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Beyond Human Exceptionalism: A Critical Analysis of Amitav Ghosh's *The Living Mountain*: A Fable for Our Times

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Abstract

Aim: *This paper aims to critically examine and address the entanglements of cultural imagination, colonial exploitation, and the climate crisis. Drawing on the concept of imperialism and Renaissance humanism, this study critiques the role of the anthropocentric worldview in ecological collapse. It attempts to destabilise the notion of human exceptionalism by foregrounding the active presence of nonhuman agency.*

Methodology and Approach: *This study employs a qualitative, text-centred approach and adheres to the MLA 9 guidelines. Analysing the selected text, through the critical lenses of Anthropocene and Posthumanism, the study engages with Dipesh Chakrabarty's notion of entangled histories and humans as geological agents, Donna Haraway's idea of sympoiesis and multispecies kinship, and Bruno Latour's concept of Gaia and the new climatic regime.*

Outcome: *Amitav Ghosh, through this intriguing fable, compels us to reimagine literature's role in highlighting the gravity of the planetary crisis and calls for ecological consciousness. This paper, with a particular focus on challenging the paradigm of human exceptionalism, contributes to posthumanist ecocriticism by foregrounding the intertwined histories of colonialism, capitalism and environmental catastrophe.*

Conclusion and Suggestions: *The study concludes that recognising nonhuman agency and respecting ecological limits is essential for sustainable development. It suggests writing and promoting literary works that foreground nonhuman agency and reinforce the notion of coexistence.*

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The unprecedented natural calamities in recent years have forced writers, philosophers, scientists and artists across the globe to rethink and reimagine the relation between humans and nonhuman agencies. Global warming, rising sea levels and biodiversity loss are not only environmental challenges but also pose existential challenges. The accelerating climate crisis demands a profound shift in cultural imagination, and climate literature needs to play a crucial role in bringing about the change. Amitav Ghosh is one of the most prominent contemporary writers to lead the emerging discourse of climate fiction. Ghosh has consistently addressed the entanglements of cultural imagination, colonial exploitation, and the climate crisis through his literary oeuvre. *The Living Mountain: A Fable for Our Times (2022)*, by Amitav Ghosh, dramatises the ecological catastrophe of Anthropocene through the allegorical tale of a mountain named 'Mahaparbat' or 'the great mountain'. Amitav Ghosh, through this intriguing fable, stages the confrontation between two different world views: Ecocentrism and Anthropocentrism. Ecocentrism is a philosophy that prioritises ecological balance and a sustainable way of living over human interests. In contrast, anthropocentrism is based on the philosophy of Renaissance humanism, which prioritises humans and views all other creatures and natural elements as having an intrinsic value to be useful to humans, thus making it natural for humans to exploit nonhumans. Based on these contrasting worldviews, *The Living Mountain: A Fable for Our Times (2022),* speaking directly to the Anthropocene condition, interrogates the intersections of ecocentric and anthropocentric cultures, colonial exploitation, and ecological devastation.

Amitav Ghosh draws a stark distinction between the Renaissance humanism philosophy of Western colonisers, who believe in their exceptionalism, hence are entitled to explore and exploit natural resources, and Eastern natives who are seen as savage and uncultured for living in harmony with nature. Ghosh uses a Greek term, Anthropoi, meaning 'human', to represent colonisers and imperial powers. Anthropoi are technologically advanced humans representing modern industrialisation. They see Mahaparbat as inert and attempt violent extractivism. In contrast, Valley people see Mahaparbat as a sacred living force and treat it with reverence. "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

7). Tracing the history of environmental degradation into capitalism and colonisation, Ghosh highlights the outright comparison between the East and the West through the comparison between the indigenous valley dwellers who live in harmony with nature, and Anthropoi, the invaders, attempting to colonise the valley and exploit the natural resources through unsustainable practices. Natives of the valley represent the class of humans who are treated by Anthropoi as less than humans for their animistic understanding of the world. Anthropoi positioned the valley people as inferior and dismissed the idea of treating Mahaparbat alive as a primitive superstition.

> 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. We were unaware of this because we were a credulous and benighted people who believed that our Mountain was alive. The savants of the Anthropoi were 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. (14)

Anthropoi's colonising of the valley people and justifying it by calling the native's culture and way of life unsuitable and incapable of making use of the richly resourced Mahaparbat mirrors Rudyard Kipling's famous poem "White Man's Burden" (1899) in which he propagated the idea that colonial rule was a moral duty of Europeans to civilise the non-white people. This further resonates with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's famous remark, "the white men saving brown women from brown men" (297), made in her seminal essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak" (1988). In this regard, Anthropois also narrativise their plunder of Mahaparbat as rescuers of a wasted resource. It is portrayed as a matter of pride for colonisers, demanding great sacrifices to perform the burdensome duty of colonising primitive, uncivilised and incapable of self-rule people. Amitav Ghosh highlights this anthropocentric worldview as a major cause of the present climate crisis.

To argue that global warming and environmental degradation are due to anthropogenic factors, such as deforestation, industrial agriculture, and fossil fuel

consumption, is correct at the surface level; however, for a deeper understanding of the Anthropocene discourse, these processes cannot be divorced from the geopolitical and historical structures that enabled them. Situating the environmental degradation within specific socio-economic and historical trajectories of the West, Amitav Ghosh in *The Living Mountain: A Fable for Our Times* examines the layered failures across multiple levels in order to understand how environmental degradation has culminated in the crisis we face today. The fable is loosely based on the patterns of British imperialism. Initially, the valley people are shown to have deep regard for the great mountain. The precolonisation period marks the ecocentric cultural values of the natives who lived in harmony with nature. Once captured by Anthropois, the natives help them to exploit Mahaparbat. Anthropoi trick natives into believing that they are toiling because their beliefs regarding Mahaparbat are superstitious. "They were all worthless, they said; our ancestral lore, they said, had brought nothing but doom upon us, which was why we were now reduced to this state of degradation and despair" (17).

Had they been capable of making use of the resources of Mahaparbat, they would not have been enslaved by the Anthropois. Convinced by anthropoi, valley people begin to discard their own beliefs and adopt anthropoi's way of living. Ghosh makes a strong argument about colonial expansion and capitalist extraction by highlighting the unequal power structures between powerful anthropoi and powerless valley people. "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" (16).

Ghosh uses this manufactured distance to reveal how oppressive systems rely on narrative control. Once the valley people are tricked into believing the authority and superiority of the Anthropoi, they do not merely obey — they begin to emulate them. "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" (18-19). The valley people's transformation from an ecocentric worldview to an anthropocentric worldview mirrors the broader Anthropocene condition, where societies adopt exploitative behaviours

not because they are inherently destructive but because they internalise narratives that glorify human domination over nonhuman agencies.

This shift in cultural imagination resonates with the history of the British Empire's colonial rule around the globe. In all their colonies, the British Empire labelled the natives as barbarians, their culture and values as uncivilised and looted the natural resources with no regard for nature. While treating natives as slaves in their endeavour to exploit natural resources, they began a flurry of conversion from an ecocentric way of living to an anthropocentric one. During the mid-twentieth century, when the British Empire relinquished control over most of its colonies, it not only left the English language behind but also its culture and lifestyle. People in third-world countries were made to believe that they were colonised because they were insufficient to rule themselves. Their worldview and culture were incapable of the idea of progress that Renaissance Humanism promotes.

The long history of colonial rule led the natives to believe that if they were to make any progress, they would have to live as the Britishers did and do what the Britishers did. The postcolonial period marked the shift from an ecocentric worldview to an anthropocentric worldview. People in third-world countries began to view nonhuman agencies as resources to be exploited for riches and gains, giving rise to the quest to conquer nature. Instead of living in harmony with nonhuman agencies, they adopted a lifestyle that puts materialistic comfort and profit above all else. Insisting that the climate crisis cannot be abstracted from the historical unfolding of imperialism, postcolonialism and capitalism, Dipesh Chakrabarty in "The Climate of History: Four Theses" makes an outright statement:

> One could object, for instance, that all the anthropogenic factors contributing to global warming—the burning of fossil fuel, industrialization of animal stock, the clearing of tropical and other forests, and so on—are after all part of a larger story: the unfolding of capitalism in the West and the imperial or quasi-imperial domination by the West of the rest of the world. It is from that recent history of the West that the elite of China, Japan, India, Russia, and Brazil have drawn inspiration in attempting to develop their own trajectories toward superpower politics

> and global domination through capitalist economic, technological, and military might. (216)

Critiquing Eurocentrism, Chakrabarty is of the view that developing nations are blindly following the Western model of growth and development. This insight deviates from the prevailing view that humans, on the whole as a species, are a geological force in the Anthropocene, and calls for a more critical study of asymmetrical power structures among humans. It offers a groundbreaking contribution to our understanding of the Anthropocene condition. Ghosh and Chakrabarty's parallel argument establishes the idea that the Anthropocene condition is not due to humans in general, rather it is the product of specific human histories of power, inequality and domination.

At first glance, *The Living Mountain: A Fable for Our Times* appears to be a parable, in which a community of people termed 'Anthropoi' seeks to exploit the treasures of Mahaparbat or The Great Mountain, whereas the people of the valley living at the foothills of Mahaparbat regard its sanctity. The flavour of the fable lies in the liveliness of the Mahaparbat. It is not an inert entity in the story; rather, it asserts its living force against human greed and extractive violence. Using the fable form to represent cultural differences between indigenous and anthropoi, Ghosh presents Mahaparbat as a subject rather than a mere object. The fable opens with a striking declaration that immediately foregrounds the need for a reciprocal relation between humans and nonhumans,

> 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. (10)

This passage encapsulates the fable's central ideas: treating nature as alive and respecting its sanctity by restraining unnecessary exploration. The ethic of distance proposes an alternative relationship between humans and nonhumans, rooted not in mastery over one another but in acknowledging the coexistence.

Ghosh, through the Native's belief that Mahaparbat protects them on the condition of telling the stories of it, stresses the need for narrative attention to nonhuman agency. Valley people maintaining the appropriate distance from Mahaparbat and resisting the desire to explore it greatly resonates with Donna Haraway's idea of 'multispecies kinship', which emphasises the bond of interdependence among species based on the reciprocity of reverence for difference. In this regard, Mahaparbat is treated as a kin to the valley people, which protects and sustains them, and demands respect in return. Arguing against anthropocentrism, Donna Haraway, in her groundbreaking work, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene (2016),* states, "Make kin, not babies" (102) and suggests an alternative concept, the Chthulucene, to the Anthropocene by promoting kinship across species, geography and ontology.

At the core of Haraway's concept is the idea that humans exist in webs of multispecies entanglements. She radically dismantles the illusion of human exceptionalism by rejecting the human self-sufficiency as she remarks, "Sympoiesis is a simple word; it means 'making-with.' Nothing makes itself; nothing is really autopoietic or self-organising" (58). Ghosh further strengthens the need to coexist by describing the events that follow, breaching the ethical code of distance and reverence. When Anthropoi, followed by valley people, begin to climb Mahaparbat, it causes devastating landslides and avalanches. "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." (24)

Ghosh's treatment of nature as a living force adds a new dimension to our understanding of the Anthropocene. Ghosh's presentation of Mahaparbat's resistance against human violation sets nature as an active agent. The human invasion of Mahaparbat triggers avalanches and landslides. This indicates nature has its own threshold, which, when breached, brings natural disasters. The narrative echoes Bruno Latour's *Facing Gaia (2017),* which dismantles Renaissance humanism's notion of human exceptionalism and nature as a passive background for human action. "A force of nature is obviously just the opposite of an inert actor; every novelist and poet knows this as well as every expert in

hydraulics or geomorphology. If the Mississippi possesses anything at all, it is agency – such powerful agency that it imposes itself on the agency of all the bureaucrats" (Latour 52).

Latour, through the example of America's iconic river, the Mississippi, provocatively puts forward the idea that nature is an actor in its own right. Despite being one of the most engineered, managed, and controlled rivers on Earth, the Mississippi asserts its agency through regular overflows, floods, shifts in course, and destroys infrastructure. Latour's Mississippi exemplifies nature's resistance to human actions and resonates with Ghosh's Mahaparbat, which similarly refuses to be treated as a passive entity and asserts its agency. Both the Mississippi and Mahaparbat counterattack the enlightenment-derived notion that humans alone possess the power. Latour and Ghosh offer a paradigm-shifting illustration of how nonhuman agencies actively resist human attempts at intrusion and exploitation.

To address the nuances of the climate crisis, Amitav Ghosh stresses the need to tell stories that deconstruct the present apocalyptic scenario. He specifically outlines the insufficient climate fiction, distorted history to hide colonial exploitation and its aftereffects, and crony capitalist politics accountable for worsening the climate crisis. To align with the idea of nature as a living force and to promote coexistence, he critiques the Renaissance humanism philosophy that treats humans as an exceptional species, superior to all other living beings and non-living things. Ghosh, through the engagement of villagers, anthropoi, and the living mountain, weaves the complex cultural, ecological and philosophical concerns into a deceptively simple narrative. The short fable presses the need to see beyond human exceptionalism and situate humans within a complex web of interdependencies where the nonhuman agencies cannot be ignored or taken for granted. Ultimately, Ghosh's narrative offers a posthumanist reorientation, calling for a rethinking of the fundamental question that how humans can reimagine their place in planetary systems. As this paper has argued, *The Living Mountain* is not merely a mythical story of a Mountain; it compels us to rebuild our ethical frameworks.

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