
Reading Amitav Ghosh's *The Living Mountain* as a Metanarrative of Myth, Indigenous Epistemologies and A Critique of Environmental Exploitation

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Abstract:

Amitav Ghosh's *The Living Mountain* is a significant metanarrative that delves into the intersection of myth, indigenous epistemologies, and environmental exploitation. This paper examines how Ghosh portrays the systematic destruction of indigenous knowledge, the subjugation of native communities by imposing inferiority upon them, and the relentless capitalist extraction of their resources. Through a narrative ecological lens, the study highlights how colonial and capitalist forces have not only commodified nature but have also erased traditional ecological wisdom, leading to epistemicide and ecocide. It critiques the hegemonic Western discourse that legitimizes environmental destruction while silencing indigenous voices. The paper reasons that *The Living Mountain* calls for epistemic resistance and reclamation of Indigenous knowledge systems to counteract testimonial injustice and ecological devastation. Ghosh urges a collective responsibility toward sustainable planetary and indigenous-led ecological preservation by advocating for a decolonial re-centering of environmental consciousness.

Key Words: Environment, Indigenous Epistemologies, Fable, Intersection, Metanarrative, Ecocriticism, Myth.

Introduction

In an era marked by mounting natural calamities, environmental exploitations, and the erosion of Indigenous knowledge systems, Amitav Ghosh's works serve as both a mirror and a magnifying glass, reflecting the ramifications of environmental degradation while amplifying the voices of marginalized Indigenous communities. His latest, *The Living Mountain: a Fable for Our Time* (2022), emerges as a profound metanarrative, weaving together the threads of environmental exploitation and the tragic loss of indigenous wisdom. No one can deny that "the multidimensional and planetary environmental crises that the world faces today call for conversations across different branches of human knowledge and imagination" (Chakrabarty xiii). That is what Amitav Ghosh's *The Living Mountain: a Fable*

for Our Time (2022) is a reminder of. It is an urgent reminder of and about the time that we are being witnessed like reels being scrolled up and down to watch another without being taken with its due seriousness and urgency.

We, people, have accustomed and accommodated ourselves within the various narratives, including political, cultural, ideological, etc, as suited or supplied to us. These various ideologies have been knitted deliberately and minutely in order to control the thought processes. These have created perceptions that do not let us go beyond the above-mentioned narrative structures and also the web of consumerism and capitalism. Such is Amitav Ghosh's fictional creativity, which falls within the domain of postcolonial ecocriticism that reconnoiters the complications of safeguarding biodiversity, skeptic political pronouncements that "crush impoverished tribal folk, and highlights the attempts of the corporate world to transform a threatened ecosystem into a lucrative eco-touristic venture by varying 'classification,' 'labeling' and 'nomenclature'" (Vincent 173). And "above all," the text "enables us to understand Ghosh's conception of his art—and of the narrative arts in general. The narrative arts, he claims, 'shape the world as they relate it.'" (Khair vii) Ghosh also seeks to show how peoples' exploiting instinctive natures always prioritize the curtailing of non-human prerogatives to the common natural world.

Amid all the chaos and catastrophes simultaneously taking place across the planet, along with numerous civil confrontations and disputes, Ghosh's tale runs its "metaphorical traffic on narrative rails" (Blackham xii). The fable is a timely reminder to the contemporary masses that if they want a healthy, sustainable, and life-abiding environment not only for themselves but also for the generations to come, it is their responsibility to ensure this for them. These sorts of messages consequently have an emotional impact on people's response to the worldwide ecological catastrophe, "which is not merely a physical crisis, but a crisis of culture and mind, and threatens both the continuation of joyful human existence and the survival of much of the biosphere. Yet words by themselves may not be enough to produce change." (Nanson 1). The text delves into the nuances of "testimonial injustice," the affliction endured by Indigenous knowledge systems in the face of relentless neo-colonization, imperialism, and modernization, leading to forms of epistemic-ide and ecocide that threaten our planet's very existence.

The text is more than a story; it is an Earthsong, a hymn to the living spirit of nature, a saga of indigenous epistemology based on faith and belief, and a lament for the perils of human arrogance. From the outset, the text throws down a gauntlet, challenging our Western notions of mountains as mere landscapes to be conquered. But here, the Mountain is a sentient being pulsating with life; its every tremor is a whispered story. In the opening description of the village, which was situated high on the Himalayas, the narrator states, "Valley was an immense, snowy mountain, whose peak was almost always wreathed in clouds" (7). The villagers call the mountains "Mahaparat" and "the Great Mountain." The narrator also introduces an abiding law about the Mountain that has been followed for generations and respected by all the warring villages, which states that they "were never, on

any account, to set forth on the slopes of the Great Mountain" (7). This way, they have maintained this interdependence for ages without any greed and without causing any avalanches and hazards. They "headed" their "ancestors and kept away from this mountain" (7).

Ghosh has not used ambiguous details and embellished language but simple prose like a clean and crystal Himalayan stream that reflects nothing more but the seriousness and graveness of the subject, which has been dealt with and beautifully organized in this narrative. Also, there is little about the development of characters or KIthe complexity of the plot and structure, but a straightforward projection of narrative builds strongly on contemporary subjects and is certain that the narrative does not touch the superficiality of any point of the narrative structure. The village thrived in harmony with its natural surroundings. Their deep reverence for nature, coupled with their inherent contentment, served as a shield against the lure of exploiting the Mountain's riches. The villagers, finding fulfillment in their simple lives within the Valley, held no desire to exploit the Mountain's abundance. The narrator observes the Valley and Himalaya:

We know in our hearts that our Mountain was a living being that cared for us; we saw proof of this every day, all around us, in the form of a tree that grew along the streams that descended from its slopes. This tree, which grew only in our Valley and nowhere else, produced things that were so miraculous that we called it the Magic Tree. Its leaves kept insects away; its wood was impermeable to water; its roots nourished rare mushrooms; its flowers produced exquisitely scented honey; and its fruit was delicious to eat. But the most miraculous thing of all was the nut that lay within the fruits: its fragrance was incomparable, and it had so many medicinal uses that traders from the Lowlands would travel long distances in search of it. (7-8)

Though Valley folks fought over many things, they all agreed on the subject that "strangers" would never be permitted to move into their Valley. Accordingly, to ensure this, they had their system of protecting the Valley and its resources from outsiders. It is their belief that "the future of the valley people pivots on the principle of ecological sacredness" (Singh 22). They had "great portcullis" that defended the Valley and issued the passes to outsiders to visit only when they were assured that these people would not harm the Valley while the "Trading week," and "At the end of the Trading Week, as it was known, the Elderpeople would see to it that all the visitors had departed, after which they would post a squad of sentries to guard the portcullis for the rest of the year" (9). This great Mountain had been part of their culture, history, myth, songs, stories, and dances. Any cultural practice or custom or festival was not possible without their Mountain. And "sometimes, when dancing, they would go into a trance, and afterward they would tell us that they had felt the Mountain speaking to them through the soles of their feet" (10). This has been their belief that they are now part of their daily lives, knowledge system, culture, and history.

The text's resonance with contemporary issues is undeniable. The villagers' deep

respect for the living Mountain, Mahaparat, stands in stark contrast to the Anthropoi's insatiable greed. This concern with the past, present, and future is exemplified by the arrival of these outsiders. One day, strangers called "Anthropoi" entered the Valley, eager to learn everything about its resources and people. Though wary, the villagers shared their knowledge, emphasizing that the most significant thing in their Valley is something that cannot be traded – their "living mountain, Mahaparat." Yet, the Anthropoi remained unmoved by their reverence. They departed abruptly, only to return a year later, a chilling foreshadowing. The Great Mountain shuddered. Avalanches roared down its slopes, and rifts cleaved the valley floor. Fear gripped the village. The Adepts, those who were the most skilled and wise people in the village, informed them, "'A cycle of time has ended... and another one has begun: the Cycle of Tribulation. Strangers are coming from afar, a horde of them, armed with terrible weapons'" (13). The villagers braced themselves for a fight unlike any they had ever faced.

An army of outsiders (Anthropoi) had arrived in large numbers, armed with potent weapons and skilled in the art of war. They, driven by an insatiable hunger for progress, stand in stark contrast. They saw the Mountain as a treasure to be plundered and its secrets to be unlocked for their own profit. Their insatiable hunger and their lust for power at any cost echo the colonial loot of indigenous knowledge and natural resources and the exploitation of people and their lands in the name of progress. They stormed the portcullis, and the men who were on guard duty attacked the Valley and took all the guards captive as the colonizers had done. They had come there to conquer "the Great Mountain" (which symbolizes the nation and its beliefs and history), and they were there for the hidden great riches, minerals, metals, and the like as they believed. But this had led village people to think that they were ignorant, "a credulous and benighted people who believed that" their "Mountain was alive" (14). It was these Anthropoi (the outsiders or the foreigners), according to the native people, who were unmatched in their wisdom.

The villagers were not making much use of the riches of the Great Mountain, according to Anthropoi. Hence, they "were fully justified in seizing them and taking whatever they wished" (14). This resulted in a revolt and a fight between the villagers (native folks) and the Anthropoi (the foreigners). Facing the Anthropoi's superior weaponry and tactics, the villagers were defeated and forced to surrender. The narrator states that once they had been overpowered and suppressed by the Anthropoi, they flocked them together and informed them that from now on, the villagers should be ruled by some of their most fierce militias, whom they called "Kraani" or "The Helmeted Ones." They were to be their sentinels and supervisors to ensure that they had been doing all the labor that was assigned to them. Thus, the once peaceful Valley became a microcosm of colonial oppression, with the Anthropoi as conquerors and the villagers as the conquered.

The Kraani, despite their limited numbers, wielded a terrifying illusion of omnipotence. They dismantled the Valley's social fabric, replacing elders and suppressing native beliefs, as the narrator observes that Kraani's initial move to dismantle the Valley's

traditional power structure and also forcefully removed the existing elders, both men and women, who held positions of wisdom and respect. "The new ones were all men, and we soon learned to fear these Eldermen almost as much as" they dreaded the Kraani (16). This systematic control served a dark purpose – to exploit the villagers and the Sacred Mountain. They were forced to serve as laborers, toiling under the watchful eyes of the Kraani to extract riches from their own land. The Kraani further dehumanized the villagers, labeling them "Varvaroi" and dismissing their customs as worthless: "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" (16-17). This brutal subjugation left the villagers feeling powerless and despairing. Thus, the villagers were forced into complicity with their own oppression. Under the watchful eyes of the Kraani, they were made to toil in the fields, producing the supplies needed for the Anthropoi to conquer their sacred Mountain. The Kraani justified this by portraying the villagers as unfit for the task, claiming their bodies were weak, their customs inferior, and their beliefs misguided. They were even labeled "Varvaroi" (barbarians) by the Anthropoi, further dehumanizing them. This forced labor exposed the hypocrisy of the Anthropoi's supposed "progress," which relied on the very people and traditions they deemed inferior.

The Anthropoi's manipulation proved highly effective. They instilled a deep sense of inferiority in the villagers, successfully distorting their history, culture, and myths. This fabricated narrative, coupled with the alluring image of the Anthropoi's lives, led the villagers to believe their own existence was "wretched" in comparison (18). The Kraani further reinforced this by relegating them to mere laborers tasked with supplying the climbers' needs without question. Over time, the Anthropoi completely altered the villagers' perception of the Mountain. Its sacredness was replaced by a focus on resource exploitation, fuelled by the villagers' own growing desire to participate in the Anthropoi's seemingly exciting venture. The narrator observes, "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" (19). This shift in perspective, coupled with stories of the Anthropoi's exploits, ignited a spark of rebellion within the villagers. They began to defy the Kraani, their fear replaced by a growing determination to reclaim their agency. This evolving resistance marked a turning point as the balance of power slowly began to shift toward the villagers.

The villagers' growing awareness of their own strength marked a turning point. They realized their numerical advantage over the Kraani and the power they held through their labor. Withholding their services could severely hinder the Anthropoi's operations. The narrator notes, "And at last a day came when it became clear to the Kraani that it would be impossible for them to sustain the illusion of omnipotence for much longer" (20). However, by this time, the Anthropoi had already secured their spoils, discovering "great stocks of riches on the mountain slopes – more than enough for them to sustain themselves" (20). Recognizing their vulnerability, the Kraani and Anthropoi disappeared one night, leaving the Mountain open for the villagers to reclaim.

The villagers' initial victory was tragically short-lived. The sudden access to resources triggered a profound upheaval in the Valley. Driven by a desire to acquire as much wealth as possible, certain villages launched attacks on others, envisioning a transformation into their own oppressors. This brutal power struggle tore neighboring communities apart, with residents slaying one another in a ruthless quest for advancement. The resulting carnage surpassed the scale of past Anthropoi-inflicted atrocities, plunging the Valley into a grim landscape of slaughter and ruin. This chaotic narrative persisted until a semblance of order emerged, albeit at a devastating cost. A significant portion of the populace was confined to the base of the slope under the watchful eyes of armed guards, carefully selected from their own villages and known as the "Kraani of the Varvaroi." This new order, based on force and fear, mirrored the very oppression they had sought to overthrow. The villagers once united in their resistance, had become the very instruments of their own subjugation.

Despite their initial victory, the villagers' descent into violence ultimately served the interests of their oppressors. The armed guards, the "Kraani of the Varvaroi," established a new order based on force, mirroring the very regime they had sought to overthrow. However, the story does not end there. The villagers' numerical advantage and determination continued to pose a threat to the Anthropoi. Their assaults on the Great Mountain were "stronger and more carefully planned than those that had preceded it" (21). While the Anthropoi had left the Mountain ravaged and polluted; the villagers were undeterred. Their resolve remained steadfast, and their numbers continued to swell as more villagers joined the ascent. As they reached higher slopes, they discovered that "the Anthropoi were faltering and hadn't yet reached the Mountain's cloud-wrapped summit" (22). This revelation ignited a renewed sense of hope and ambition. They began to contemplate the possibility of achieving something far greater than they had ever imagined – the potential to be the first to reach the summit of their sacred "Mahaparbat."

The villagers' unrelenting pursuit of wealth on the Mountain had disastrous consequences. Their uncontrolled ascent, driven by greed, destabilized the slopes, triggering avalanches of debris that swept through the Valley, claiming countless lives. Despite the looming disaster, both native people and Anthropoi pressed on, driven by a shared human tendency towards self-preservation. This incident highlights an intriguing connection to universal cultural themes across diverse societies, where the pursuit of individual gain can often outweigh collective well-being. Further compounding the tragedy, many villagers trapped on the upper slopes were forced to continue climbing for survival. The narrator's chilling observation reveals the depths of human desperation, "We put our dead kin out of our minds – they were poor anyway, and there were so many of them that a few would not be missed" (25). This stark dehumanization, fuelled by the desperate need for survival, underscores the profound moral decay that can accompany unfettered greed.

The villagers' relentless ascent continued, oblivious to the mounting danger. The Mountain, ravaged by their greed, began to crumble further. "Strange crevasses were opening up everywhere, that each step was setting off a mudslide, some of which were sweeping even

the Anthropoi away” (25). Yet, driven by a desperate desire for wealth and perhaps a twisted sense of vengeance, the villagers pressed on with renewed vigor. They even forged alliances with the remaining Anthropoi, sharing resources and knowledge. This newfound unity, however, was born out of expediency rather than genuine reconciliation.

Through their combined observations, they discovered a horrifying truth that “their Mountain could support only a small number of climbers” (26). The Anthropoi's exploitation had irreparably damaged the Mountain, causing the ice to melt and threatening to drown the Valley below. This revelation served as a stark reminder of the Anthropoi's deception. They had positioned themselves as superior beings, possessing “Universal ideas” in contrast to the “local superstitious beliefs and false perceptions” of the villagers (26). They had ridiculed the villagers’ “inherited ideas” about the sacredness of the Great Mahaparat, dismissing them as “ignorant” and practitioners of “pagan superstition.” The Anthropoi had instilled in the villagers a belief that their “Adepts had always said, by listening carefully and using not our brains but the soles of our feet?” (27). This manipulation blinded the villagers to the true consequences of their actions and the imminent ecological disaster they were perpetuating. The Anthropoi, ever the masters of manipulation, shifted the blame for the unfolding disaster onto the villagers themselves. The Anthropoi, claiming their inherent superiority, asserted that the villagers should blindly follow their example. They emphasized their own knowledge and expertise, dismissing the villagers’ ways as inferior by saying that If they observe them cautiously enough, then the villagers “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” (29). This blatant gaslighting served to absolve themselves of responsibility and further control the villagers.

The villagers, trapped on the lower slopes, bore the brunt of the avalanches triggered by the Anthropoi's reckless ascent. Their complaints were met with further accusations that if they had not been so sluggish in starting the ascent and “if you hadn't let the foolish ways of your ancestors hold you back, you too would have been higher up. There is nothing for you to do now but accept your lot” (30). This self-serving rhetoric highlighted the Anthropoi's complete disregard for the villagers' well-being and their unwavering commitment to self-preservation at any cost. Facing this unrelenting manipulation, the villagers finally realized the futility of arguing with their oppressors. They understood that even those leading them “did not in their hearts, care about the Great Mountain at all; it had never held any meaning for them. the only thing they really cared about was being higher on the slope...” (30) to avoid the impending disaster and secure their own share of the Mountain's riches. Anthropoi's “racially insensitive and culturally oblivious reveals a host of issues that challenges... (Roos and Hunt 4)” including their blatant manipulation and self-serving agenda that expose the dangers of unchecked power and the devastating consequences of prioritizing self-preservation over collective well-being.

Faced with the impending disaster and the undeniable failure of their ascent, the villagers found solace in a bitter realization. They understood that their traditional beliefs,

dismissed as “false” by the Anthropei, held truth. They had to admit that the Mountain was not merely a resource to be exploited but a living entity they had disregarded. The villagers knew that expecting the climbers to change their ways was futile, and even their own desire to turn back was thwarted by their kin in the Valley, who forced them to continue. With a heavy heart, they resigned themselves to their fate, knowing each step was a march towards their doom. This tragic turn of events underscores the dangers of prioritizing greed and immediate gain over the preservation of the natural world and the wisdom embedded in Indigenous knowledge systems.

Driven to the brink of disaster, the climbers were forced to confront the consequences of their actions. They realized that extracting riches from the Mountain without causing catastrophic avalanches and landslides was impossible. In a moment of despair, they finally acknowledged a sliver of truth in the villagers’ beliefs that “there was some wisdom in your beliefs after all” (34). In a desperate attempt to understand the Mountain’s wrath, they pleaded with the villagers to share their ancient stories and songs, hoping to determine if the Mountain was truly alive. This marked a significant shift from their earlier dismissal of indigenous knowledge as “idiotic, superstitious, unreasonable.” The text also “deconstructs any simple opposition between tradition and modernity, or discrete oriental and occidental cultures” (Robert 14). Despite the failure of their own advanced technology and expertise, Anthropei were not ready to accept full responsibility. They still viewed the Mountain as a resource to be controlled, albeit with a newfound respect for its power.

The Adept’s response, however, exposed the true depth of their arrogance. Her furious rebuke challenged their self-serving perspective. She emphasized that their actions stemmed from a fundamental lack of understanding and respect for the Mountain’s living essence. The climbers, despite their desperate pleas, had failed to grasp the true lesson the Mountain was trying to teach them. The climbers’ belated recognition of indigenous wisdom underscores the limitations of human knowledge and the destructive consequences of approaching the natural world with a mindset of domination and exploitation. Thus, the text is, in a sense, what Edward Said describes in *Orientalism* as a text that “can create not only knowledge but also the very reality they appear to describe” (Said 94), and Ghosh’s fable does so remarkably.

Conclusion

The fable concludes with an open invitation for the reader to engage with its multifaceted message. By avoiding a definitive interpretation, it empowers individuals to connect the narrative to their own experiences and understanding of the world. This resonates with the fable’s commentary on pressing environmental and social issues. The text’s refusal to assign blame across social classes or hierarchies underscores the universality of ecological consequences. It compels us to acknowledge our collective responsibility for mitigating environmental crises, recognizing that no one is spared when nature retaliates. “It also tends to foreground its commitment to an earth-centered ethics of care and imagine alternatives to the destructive behaviors and attitude that underlie environmental damage” (James and Morel 2). This call for collective action echoes the growing need for ecological solidarity.

Furthermore, the story emphasizes the urgent need to reevaluate our relationship with the environment. The dismissal of indigenous knowledge by the Anthropoi serves as a stark reminder of the consequences of ignoring traditional wisdom rooted in respect for the natural world. The fable's connection to narrative ecology reinforces this message, highlighting "the powerful tides of climate change" (Pai 2) and the power of storytelling to explore our relationship with nature and foster a sense of ecological responsibility. It has been acknowledged by literary critics and readers across the globe that Ghosh's Literary inventiveness, with its clandestine agenda of social and environmental encouragement, is imaginative and serves as "a catalyst for social action and exploratory literary analysis into a full-fledged form of engaged cultural critique" (Huggan and Tiffin 12). In essence, this fable offers no simple moral pronouncements. Instead, it challenges us to reimagine our relationship with the environment, listen to the stories we have long ignored, and embrace a collective responsibility for mitigating environmental damage. It is a powerful reminder that the fate of our planet and ourselves are inextricably linked.

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