

## Amitav Ghosh's *The Living Mountain: A Tale of Green Imperialism*

**Ram Sebak Thakur**

Lecturer, Department of English

RRM Campus (TU), Janakpurdham, Madhesh Province (Nepal)

[thakurrs033@gmail.com](mailto:thakurrs033@gmail.com)

<https://orcid.org/0009-0003-2875-6758>

**Ajita Singh\***

Research Scholar, Department of English

Lalit Narayan Mithila University, Darbhanga-846004, Bihar (India)

[ajitasingh033@gmail.com](mailto:ajitasingh033@gmail.com)

<https://orcid.org/0009-0002-1131-8041>

**Vijay Kumar Roy**

Associate Professor of English,

Department of English & Modern European Languages,

University of Allahabad, Prayagraj-211002, UP (India)

[drvkroy@allduniv.ac.in](mailto:drvkroy@allduniv.ac.in)

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7567-2467>

### Corresponding Author\*

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### Abstract

Amitav Ghosh's *The Living Mountain: A Fable for Our Times* (2022) is a kind of ecotopian speculative fiction that posits a cryptic study of human-environment relationship in the form of a fable. This novella offers a critical insight into the harsh reality of the present anthropological capitalism and its pernicious impacts on ecology as a whole. It criticizes the growing insensitivity of human towards nature in the clamour for material advancement. Ghosh envisions a caveat against the eco-colonial hegemony. Flummoxed by the injustices meted out to the nature by men, he implores the human race to make aware of the repercussions of environmental degradation and eco-colonialism. The novella, in a form of a dream tale, tells about how the predator nations expropriate the land and loot the bountiful resources of the prey

nations. In the process of gaining upper-hand, they force the native people to disclose their mystic knowledge of their ancestors making it easier for them to encroach their land and natural resources. Obligated by a pressing need to awaken the entire human race from the delusions of grandeur and its aftermath, Ghosh pens down the narrative as a commentary on the rapidly growing exploitation of nature's treasures on an unprecedented scale and its dire consequences. Ghosh has masterfully mingled history, myth, and fiction to unmask the hegemony and hierarchy percolating through the human society and how the malice of human has disturbed harmonious cohabitation of the natives and their environment. The paper aims at exploring the detrimental effects on the environment of the land of the colonised by the colonisers. At its root, it examines how the colonizers abuse not only the natives, their land, resources but even devalue their traditional knowledge. The anthropomorphic view of the colonizers has endangered the natural resources, and if not cured, may invite an ecological crash.

**Keywords:** Nature, Imperialism, Hegemony, Exploitation, Tradition, Marginalization

## Introduction

Amitav Ghosh is an acclaimed writer who has been conferred with various prestigious awards for his writings on the planetary crisis and climate change. His work *The Living Mountain: A Fable for Our Times* is a perfect example of ecotopian speculative fiction. Categorised as his shortest book ever, Ghosh, in this book, employs an engrossing dream tale to unravel the coveted desires of human to abuse nature and its subsequent outcome. By using his splendid craftsmanship, Ghosh presents a dismaying picture of the present world waiting for a climate catastrophe. The fable articulates the historical aspect of human-environmental relationship and sends an alarm bell of the awaiting cataclysm. The novella holds a mirror to the bleak and depressing reality of the present by ransacking the anthropomorphic capitalistic and imperialistic tendency of the people in power.

## The Concept of Green Imperialism: Theoretical Framework

The term 'Ecological imperialism' or 'Green imperialism' was introduced by an American environmental historian Alfred Crosby. He used the term to refer to successful European colonization of temperate regions such as Australia, South America, New Zealand and North America. In the words of Crosby, success of European colonial expansion has brought about a strong ecological disaster. He critically observes that "European emigrants and their descendants are all over the place which require explanations" (1986, p.2). A vast number of flora and fauna were carried away by the Europeans to comfort them. Crosby coined a term 'Columbian exchange' to describe large-scale transfer of flora and fauna from Europe to New World. The term conferred to the impact of geographical expeditious conducted by explorers like Christopher Columbus in restructuring the global biological terrain for the profit of prosperous European Countries.

Richard Grove (1995), an environmental historian of early modern time, developed the term 'Green Imperialism' to refer to Asian and African context of European colonial expansion. Instead of considering ecological imperialism as one sided process of imposing European

plants, animals and knowledge, Grove considers imperialism as two-way process of interactions and exchange. By analysing early colonial development of imperial botanical garden and growth of Botany as modern scientific discipline, Grove strongly argues that “indigenous knowledge influenced European idea of nature” (1995, p. 121).

Green imperialism, in general sense, means the influence of Western epistemology on the core affairs of the non-western nations in the pretext of environmentalism. P. Anker opines that “Green imperialism can be understood as a mechanism to perpetuate the domination of global capitalism, .... As such, green imperialism proposes a reformist and counter insurgent agenda connected to a mercantile view of nature-monetizable and exchangeable as ‘service’”(qtd. in Pedregal and Lukic, 2024, pp. 105-138).

The harmonious relationship between human and nature continued for long and nature poured its benevolence on human abundantly. But the advent of industrialization brought a sizeable shift in human-nature interface. Using technologies, human beings exploited nature beyond the limit. Daniel B. Botkin says that “We must distinguish between merely the persistence of some kinds of life and the maintenance of a biosphere that is desirable to human beings” (1990, p. 182). He suggests that nature must be interacted wisely and in sustainable way. But in the name of industrialization, globalization and capitalism, Europeans have altered the human-nature coexistence adversely. European domination has been the root cause of environmental degradation. Showing his concern on European's cruel approach to the environment, Guha suggests that “the ecological crisis in Himalaya is not an isolated event [but] has its roots in the [modern] materialistic civilization [that] makes man the butcher of Earth” (2000, p. 179).

Green imperialism gave impetus to environmental degradation, ultimately leading to the drastic climate change and biodiversity loss. Intellectuals from all over the world felt the multiple interdependencies between humans and nature, and therefore started a social movement to save environment. This movement gained solidarity from all over and gradually took its momentum in multiple phases. Guha writes, “We might thus speak of a first wave of environmentalism, the initial response to the onset of industrialization, and a second wave, when a largely intellectual response was given shape and force by a groundswell of public support” (2000, pp. 3-4).

### **Textual Analysis**

In a lucid narration of *The Living Mountain*, Ghosh wields his pen to unravel the gruesome picture of the present climate crisis and shows how this form of crisis culminates into a dreadful cultural crisis. He pens down a simple story of humanity rushing towards environmental apocalypse in its greedy attempt to tame the mysteries of nature. By making use of meta-narrative technique, he draws a pictorially rich story of a world that is on the brink of an environmental doom. Very tactfully, he has mingled mythology with realism to explore the subsequent consequences of the growing megalomania that is pushing the world towards an ecocide. Gautam Karmakar and Rajendra Chhetry appropriately observe that “The Living

Mountain is an allegorical rendering of the repercussions of environmental degradation and the annihilation of indigenous ecological knowledge” (2023, pp. 1-21).

The plot of the novella commences with an unidentified narrator’s voice introducing to his book club buddy, Maansi and their bizarre relationship. Though they were quite different in their choices still they were bound by a common interest of getting engaged in thought provoking discussions. The narrative paces with the introduction of a gripping term ‘Anthropocene’. Their conversation breached with a promise to dig into the word on the part of Maansi. Meanwhile, Maansi reads a book “about some poor people on a remote island who suffer a terrible fate” (Ghosh, 2022, p. 5). It results into a nightmare. From this point, the fable takes the form of an archetypal dream allegory of the environmental catastrophe caused by reckless human activity. In her horrible dream, Maansi dwells in a tribal village tucked away in the Himalayas and in the lap of a sacred mountain named ‘Mahaparbat’ whose peak was always draped with clouds. The magnificence of the ‘Mahaparbat’ was always revered by the indigenous people. It was their traditional belief that the mountain was the most alive among others and must be worshipped for it protected and nurtured them. The only condition was to praise it from distance and not to set foot on the slopes.

It was a stern warning from the ancestors to keep a distance from the mountain in order to be in close proximity with nature. The place was exotic and mysterious, and was habitat of miraculous flora and fauna. It was a sort of heavenly abode holding the secrets of nature that acted as their life-force. ‘The Great Mountain’ not only sustained the basic needs of the dwellers but also stood as a consolidating force for the clashing villages. The Mahaparbat, a living entity with its divinity, rendered the bliss of physical, mental and ecological wellbeing. The exotic herbs, the insect repelling Magic trees, the exquisitely scented honey, delicious fruits and the miraculous nuts all belonged to the Great Mountain, and the sacred mountain bestowed them upon the native people on a condition not to be ascended by them. A line from the text reads: “We knew in our hearts that our Mountain was a living being that cared for us” (Ghosh, 2022, p. 7).

Despite the hostility and clashing view among the warring villages, they all agreed on a point bequeathed by their ancestors that no outsider should ever be allowed to ravish the ecological abundance of the Great Mountain. The inhabitants were content with what they had, and hosted a ceremony of gratitude to thank the Great Mountain by enchanting prayers, making offering, dancing, and feasting. The valley dwellers always abided by the folk tradition by transference of ritual from generation to generation through the act of story-telling. The Adepts (the most skilled elder women) had a special power to communicate with the mountain and strongly believed in the conservation of the sacredness and natural heritage.

All the ecstasies disappeared when the Anthropoi (Strangers) cast an evil eye on the divine charms of the Mahaparbat. The harmonious cohabitation, eternal tranquility, and ecological sacredness all underwent a drastic change. The circumstances began to change when the Anthropoi, in their callous intent, drank the secrets of the indigenous people, their valuable assets and trade items. These Anthropoi intently enticed the natives to tell them about the great riches of the valley. This is the first striking characteristic of imperialism whereby the invaders

minutely studied about the resources of the territory to be colonized. The savants learnt the natives' attributes and created an imperial discourse. In this regard, Edward Said (1994) appropriately 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" (p. 9).

The Anthropoi acquainted themselves with all the necessary information about the magical resources and the rich history of the valley, and attached a commercial value to them. This was the contemplative hegemonic ideology of the Anthropoi. They had set a mental map to pillage the riches of the valley to carry on the legacy of environmental imperialism, and thus began what Ghosh says in *The Great Derangement* (2017) "the uncanny intimacy of our relationship with the non-human" (p. 43). The only motive of imperialism is to outrage and traumatise the biological, historical, and cultural resources of other territories for the expansion of their own power. They crave to commodify all the organic substance for the economic prosperity, by sucking their natural essence. A well-known environmental historian Corey Ross (1981) claims: "At the heart of European imperialism was an attempt to transform forests, savannahs, rivers, coastal plains and deserts into productive and legible spaces, all of which brought hefty environmental consequences: deforestation, erosion, siltation, pollution, disease, and habitat destruction." (p. 3)

All set to conquer the valley and ransack its natural treasures, the Anthropoi attacked upon the valley with its army of physical force (the Kraani). The Karaani had stormed the natives' safety barracks and thus forcefully captured their land. The Anthropoi were the epitome of imperialists who longed for their expansion by hegemonizing the indigenous people and assaulting the mountain for commercial benefit. The Anthropoi imposed their own ecological system on the valley as their sole interest was to attain control over the land. The irony lies in the fact that the natives were so gullible that they disclosed their secrets to the strangers without doubting their intentions and thereby paving an easy way for their invasion.

An army of Anthropoi had arrived, he said. They were not many in number but they had very powerful weapons and were skilled in the art of war [...] Anthropoi had decided to conquer the Great Mountain! Their savants had studied all that was told to their envoy, [...] unmatched in their wisdom, and they had decided that 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)

With an ease, the Anthropoi created a hegemonic ideology by befooling them for being docile, immature, dumb, foolish, uneducated and incapable of utilising the natural resources they had. The Anthropoi used the knowledgeable secrets of the valley dwellers as crutches to victimise their bountiful ecological resources. William Shakespeare in his play *The Tempest* voices the similar agility through the words of Caliban, whose island is captured and the environment is adversely impacted. Caliban's words in Aime Cesaire's *A Tempest* (2002) aptly describe the pathetic situation of the colonised when he writes:

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, pp. 124-147)

The valley dwellers valiantly resisted the vile attempt of Anthropoi but failed miserably and succumbed to their dominance. The inhabitants were subjugated and ruled by the ferocious soldiers called Kranni. The invaders opted for divide and rule policy and created a rift between the neighbours, and the rest others were dragged to dormancy. The Anthropoi projected their magnificence by feeding the Varvoroi (the indigenous and the aboriginal people) with the discourse of hegemony. The Anthropoi projected themselves to be superior and exhibited overpowering dominance over the natives, their land, and their precious ecological resources. They created a hierarchy of social order and replaced the original guides, the elders with their own members. The Anthropoi underrated the indigenous culture and belittled their knowledge which further helped them in their oppression. They contaminated the natives' pious minds by feeding them lies that their real place was to toil in lands to produce the food needed to them. They even befooled the natives by telling they were not fit to climb as their diets were enfeebling, their minds were dull, and they had a cowardice heart that produced a perverse belief system. The Anthropoi dehumanized the local inhabitants and acted as their masters by supervising and suppressing them and exploiting their geographical, cultural and ecological treasures. Depicting similar situation, Pablo Mukherjee (2006) posits:

Surely, any field purporting to theorise the global conditions of colonialism and imperialism (let us call it postcolonial studies) cannot but consider the complex interplay of environmental categories such as water, land, energy, habitat, migration with political or cultural categories such as state, society, conflict, literature, theatre visual arts. Equally any field purporting to attach interpretative importance to environment (let us call it eco/environmental studies) must be able to trace the social, historical and material co-ordinates of categories such as forests, rivers, bio-religious and species. (p. 144)

The situation aggravated with the arrival of Anthropoi and their encroachment of the natural scenic beauty and bountiful resources of the valley. The eco-friendly lifestyle of the valley got destructed. The tribal who co-existed with the nature and the earth, and revered and worshipped the mountain got influenced by the hegemonic capitalist perceptions of nature and ecology. The imperialists (Anthropoi) shattered their homogeneity and imposed an imperial capitalocene view on them. In the process of making efforts to scale the forbidden peaks and macabre pillage, they used their modern equipments. It has been a common tendency among imperialists to disregard oriental culture as pagan making assertion of their imperial authority smooth and easier. In this context, Jason W. Moore (2016) 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. (p. 14)

The Kraani created a state of natural inferiority and submission for the native people by deluding them. They projected themselves to be omnipotent and wise, and created a binary of opposition between them. Ghosh writes, "They were few in number, the Kraani, but they made up for this by conjuring up terrifying illusions of omnipotence- they created such a distance between themselves and us that we came to accept that the Anthropoi were not like us, that they were a different species of being" (Ghosh, 2022, p. 16).

The Kraani dismantled the inner fabric of the native people by banning their ancestral traditional ritual of singing and dancing, and disrupted their indigenous life. These were the efforts of imperialists to bring a wretched havoc in the lives of natives and their ecological equilibrium. In essence, the condition of the natives is similar to what Franz Fanon observes in *The Wretched of the Earth* (2001). He asserts that "Every effort is made to bring the colonized person to admit the inferiority of his culture which has been transformed into instinctive patterns of behaviour, to recognize the unreality of his "nation", and, in the last extreme, the confused and imperfect character of his own biological structure"(p. 236).

The circumstances even worsened when the natives became a crucial tool in the manipulative process. They became allured by the words of the Anthropoi and soon became a part of the same greed. Very soon the Anthropoi and the natives both realized that the conquest of the 'Great Mountain' was impossible without the natives' help. This ignited the fire of greed more fiercely among the natives. The idea of the Anthropoi overwhelmed them. They were fascinated to see the Kraani climb the mountain and they craved to conquer the mountain's precipitous slopes and avail its resources to the fullest. The desire of ascension and its devastation sprouted in their minds as some wildfire. They were easily duped and deceived to become the agents of their own enslavement. They, no more, worshipped the mountain and lost their original faith in their sacred tribal tradition of conserving their natural resources and forbidding anyone from exploiting it. In fact, they attached a romantic view and thrilling experience instead of reverence for the mountain. The idea of reaching its top and controlling it intoxicated them. As a result, the Kraani and the natives reciprocated in the process of ascension of the mountain. Ghosh writes:

The lives of the Anthropoi seemed infinitely more exciting than our own wretched existences down in the valley [...]. As time went by, 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. (2022, pp. 18-19)

This is what Edward Said (1994) calls “a confirmation of the dominating culture and its naturalization” (pp. 145-146). Under the influence of the outsiders, the natives disintegrated themselves and began a gory plunder of their revered mountain. The selfish commercial aspect of the Kraani was seen when they hurled their own people in the hoard of material prosperity. And the most painful thing was that the native people easily shifted from environmental friendly life to the exploitative capitalistic mode. No doubt, imperialism has always endorsed capitalistic extraction and ecological commodification. And this is what invited a catastrophe on the climbers and the residents. Their merciless exploitation and assault of the ‘Great Mountain’ brought about a natural predicament and nature’s fury.

Turning our heads we beheld a sight that took us utterly by surprise. We saw that the combined weight of all the climbers had unsettled the snow on the lower slopes of the Mountain. As a result, a series of devastating landslides and avalanches had swept through our valley, killing vast numbers of our fellow villagers. (Ghosh, 2022, p. 24)

The villagers and the Kraani, in their rush for capitalistic benefit, brought about a fatal blow by the nature, the wrath of nature. Their materialistic thought had transformed the natives into insensitive beings who overlooked the stern warnings of environmental collapse. Unaffected by the demise of their kith and kin, they moved upward and came to a point where they were staggered by the crevasses and mud slide. In the introduction of the book *Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History and Crisis of Capitalism*, Jason W. Moore (2016) states:

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”. The moment is dramatized in the growing awareness of climate change-among scholars, and also among a wilder 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. (p. 1)

The terrifying transformation of the ‘Living Mountain’ hints at a sinister. The imperialist’s dire lust to gain more profit and capital made them ignore the ominous signs. Their stubbornness, stupidity, material greed and longing to appease their insatiable needs turned them into mindless beings, those similar to the Anthropei who were hell-bent on disturbing the ecological balance and homogeneity. The serenity and natural cohabitation was disrupted by the anthropocentric view of the humans. Donna Haraway aptly contextualises the situations and observes, “The Anthropocene marks serious discontinuities; what comes after will not be like what came before” (2015). Waylaid by the western episteme, the valley dwellers destroyed their own habitat by pushing indigenous ecological world to an apocalypse of unimaginable magnitude. According to Mariko L. Frame:

Ecological imperialism is an integral to the need of the system for capital accumulation and its relations of production. This is built upon the hierarchy between countries in regard to the international division of labour, massively affecting the ecosocial impacts and ecological unequal exchange of the



periphery. As such, it results from the dialectics between asymmetric forces of capital's plundering and social resistance within a global trend of "continued accumulation of capital for imperialist countries. (qtd. in Pedregal, and Lukic, pp. 105-138)

When the 'Great Mountain' turned hostile towards its invaders, they all stood aghast, awe-struck and pain-stricken. A sense of despair and fright dominated them and at this moment, the Anthropoi implored the native people to recall their belief, their old stories and dances. But, to their dismay, they had forgotten all. Only an old Adept came for rescue, and in her trench, she admonished the human beings for exploiting and misusing the natural resources of the 'Living Mountain'. The 'Great Mountain' proved itself to be alive and sentient, and emerged as resisting force against callous human intervention. The 'Living Mountain' demolished the Anthropocene and the green-imperialism in men through its startling 'sacredness'.

The unnecessary interference on the natural abode is highly criticized through the concluding lines of the novella when the Adept, with her eyes blazing with anger cried "How dare you?" 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." (Ghosh, 2022, p. 35) With this note of rebellion, the 'Living Mountain' put a halt to its reduction to exchange value and its alienation from its socio-cultural, biological and ecosystemic features. The Europeans have always tried to tame the nature as per their interest and view them from capitalist prism. Highlighting the Europeans view towards the nature and the land, Helen Tiffin, in his book *Five Emus to the King of Siam: Environment and Empire* (2007) writes, "Westerners apprehended relations between themselves and 'their' land as one of ownership (or, at best, stewardship)" (Introduction, p. xiii). The inclusion of the words like 'masters', 'plaything' and 'child' shows how the Anthropocene sentiment is loaded with a high regard for themselves as being lauded with superiority but the nature has powerfully defied the constraints and injustices inflicted upon it. The incident very vehemently suggests that we should adopt a friendly and humane approach to nature for its sustainability by, what Ghosh in his book *The Nutmeg's Curse* (2021, p. 205) says "regaining an intuitive feeling for the Earth's vitality."

## Conclusion

Ghosh, in *The Living Mountain*, creates a microcosm of the present world by conjuring an imaginary landscape to give a dismaying picture of the problematic relationship between man and nature. The author laments the persistent degradation of the environment and gives insight of how neo-imperialists continue to discover newer destinations and methods to consume to the extent and commodify the natural assets. In an allegorical manner, the novelist manifests the repercussions of the environmental exploitation. The novella also aims at exploring that the annihilation of indigenous ecological knowledge has been a major reason for the success of Green Imperialism. The enthralling masterpiece warns the readers against the growing megalomania that has caused the destruction of nature at unimaginable magnitude, and it also pleads to change the anthropocentric behaviour to eco-centric one. The tale is a cautionary

narrative to stop the distressful hegemony of man over nature. In other words, “the novella generates environmental literacy by raising environmental awareness and resistance to the antienvironmentalist and anti-people - especially the poor and the marginal - forces of neoimperialism and global capitalism”(Kumar and Sharma, 2024). In a well-knit fabric of historical knowledge, present and future, the fable enticingly advocates for creating a long-lasting mutual relationship between human and nature. The speculative storyline suggests the humankind that the only thing that can absolve the green planet from being extinct is ‘eco-humanitarianism’. He advances his thoughts of sustainable development and suppression of escalating environmental disaster by prioritizing the need of recuperation of indigenous knowledge and planetary solidarities. All things considered, the fable, as Khanal and Gupta (2023) put it, “chronicles how colonial capitalism has ravaged ecological system and indigenous knowledge” (pp. 174-184).

Winding up, it can assertively be claimed that Amitav Ghosh is a prominent voice in environmental literature. He entertains and enlightens the readers, and at the same time he solicits them to redefine their relationship with the nature. His unwavering and indomitable commitment to environmental literature works as a catalyst to raise awareness, promote empathy, adopt sustainable practices, and whet for environmental superintendence. His urge for empathy and appreciation for beauty and diversity of our planet on the one hand, and cautionary warning about impending threat of environmental degradation and its subsequent consequences that are lurking behind on the other hand, makes him stand along the notable whistleblowers like Rachel Carson, Aldo Leopold, Barbara Kingsolver, Wendell Berry, Sunderlal Bahuguna, Vandana Shiva, Balu Imam, and many others who relentlessly and untiringly worked and wrote for environmental conservation.

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