

Human Dominance or Human Vulnerability?: Reviewing Amitav Ghosh's *The Living Mountain: a Fable for Our Times*

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Abstract

The term 'Anthropocene' – the human-dominated epoch has emphasised the evolution of human beings as the dominating species causing the environmental changes and affecting the current climate crisis. The proposal of the Anthropocene as the new geological epoch integrally entangles the human world with the geophysical world, insisting that human history can hardly be separated from environmental history. Realising that both worlds are entangled, it underpins an environmental consciousness among environmental thinkers. Their consciousness rests on their understanding of human beings' vulnerability to being intertwined with the fragile ecosystem. In this review, I attempt to place Amitav Ghosh's *The Living Mountain: a Fable for Our Times* (2022) within Anthropocene discourses which consider human beings as the dominating species in the current epoch, while remaining vulnerable to their destructive activities.

Keywords: Anthropocene, climate change, environment, human beings, mountain

Introduction

Ever since Atmospheric Chemist, Paul Crutzen and Biologist, Eugene Stoermer introduced the term 'Anthropocene,' (2000) it has intrigued the global intelligentsia. 'Anthropocene' referred to as the 'geology of mankind' (Crutzen 23) indicates the present epoch is human-dominated. Paul Crutzen insists upon the escalating human effect on the "global environment" (23), thereby converging human history and environmental history. Alluding the geological epoch to humankind suggests an indispensable combination of physical science and social science, as

humankind supposedly is the primary geo-physical factor behind the planetary climate and environmental change. The claim of humans as the dominant actant impacting the global environment attracts academics across disciplines and also those writers concerned with human-induced climate change over several decades. Amitav Ghosh is one such author who has marked his position as a prominent discussant of the environmental crisis. Aware of and awakened to climate change, his enunciations regarding the planetary crisis have invigorated interests among his readers about the most important issue of the present times. In *The Great Derangement* (2016), a work of non-fiction, Ghosh extensively expresses his concern over climate calamity and interrogates the absence of the issue of climate change in what is recognised as 'serious fiction' (16). This concealment or evasion of the serious issue of the climate crisis from the dominant modes of art and literature eventually runs the risk of preventing “people from realizing their plight” (17). In Ghosh’s view, the lack of representation of climate change in art and literature obfuscates the current reality and for future generations probably there will remain no trace of the world before its geomorphological alterations (17).

The Living Mountain: A Fable for the Anthropocene

Acknowledging that his earlier works address ecological calamity only obliquely, Ghosh preoccupies his most recent works – *The Gun Island* (2019), *The Nutmeg’s Curse* (2021) and *The Living Mountain* (2022) with the burning issue of environmental crisis directly, marking his authorial presence within the avenue of Climate Change Literature – now recognised as a distinct genre with the publication of several such fictions and non-fictions concerning the planetary climate change. Ghosh’s latest work – *The Living Mountain: a Fable for Our Times* (2022) is designed as a fable - as the subtitle suggests - to convey a moral lesson related to the significance of indigenous wisdom integrally associated with people's immediate environment. The narrative

harps upon the concept of ‘Anthropocene’ as its point of anchorage, as it unfolds with the author and his ‘book club buddy,’ (1) Maansi’s curious navigation into the newly introduced word ‘Anthropocene.’ The idea of the ‘Anthropocene’ centring on human beings as the driving force behind the ecological crisis is explicated through a fabular story of village people residing high up the Himalayas. At the very outset, an introspection into ‘Anthropocene’ leads Maansi, a Nepal-born sales manager at a clothing store, to a book that tells its readers about “some poor people on a remote island who suffer a terrible fate” (5). Maansi’s reading of the book churns up a mnemonic story from her days as a child in the Himalayan country of Nepal in the form of a dream. The story is about the ‘Mahaparbat’ or ‘Great Mountain’ “overlooking [their] Valley” (7). The story that unfolds tells the saga of modern times where so-called modernity undermines the indigenous wisdom, encroaching upon the indigenous space and disregarding their environment – the ‘Mahaparbat’ in the current narrative.

The Valley despite having warring communities is thriving on the ‘bindinglaw’ – no one is ever, “on any account, to set foot on the slopes of the Great Mountain” (7). They have revered the Great Mountain with the belief that it is living and has cared for them, manifesting its care by showering the Valley with its blessings of the ‘Magic Tree,’ (8) producing miraculous things. The Valley that has resisted the intrusion of foreigners over centuries is compelled to pull down its guard before the Anthropoi, curious about the Valley and the Mahaparbat overlooking it. ‘Anthropoi,’ the word suggestively seems to be derived from the word ‘Anthropocene’ – the human-dominated epoch. ‘Anthropoi’ then heralds the new era, as the Adepts of the Valley enunciate after laying their ears and feet on the ground – “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 ‘Anthropoi’ eventually transforms the Valley by subjugating

the indigenous people, donning upon them an era of Anthropoi-colonisation. Anthropoi coaxing the Valley people into complying with them and the Valley people not resisting them from exploiting the mountain resources is a metaphorical retelling of the history of colonisation and imperialist environmental exploitation, a subject that has formed his recent work of non-fiction *The Nutmeg's Curse* (2021). Soon the 'Anthropoi' enslave the local inhabitants, forcing them to be a part of their assault on the Great Mountain. Watching the ascent of the Mountain, "inflamed [the] appetites" (19) of the indigenous people or the 'Varvaroi' as 'Kraani' - the most abled soldiers among 'Anthropoi' - call them. Burning in exulting desire to climb the Mountain the villagers turn against each other, as "a great orgy of bloodletting filled" the Valley, "bringing slaughter and destruction on a scale far beyond that which the 'Anthropoi' had inflicted on us in the past" (21). Eventually, the 'Varvaroi' and the 'Anthropoi' come down on the same plane – both are the assaulters of the Great Mountain destabilising it, causing landslides and avalanches. The indigenous wisdom of considering the Mountain sacred is dismissed as mere superstition, and what then matters is the exploitation of the Mountain for its riches. Despite their initial resistance and their centuries-old reverence for the Mountain, the 'Varvaroi' give in to the lure of modernity and greed, thereby assuming an integral position in the history of environmental exploitation. As Ghosh in *The Great Derangement* opines, "every human being who has ever lived has played a part in making us the dominant species on this planet, and in this sense, every human being, past and present, has contributed to the present cycle of climate change" (Ghosh 115). The assaulting pressure exerted by the 'Varvarois' on the Mountain is greater than that caused by the 'Anthropoi' as they are equipped with advanced technology and have the knowledge of treading the Mountain lightly, hence exerting less pressure on it. The Varvaroi's loss of reverence for the Mountain compels the living Mountain to react to teach them a lesson.

The 'Varvarois' dismissing their old stories as "foolish and fantastical" and believing that those stories have "no place in the Age of the Anthropoi" (34) ensure their downfall.

Conclusion: A lesson learnt?

Ghosh weaves a fable for the new epoch 'Anthropocene' as the Anthropocene narrative "recognise(s) that climate change derives from human activities" and these activities are "viewed as expressions of innate traits of our species" (Hornborg 61). But the dominant Anthropocene narrative has come under a critical enquiry for its homogenisation of the human species. Human activities inducing climate change may vary among communities depending on their socio-economic placements and geographical positions, indicating unequal human contribution to the climate crisis and concomitant unequal human subjectivity to the crisis. However, Ghosh here seemingly brings forth a narrative to show that every community has its share of contribution to the current planetary crisis regardless of their socio-economic and geographical differences. Giving indigenous wisdom away to modern technology manifests that modern civilisation is engulfing primitive and green ways of living to exploit environmental resources. In their urge to master the environment, human beings have ignored the adverse consequences that inevitably will grapple them. While Anthropocene discourse affirms human agency as the pervasive force behind climatic changes in the current times, it simultaneously warns human beings of their vulnerability to being entangled with the environment they assault. This is spelt out through the angry cry of the only existing Adept at the end of the narrative, "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" (35)? The lesson the Great Mountain intends to teach human beings is that environment is not to be mastered and to be treated as an object subjected to human whims. The relentless assault on the

environment will eventually destabilise the ecosystem, throwing every species, including *homo sapiens* off its balance. Human beings can hardly escape the ecological avalanche in the eventual times.

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Bionote

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