

Exploring the Nexus of Colonialism, Indigenous Knowledge and Climate Action in Amitav Ghosh's *The Living Mountain: A Fable of Our Times*

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Abstract

This paper in Amitav Ghosh's *The Living Mountain: A Fable of Our Times* (2022) depicts the complex nexus between climate action, colonialism, and indigenous knowledge. Set in a remote Himalayan valley, the story follows the warring tribes who live around a sacred mountain, later forced to become the servants of the 'Anthropoi', the foreigners who have come there to climb and mine the mountain. The outsiders' interests in exploring the mountain and its natural resources have threatened the lives of the natives. A postcolonial eco-critical approach is adopted to investigate how Ghosh portrays the relationship between climate change and colonialism through illustrations of invaders' dismissal of the indigenous knowledge on environmental issues, de-sacralisation of the Sacred Mountain, etc. Similarly, the study explores the mind of the writer who seems to argue that climate change is a direct consequence of colonialism, which has led to a worldview that promotes nature as something to be conquered and exploited. Similarly, this study emphasizes the importance of indigenous knowledge for climate action, suggesting that it is essential for developing sustainable solutions to the climate crisis.

Keywords: *Climate action, Colonialism, Eco-criticism, Indigenous Knowledge, Resistance*

Introduction

Amitav Ghosh's recent fiction *The Living Mountain: A Fable of Our Times* (2022), explores the complex nexus between climate action, colonialism, and indigenous knowledge. With the setting of High Himalayas represented as the 'Mahaparbat', the book offers the feelings and experiences of the Valley dwellers before and after the encroachment of the foreigners-the 'Anthropoi'. The Valley inhabitants living peacefully at the foot of the sacred mountain feel threatened by the arrival of outsiders who seek to exploit the mountain's natural resources. The

outsiders are the colonizers; whose invasion to the Valley brings huge threats not only to the native inhabitants but also to the environment, overall. This is the fundamental feature of colonialists that they invade the foreign land, exploit the natural resources and degrade the environment. Postcolonial eco-critic Banerjee (1995) argues that "colonialism has had a profound impact on mountain cultures and ecosystems" (12). Prof. Banerjee in her *Dangerous Dandies: Imperialism and the Politics of Transvestism in Late Victorian and Early Modernist Writing* (1995) points out that the colonizers control and dominate the natives and their inherited knowledge about environment and nature that includes the mountains. "The colonial enterprise was not simply a matter of political and economic domination, but also a cultural and epistemological one." (4) She further states that colonial powers represent the colonized environment as wild and dangerous in order to justify their rule and portray colonized people as inferior, However, she also believes that, at one point of time, the indigenous people defend their knowledge, claim their property and resist the invaders. "Colonized people resisted the colonial epistemological project by asserting the validity of their own knowledge systems and by challenging the colonial representation of the environment." (10)

Gosh has personified the Great Mountain commonly called as 'Mahaparbat' by the native dwellers, as something living being such as Human or God, and that Mahaparbat, the only source of everything for the villagers, has been the target of the Anthropoi. Nixon (2011, pp.1–44) discusses the ways in which mountains are often sites of environmental violence and the ways in which indigenous peoples have resisted this violence. He says that the environmental harms experienced by poor and marginalized communities around the world are not simply the unintended consequences of economic development, but rather the result of a deliberate system of exploitation and violence. (Huggan, 2006), on the other hand, argues that mountains are often exoticized and marketed in Western culture, often ignoring the complex realities of the people who live there. He argues that this exoticization often ignores the complex and dynamic nature of mountain cultures, and that it can lead to the exploitation and marginalization of mountain communities. He also highlights the importance of indigenous knowledge and community-led action in protecting mountains and addressing the challenges of climate change, ""Mountains are often seen as places of cultural purity, where traditional values and lifestyles have been preserved. However, this view ignores the complex and dynamic nature of mountain cultures, which have been shaped by centuries of interaction with other cultures and by the changing environment." (12). As post colonial critic, he sees a deep nexus between the natives and their knowledge on the mountains that preserves environment in overall, ""Indigenous knowledge systems are often based on a deep understanding of the local environment and its resources. This knowledge has been accumulated over generations and is essential for sustainable living in mountain regions."(13).

The Living Mountain has been presented in such a way that the world communities are required to take this as cautionary message that, because of the human encroachment, the natural world has suffered so badly and it is likely to encounter terrible natural catastrophe as well as horrible

collapse in near future. Ghosh gives the continuity of the same themes in *The Living Mountain*, too from his recent two books *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (2016) and *The Nutmeg's Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis* (2021) that focused on environment and climate change. Ghosh, in both these non-fictions argue that climate change is an enormously significant issue caused by the unstoppable degradation and deterioration of the nature. It would require a strong international political will to make changes in the system of natural resource use, abuse, and exploitation. He wonders why fiction writers do not build climate change into their narratives, while it has already threatened to be the most problematic challenge of the future. He writes, “*It is difficult to imagine a conception of seriousness that is blind to potentially life-changing threats. And if the urgency of a subject were indeed a criterion of its seriousness, then, considering what climate change actually portends for the future of the earth, it should surely follow that this would be the principal preoccupation of writers the world over – and this, I think is very far from being the case*” (Ghosh, 2016, p. 5). According to him, the climate change is the most critical derangement of this time.

Ghosh continues this theme and elaborates in *The Nutmeg's Curse*. Here, Ghosh raises the issues of fossil fuels in regard to climate change by drawing the nexus between the Dutch colonialism and their colonialists' efforts. Ghosh seems to argue that the spices, opium and woods of the colonial era are equivalent to the fossil fuels of the present days. He says:

“Like coal, oil by its very nature has come to be enmeshed with global hierarchies of power in other, more elusive ways, creating vested interests that are neither economic nor enumerable. This has come about because of another aspect of the materiality of petroleum – the simple fact that it must be moved, by ship or pipeline, from its point of extraction to other places. Out of this arises a geopolitical dynamic that leads directly back to the conflicts that revolved around cloves and nutmegs” (Ghosh, 2021, p.16).

In *The Living Mountain*, Ghosh explores the relationship between the Colonialists' efforts in capturing the treasures of the mountains and the growing threats in the Himalayan lives through the degradation of the quality of environment. He presents the mountain ecosystem as the new threat to the environment and climate concerns. Meanwhile, he also tries to establish a fact that the indigenous knowledge should be emphasized so as to maintain climate action.

The Living Mountain has come at a time when United Nations has been working globally on Climate Action as Goal 13 of Sustainable Development Goals. Antonio Guterres, the general secretary of the United Nations, in his recent visit to Everest Base Camp, Nepal (probably the Himalayan valley that the narrator Maansi mentions in her dream story in *The Living Mountain*), pleads the world communities to work on climate action and mountain matters. Guterres, A. (2023, October 30) appeals and warns the world highlighting the possible consequences of the ongoing rise of temperature and the speedy melting of the snow from the Himalayas, “Today from the base of Mt. Everest, I saw for myself the terrible impact of the climate crisis on the Himalayas. As temperatures rise, glacier melt increases—threatening the lives and livelihood

of entire communities. Climate Action can't wait. [Tweet]. This idea aligns with Graham Huggan's emphasis on the importance of Himalayas in the colonized world, "'Mountains play an important role in the global climate system. They regulate the flow of water and air, and they store large amounts of carbon. Protecting mountain ecosystems is essential for mitigating the impacts of climate change and for building a more sustainable future.'" (Huggan, 2006, p.16).

Mansi's "horrible dream" (Ghosh, 2022, p. 5), as narrated by herself, is an archetypal allegory for the environmental collapse caused by the Anthropocene epoch. It depicts the consequences of environmental degradation and the loss of indigenous ecological knowledge. Ghosh highlights the "operation of colonial capitalism in disrupting ecological systems and marginalizing indigenous epistemologies, leading to forms of epistemicide and ecocide" (Karmakar, G. and Chetty, R., 2023).

Efforts of Colonialism in *The Living Mountain*

Colonialism is a mission-oriented project of the Western invaders in the native lands that can be defined as a system of political and economic domination in which the colonizers have had the specific goal of controlling the natives, exploiting the natural resources, enslaving the locals, and imposing their culture. Some of the key features of colonialism are: Expansion of territory, Resource exploitation, Indigenous displacement, Cultural hegemony and Economic exploitation. What is interesting in *The Living Mountain* is all the colonialists' features function together competitively. Colonization has links with many adverse factors such as environmental degradation, social and economic inequality, and cultural loss, etc. Climate change and colonialism are also inextricably connected as most of the colonial projects are based on the exploitation of the natural resources and the displacement of the indigenous people. In *The Living Mountain*, the controlling the 'Valley' and exploiting the treasure of the 'Great Mountain' is the mission-oriented project of the Anthropei. Climate change is "the return of the repressed environmental violence of the colonial past. It is the revenge of the colonized earth" (Nixon, 2011). Similarly, Graham Huggan, in *Green Postcolonialism: A Global Ecocritical Reader*, highlights that "'The environment is not a neutral space; it is a site of struggle over resources and power. Environmental issues are therefore interconnected with issues of power, colonialism, and globalization" (Huggan, 2001, p.1). In this sense, Climate change is a manifestation of the environmental violence of the colonial past, as the revenge of the exploited earth.

The nature of colonialists is that they make an ordinary entry but with clear mission and vision so as to accomplish their projects, "a stranger of a new kind had come to the pass that year from a land very far away. His people were called the Anthropei; their savants had heard about our nuts and he had been sent on a mission to learn about our Valley, and all that it contained" (Gosh, 2022, p.10). Usually, the colonial agents, in the initial stages, inquire with the natives about the treasures that the new land possesses so that they can plan how to explore and exploit them at max, "Tell me about the Valley and about all the other valuable trade goods

that it produces” (Gosh, 2022, p.11). In his preface to Jürgen Osterhammel's *Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview*, Roger Tignor presents the concept of colonization that implies in *The Living Mountain*. He writes, “Colonialism is a relationship between an indigenous (or forcibly imported) majority and a minority of foreign invaders. The fundamental decisions affecting the lives of the colonised people are made and implemented by the colonial rulers in pursuit of interests that are often defined in a distant metropolis. Rejecting cultural compromises with the colonised population, the colonisers are convinced of their own superiority and their ordained mandate to rule” (Jürgen Osterhammel, 2010).

Colonizers exploited indigenous peoples' lands and resources, while displacing them from their homelands. They justified their actions by claiming to civilize "savages," but this was used to suppress indigenous cultures and languages. This belief justified the exploitation of natural resources and the displacement of indigenous peoples from their own land, “the Anthropoi had decided to conquer the Great Mountain! their savants had studied all that was told to their envoy, and they were convinced that unbeknownst to us, great riches-minerals, metals and the like-were hidden within the mountain...since we were not making use of the mountain's riches, they were fully justified in seizing them and taking whatever they wished” (Ghosh, 2022, p.14). It is well understood that the natural properties are the major attractions for the colonialists. In the name of using them, they destroy them. Colonialists, in order to establish their reign in the new land, exploit the treasures of the region, enslave the natives, apply cultural tool, too for domination. Kraani, the ferocious soldiers of the Anthropoi, after dismissing the Elderpeople from their authority and appointing the new ones in their own choice, “imprisoned our Adepts, and forbade all our ceremonies and songs, stories and dances. They were all worthless, they said; our ancestral lore, had brought nothing but doom upon us, which was why we were now reduced to this state of degradation and despair” (Ghosh, 2022, pp.16-17).

Edward Said argues that culture is not neutral, but shapes our understanding of the world and has legitimized and perpetuated the hierarchy of civilizations that underpins imperialism. He writes, “In the context of imperialism, culture is used to justify and maintain domination over other peoples and cultures” (Said, 1994, p.3). Said identifies a number of ways in which the imperialists use culture to colonize such as by creating a binary between the "civilized" West and the "barbaric" East, representing colonized people as inferior and savage, promoting their own cultures and values in the colonies, etc. At one point of time, the colonized unnoticedly develop the feelings that they are inferior, their job is to support their masters, they have no knowledge of the world around, and they should simply follow what the 'civilized' masters instruct, “the lives of Anthropoi seemed infinitely more exciting than our own wretched existences down in the Valley-and in no small measure was the attraction enhanced by the fact that the Kraani were telling us not to look in that direction: our job was to toil in our fields so the climbers never ran short of supplies” (Ghosh, 2022, p.18). The narrator further confesses, “our attitude towards the Mountain began to change-our reverence slowly shifted away from the Mountain and attached itself instead to the spectacle of the climb.

Gradually, as the spectacle took the place that the Mountain had once occupied in our hearts, we burned with the desire to ascend those slopes ourselves”(Ghosh,2022, pp.18-19). This shows that the continuous influence and invasion has shaped the mindsets of the warring tribes as per the interests of the colonialists.

Colonialism has had a devastating impact on many parts of the world. A part from being the background of causing wars, genocide, and the destruction of entire cultures, colonialism has also contributed to the climate crisis, as colonial powers have exploited the natural resources of their colonies without regard for the environmental consequences. Ghosh presents another evidence of colonial efforts in destroying the ecology and environment in *The Living Mountain*, “ now began another assault upon Mahaparbat, more carefully planned than those that had preceded it. The climb was much harder now because the Anthropoi had dirtied the slopes and covered them with trash”(Ghosh,2022,p.21). It is evident that dirtying of the Great Mountain affects the whole mountain ecosystem and brings misfortune to the Valley dwellers with climatic disorders.

Many postcolonial eco-critical theorists have written about colonization and its impact in the environment. In his book *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and the Differend of Globalization*, DipeshChakrabarty argues that the climate crisis is a product of European colonialism and modernity. Definitely, the climate crisis is caused by many factors including the uneven melting of the snow from the Himalayas resulting not only the ugly look of the mountains but also several disastrous calamities, “We saw that the combined weight of all the climbers had unsettled the snow on the lower slopes of the Mountain. As result, a series of devastating landslides and avalanches had swept through our Valley,killing vast numbers of our fellow villagers”(Ghosh,2022,p.24). Chakrabarty defends the indigenous knowledge as essential for developing sustainable solutions to the climate crisis.

Similarly, Vandana Shiva, an Indian environmental activist has written about the impact of colonization on biodiversity, agriculture, and food security. In her book *Biopiracy: The Plunder of Nature and Knowledge*, Shiva argues that colonialism has led to the exploitation of the natural resources of the colonized world and the marginalization of indigenous knowledge. This idea is reflected in *The Living Mountain*, “the Anthropoi had always told us that one of the reasons why they were so much stronger than us was that their ideas were universal-unlike the false, local beliefs that circulated amongst us Valley folk. They had laughed at our inherited ideas of the Mountain’s sacredness: that was all ignorant, pagan superstition, they had said”(Ghosh,2022,p.26),too, although the fact is when the natural environment is disturbed and degraded, it’s not only the natives who suffer, but also the exploiters, “as we climbed; we saw that strange crevasses were opening up everywhere, that each step was setting off a mudslide, some of which were sweeping even the Anthropoi away”(Ghosh,2022,p.25). Another fundamental understanding of colonialists is their feeling of intellectual supremacy over the

indigenous people. Despite the fact that the Valley dwellers have inherited the traditions of knowledge on how to preserve mountains and mountain-protected ecosystem, the invading colonialists blame the villagers, “It was because of us, they said, that this catastrophe had come about”(Ghosh,2022,p.28) and As Edward Said in *Orientalism*(2006) argues, they tend to define, civilize and recognize the locals they call ‘Other’, “ Look at us, we are the Anthropoi,we always know best; you Varvaroi(similar to Barbarians) need to copy us even more closely than you did before. If you observe us carefully enough you will see that we are learning new ways to climb, so that we tread lightly on the mountain. This is what you must do-you must stop climbing in the old, bad way. You must learn to tread lightly, like us”(Ghosh,2022,p.29). Clearly, the colonialists tend to believe that they are the expert of everything, they can’t be wrong, only it’s the natives who have to learn and follow.

Overall, Ghosh’s *The Living Mountain* presents an abundant number of evidences that represent colonialists efforts in controlling the natives of Valley and exploiting the great treasures of the ‘Mahaparbat’.. To be specific, the Anthropoi’s disregard for the environment, their littering the mountain slopes, climbing expeditions triggering landslides and avalanches, their ridiculous statements over the Valley dwellers’ knowledge and beliefs in regard to the Great Mountain, etc are some of the strong efforts of the colonialists in *The Living Mountain*.

Indigenous Knowledge, Efforts of Resistance and Climate Action

Postcolonial eco-critics argue that indigenous knowledge and resistance to colonial efforts are essential for climate action. The increasing climate threats is a direct result of the exploitation of the natural world and the displacement of indigenous peoples that began with European colonialism. Robin Wall Kimmerer highlighting the significance of the earth and the deep realization of the indigenous people about the natural treasures writes, “ we have received so many gifts from the earth. The air we breathe, the water we drink, the food we eat, the medicine that heals us, the beauty that inspires us—all of these are gifts from the earth”(Kimmerer, 2013). In *The Living Mountain*, the original inhabitants of the village are committed to the nature’s safety and therefore they resist the ‘merchants’ envying the gifts of Mountain such as the miraculous nuts, rare mushrooms, fine honey, herbs, and the like. “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”(Ghosh,2022,p.8).Indigenous peoples have a deep understanding of the natural world and a respect for all living things, “We knew in our hearts that our Mountain was a living being that cared for us; we saw proof of this every day, all around us”(Ghosh,2022,p.7)which is essential for developing sustainable solutions to the climate crisis. The village dwellers are also very aware that the environment gives them back wholeheartedly only if they take care, love and respect the nature, “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”(Ghosh,2022,p.7). The indigenous people offer their profound

respect to the nature by hosting “a ceremony of gratitude, to thank the Great Mountain...the whole Valley would feast and dance” (Ghosh, 2022, p.9).

The Elderpeople, who represent the villagers of the Valley, tell the strangers(colonizers) that entering into the Valley from the mountain pass was “against the Law of the Valley; the Great Mountain didn’t wish it”(Ghosh,2022,p.11). The Elderpeople keeps his stance that their living mountain-the Mahaparbat can’t be traded at any cost. This is a significant attempt of resistance on behalf of the indigenous people. Regardless of the gender, their immense efforts of resistance continue even if they have got to fight with the invaders with firm commitment not to compromise, “it was decided that we would fight, and so we did, all of us, men and women, young and old. We fought valiantly, but our efforts were to no avail-some of our villages were defeated in battle, some were tricked into attacking their neighbors, and others were reduced to quiescence with drugs that sent them into dream-like trances”(Ghosh,2022,p.15). This clearly reveals that the colonized, regardless of the gender and age, have continued to fight claiming for their holy mountain, land and cultures.

The indigenous people have never go any hidden interests with the nature. They know that the nature that includes the Great Mountain has been maintaining the whole ecosystem offering them everything they need. Their awareness level seems quite high that their lives and the lives of the nature are interconnected. The narrative also shows that the natives, more particularly the women of the Valley had better understanding of the environment, “In our Valley, wisdom had always resided with the women’(Ghosh,2022,p.19). The colonizers underestimate the women and always keep them in margin. In a way, in the colonized world, women are double-colonized; one within their homes by patriarchy and the other by the foreign missionaries, although their efforts of resistance, knowledge on the environment and climate are higher than others in many contexts. The narrator confesses the power of women in regard to their understanding to the nature, “ that our Mountain’s mode of reasoning could only be understood, as our Adepts had always said, by Listening carefully, and using not our brains but the soles of our feet”(Ghosh,2022,p.27) was more powerful than that of men. The ‘Adepts’ in *The Living Mountain* represents the strong, skilled, insightful and informed females. The Elderpeople further acknowledges the talent and feelings of indigenous women that “Our dances were always led by women and the most skilled of them were known as Adepts; sometimes, when dancing, they would go into a trance and afterwards they would tell us that they had felt the Mountain speaking to them through the soles of their feet”(Ghosh,2022, pp. 9-10) . The efforts of resistance continue despite the Valley dwellers’ failure at times. They “defy the Kraani, timidly at first, but then with increasing determination”(Ghosh,2022,pp. 20-21). It is not easy for the villagers to fight with the ‘Merchants’ with modern equipments, but it is because of their love and respect to their land, resources, and beliefs. The Elderperson, even after the invaders have absolutely exploited and taken control of the Mountain and Valley, insist on saying that the new settlers should realize their stupidity, “they would have to acknowledge that their stories were false, because their storytellers could not see that trees and

mountains were living beings”(31). This reference clearly hints us the indigenous people’s deep rooted knowledge and beliefs towards the conservation of nature and balance of climatic ecosystem.

The last part of *The Living Mountain* shows that the efforts of resistance still continue from the colonized with the awareness of mountain ecosystem and climate action as the narrative exhibits the aggression and agony of the Valley women represented by the Adept;

“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 is has been trying to teach you? Nothing at all?”

However, the protest sounds very insignificant in use but important in message-giving to the world communities, specifically the colonizing powers, United Nations, environmentalists, ecologists, politicians, and conservationists that there is no use of regrets after the damage has been experienced.

Conclusion

It is evident that colonialism has severed the deep bond between indigenous people and the natural world, but their ancestral wisdom can help us mend this rift and address the climate crisis. Ghosh's *The Living Mountain* chronicles how colonial capitalism has ravaged ecological systems and indigenous knowledge.

In *The Living Mountain*, initially, the villagers’ indigenous knowledge is reflected in their stories, songs, rituals and practices. Their beliefs and reverence to the Great Mountain (that represent the Nature, overall) remain firm for time until the colonizers slowly but absolutely control the Valley, exploit the Great Mountain at fullest. Later, even the indigenous Elderperson and other dwellers get involved in assaulting on the Mahaparbat following the footsteps of the colonizers. Consequently, the locals themselves started competing with the invaders to “set foot on the summit of once-sacred Mountain”(Ghosh,2022, p.23).

According to Huggan (2006),“Mountain cultures are diverse and complex. They have been shaped by centuries of interaction with the environment and with other cultures. Mountain communities have developed a deep understanding of the local environment and its resources, which is essential for sustainable living”(13). Ghosh presents the warring tribes of the Great Mountain with deep- knowledge regarding the ways of protecting the nature and contributing in climate action. The locals practice a more sustainable farming, forestation, and water management, soil preservation, etc. They seem to have had a better sense of community, collaboration and accountability for the conservation of the nature and natural world. But later, in the course of time, being enslaved by colonialists’ culture, accepting their mindsets, and knowingly and unknowingly following their schoolings about the nature and environment, the indigenous people have also lost their essence. The protagonist asks himself and his

community, “ Could we have turned back ourselves? No-that too was impossible now; for our bodies too had grown used to this drug, and to the thin air that we had risen to, and to all the excitement that accompanied our ascent...but with heavy hearts now, for we could not forget that with every step we took were advancing towards our doom”(Ghosh,2022, pp. 31-32). The big irony of time is the natives have changed themselves, forgotten their own stories, songs and dances of the past. Eventually, it becomes so difficult to find some Valley dwellers who could perform the Mountain rituals, “It wasn’t easy to persuade her to dance, but in the end she did agree to perform”(Ghosh,2022, p.34). This transformation of the indigenous people, who once fought for their land and beliefs, is a kind of surrender, and moreover, this indicates a bigger threat to the natural environment.

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