "state shit." This moment is dramatized in the growing awareness of climate change-among scholars, and also among a wider concerned public. But our moment involves far more than bad climate. We are living through a transition in Planetary life with the "potential to transform Earth rapidly and irreversibly into a state unknown in human experience" (1).

The chaotic condition on Mahaparbat symbolise Jason Moore's concern for the planet Earth. The natives, before their exploration, notice that the once sacred place had now turned to be a place covered with trash. Despite noticing this nature-polluting situation, they worked hard to reach "the Mountain's cloud-wrapped summit" that still remained unattainable to the Anthropoi. The quest to gain more profit and capital motivate the natives to deliberately ignore the transformations happening to their land and lives. The Anthropoi army tried to alert the natives of the increasing weights that could unsettle the snow on the mountain. "As a result, a series of devastating landslides and avalanches had swept through our Valley, killing vast numbers of our fellow villagers" (23). The terrifying transformation of Earth to an irreversible state of despair is vividly brought home to them through this fatal experience. The natives were only familiar with the serenity of the mountain not with the wrath of nature.

The unexpected situation prompts the Anthropoi to advise the natives to abort their mission of exploitation. But at the same time, the Anthropoi are not willing to back off from their profit-driven motives. Instead, they try to gain knowledge from the villagers about their inherited idea of the sacredness of the mountain. Once the mutual accusation of Anthropoi and the natives for their plight fizzle out, the valley people reaffirmed their stance to continue the exploration for the sake of others in the village. Donna Haraway, in "Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin" writes: "The Anthropocene marks severe discontinuities; what comes after will not be like what came before" (160). It is the severe discontinuities with nature that affected the lives of the valley people and urged them to ignore the destructive approach to the once-sacred mountain.

With the foreboding of more disasters in the future, the Anthropoi join the villagers in an effort to protect themselves. The ecological imbalance that affected the lives of the colonials urge them to seek native support to re-establish harmony in nature. "... no longer were we Anthropoi and Varvaroi – we were one" (30). The suddenly found equilibrium between the imperials and the natives urged the former to seek the help of the latter to revisit their forgotten fables and rituals. The Anthropoi finally admitted that the belief of living mountains is true, and their stories lack the reality of seeing lives in trees and mountains. The colonials are bound by the tendency to consider the oriental culture as pagan in order to assert their imperial authority. The Valley people and the Anthropoi finally manage to find the last surviving Adept to perform the ritual dance to reveal the hidden answers of the living Mountain.

'How dare you?' she cried. 'How dare you speak of the Mountain as though you were its masters, and it were your plaything, your child? Have you understood nothing of what it has been trying to teach you? Nothing at all?' (31)

The book reveals how the natives, with their desire to embrace and imitate the superior life style of the Anthropoi, begin to consider their own culture which is bound to nature, as meaningless. The attitude of the capitalist to consider the Mountain as a free capital in the initial phase, and as something that needs to be protected reveals their inner desire to control both nature and the culture of the natives. The Adept, in the final part of the story, admonishes all humans, the exploiter and the exploited, for plundering the ecology for selfish capitalist profits. The words "masters", "plaything" and "child" mentioned in the above quotation reveal the reality that the anthropocene race regarded themselves as superior. But nature is powerful enough to restructure the transition in planetary shift.

Conclusion

Fictional narratives have the ability to encourage the reassessment of the ways in which humans interact with the environment. By conjuring an imaginary landscape, the author provides an alternative way to communicate the real issues of nature to the readers. Amitav Ghosh's novel *The Living Mountain* traces the growing sense of environmentalism in the indigenous Valley people and the shift from environmentalism to anthropocentrism that later led to the fatal consequences in the fictional landscape of the book. Ghosh brilliantly allegorises the history of exploitation of colonised people and of the natural environment by decentering anthropocentric views and recentering it from an ecocentric perspective. The chronicle of the subjugation of the Valley people and exploitation of the rich natural resources on the Mahaparbat by the Anthropoi and later by the Valley people trigger an alarming environmental crisis. The author urges the readers to reconsider a reversal of the situation by understanding our connectedness with the planet and all life. He earnestly advocates a return to nature to restore harmony. Ghosh astutely promulgates the thought on how the culture and civilization of the valley people in *The Living Mountain* are similar to that in colonial lands who are subjected to exploitation for imperial profit-making. However, the story focuses attention more on the impact of capitalocene on nature and how human impact on the planet had altered it profoundly than on the anthropocene where humanity consisting of both the colonials and the natives who are bound to each other for capital benefits. The final cry of the Adept to learn from the actions of the mountain is a clarion call to the readers to re-examine priorities, to retrace our steps, and to reforge our relationship with nature. Ghosh insists that establishing an ecological balance is the only possible solution to all environmental crisis.

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