

A Critical Study of Ecological Damage and Cultural Displacement in Amitav Ghosh's *The Living Mountain: A Fable for Our Times*

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Abstract

Environmental degradation is intricately connected with the destruction of indigenous lands. Colonial and capitalist exploitation of the natural environment leads to the subsequent displacement of indigenous communities. Amitav Ghosh's *The Living Mountain- A Fable For Our Times* (2023), set in a remote village in the Himalayan region, delves into the interconnectedness of nature and culture, where damage to the land causes serious disruption in the lives of these tribes. Ghosh presents the landscape as a cultural symbol that transcends a geographical entity. The tribes experience cultural displacement as a result of ecological damage. This paper posits that the destruction of landscapes results in the erosion of traditional knowledge systems and cultural identities that are deeply rooted in the environment they inhabit. This paper asserts that the postcolonial concern for place, when read from an ecological perspective, insinuates that the loss of ecological balance that disrupts the living conditions of the native people, creates cultural displacement. The paper has adopted an interpretive and analytical approach to understand how Ghosh has represented ecological impairment and cultural displacement in his narrative. The study also shows the importance of biocentric development to preserve both ecological balance and indigenous culture.

Keywords: Colonialism, Eco-criticism, Cultural displacement, Indigenous land, Development, Ecological Damage

Introduction

In our world today one of the biggest challenges of human life is ecological degradation. Amitav Ghosh has been a dominant voice in Indian Writing, to address his concerns regarding ecological issues, climate change, habitat loss along with the plight of the marginalised that these rampant ecological catastrophes and developmental plans result to. Unfortunately, 21st-century capitalistic development continues the legacy of colonialism. Both his fiction and non-fiction explore problems of conserving biodiversity and the plundering of natural resources. In his writings, Ghosh also implies that ecological damage is interlinked with cultural displacement.

In *Nutmeg's Curse*, Ghosh writes about the colonial era's exploitation of nutmeg spices and other resources that damaged both the environment and cultural customs of the place. The exploitation of natural resources damages social structure and cultural identities of people that rely on it.

Therefore, this paper studies how ecological deterioration interweaves cultural shift and rootlessness among indigenous populations taking postcolonial ecocriticism as its analytical framework. Even though the central premise of post-colonial criticism and ecocriticism are different, the former concerning human-centric approach and the latter with earth-centric approach, both are connected by the issue of place. Postcolonialism examines the issues related to a colonised place, while ecocriticism critically studies the conservation of a place and its landscape. What brings them closer is that they both promote decentralisation, prefer local autonomy, and challenge the Western binaries. Hence, postcolonial ecocriticism provides a useful analytical methodology to understand environmentalism in a developing country that has undergone years of imperialism.

In the form of a dream fable, Ghosh connects the story of colonialism with 21st-century capitalism. The story starts with a discussion of the word "Anthropocene" between Maansi and her friend from her book club. The story then becomes a dream fable as Maansi starts to narrate her "horrible dream". Her dream is about a valley inhabited by warring tribes and how their culture is challenged after some strangers decide to arrive.

Interconnection of Land, Ecology and Culture

Indigenous culture shares a symbiotic relationship with their land and nature, promoting a culture of ecological sustainability and harmony. This is evident in their traditional knowledge, which gets transmitted to generations through storytelling, music, dance, song, myths, and folklore. In this knowledge, there exists a consciousness and sense of belonging towards the place of living. Personal and social identity are embedded in the physical environment. Attachment to their place of living, serves as a motivation behind protecting the place. Thus, Indigenous culture in a way promotes the principle of deep ecology, which gives equal importance to all entities, resisting the 'othering' of the non-human. The creative art forms that the native communities engage in foster fellow feelings towards their land. Narrating her dream, Maansi says- "our ancestors had told that of all the world's mountains ours was the most alive, that it would protect us and look after us-but only on one condition that we told stories about it. And sang about it, and danced for it-but always from a distance"(Ghosh 7).

In her article "Violating the Ecotopian Promise: Reading Colonial Extraction in Amitav Ghosh's *The Living Mountain*", Sharma mentions, the 'distance' is a mark of respect that indigenous people had for the Mahaparbat. They abided by the laws created by their ancestors that barred them from setting foot on the slopes of the Great Mountain, disobeying which the mountain would stop protecting them. In Ghosh's narrative, the valley people

espoused an animistic faith where they believed the Great Mountain to be their preserver and provider. The magic tree provided them nourishment with fruits and herbs, grew rare mushrooms, and kept insects away. Gary Synder has observed that for native cultures, living in a place means to be aware of ancestral knowledge and their ways of living (Rangarajan 66). It is also deeply spiritual, as evident in the story. They believed that their mountain was alive. The Adepts felt a spiritual connection with the Great Mountain as they danced to its glory. The inhabitants followed the culture and tradition of their elder people but most traditional knowledge remained with the women. Vandana Shiva asserts the eco-sensibility of the Himalayan women farmers, compared with the male farmers, saying “women’s work in the forest facilitates the process” of a sustainable food production system (Shiva 62).

The valley people remained united against any outsiders from the lowlands who were prohibited from entering the valley’s ground. This helped them maintain a close-knit community that, despite the inter-communal dissension, maintained a feeling of contentment among themselves and nurtured reverence towards their land. Their culture was confronted after curious strangers arrived to familiarise themselves with the valley after hearing about the special properties of the nuts.

Erosion of Land, Ecology and Culture

Ashcroft et al., propounds that concern for place and displacement is one significant feature of post-colonial literature. An active sense of place can be eroded by cultural denigration, which is, “the conscious and unconscious oppression of the indigenous personality and culture by a supposedly superior racial or cultural model”(9). This is understandable in the fable when, with the forceful arrival of the outsiders, their land transformed, threatening their survival. These outsiders—Anthropoi came with an imperialist mindset—to conquer the mountain, extract its riches, and subjugate the native populace. They arrived under the pretence to gain knowledge of the valley, but soon the Magic Tree attracted them as they discerned potential for commercial profits. This prompted them to apply brute force with their terrible weapons and soldiers, the Kraani, skilled in the art of war. They invaded the portcullis and imprisoned all the native guards who were protecting the valley. They declared that they would conquer the Great Mountain. They justified it, saying the natives had no knowledge of the mountains’ riches. All attempts at resistance were crushed by the Anthropoi and their soldiers-Kraani. They first instilled in the natives’ minds that their traditional wisdom is backward and irrational, their rituals are nonsensical, and they should follow the Anthropoi. These created in the natives a sense of inferiority, and the tribes started to believe the Anthropoi’s as their superiors. To establish stronger control, they dismissed the elder-people and their knowledge. They replaced them with new people who adopted the coloniser’s behaviours. Thus, created a new world, suppressing indigenous culture and their identity. Disconnection from their land created a loss of sense of self among the natives. As for the native culture, their cultural identity is embedded in a sense of belongingness with the land. Ashcroft et al., states, colonisation of land and enslavement lead to cultural displacement and a ‘crisis in self-image’ in the colonised community (9). The gender

dynamics that existed prior to the advent of the colonisers, regressed. Earlier, women were considered to be the custodians of most knowledge, but with this new patriarchal culture taking form, women's place was disregarded and dismissed. The post-colonial identity crisis emerged as the relation between human and land started to shake. They took control of the existing culture and replaced it with an alien one. Edward Said has explained this process as "a confirmation of the dominating culture and its "naturalization"" (Said 145-146).

The narrator says-

"Next they imprisoned our adepts. Forbade all 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 16-17).

The subjugated and suppressed natives were manipulated into accepting their inferior position, debarred of all their rights to their place, and reduced to forced labourers by the soldiers, while the colonisers continued their expedition and extortion of the mountain. This spectacle of power took the natives by wonder and they wanted to imitate them. Gradually, the mountain, which was once respected, became an object of desire to be conquered. The tradition of storytelling promoting ecological harmony and sustenance changed into stories about the ascent of Anthropoi.

Their soldiers degraded the natives, calling them Varvaroi, saying that their bodies were not suitable to climb, they were weak, and everything in their culture was savage. Thus, the natives became the 'other' in their own land. As, the hunger for material riches captured the locals' minds, and they too joined in the race towards conquering the mountain. This new culture was filled with wars, power struggles, and a hierarchy system to oppress others. By the time the Varvaroi started climbing, much damage had already been done to the mountain. Following the Anthropoi, Varvaroi waited to summit the mountain. A culture of symbiotic existence with the ecosystem that existed and upheld, was removed by the western model of progress and economic pursuit. Even after various environmental disasters, considerable damage, and loss of lives, it was not possible for the natives to stop and turn back from this obsession. Such is the result of an unethical development. The loss of lives became only numbers, for now, climbing up the mountain became linked to their survival. It gave them a newfound identity, and they were trying to hold onto it.

Dismissing the sacredness of the mountains, and revoking them as pagan superstitions, the colonisers created a cultural vacuum within the natives. This spoiled the harmonious relationship that they shared with their land and its non-human inhabitants. The fable takes a stand against Eurocentric rationality, which looks down upon emotional and spiritual connections with land. The fable is indeed of our times, as we are witnessing the occurrence of increasing amounts of disasters in the Himalayan and adjacent regions.

Climate activist Sonam Wangchuk recently launched the ‘People for Himalaya’ campaign to address these issues. According to reports by the *Deccan Herald*, in an online press conference he discussed about protecting the Himalayas and the local farming communities from the disasters caused by its over-exposure to corporatization over the years in the name of development and pilgrim tourism. The article also mentions several activists protesting against excessive mining in the Himalayan rivers (Trivedi). These ecological problems affect the local communities the most. Beyond economic, political, and social problems, it victimises them of cultural dissonance. The book is also a discourse on environmental refugee. After causing ecological damage, in name of conservation the natives and poor are removed from their own dwelling places. Dominant powers take control over the land and its resources, denying the natives their rights to their land. Rob Nixon states that the livelihood of these “ecosystem people” depend on the well-being of the ecosystem (22). When the Anthropoi ask the Varvaroi to not overcrowd and limit their ascent, it becomes a problem for them. Ramachandra Guha has mentioned about third world environmentalism, arguing that in developing countries where there are issues of poverty, hunger, and homelessness, we cannot think of environmental conservation in the same light as in developed countries. The policies that are put forward for conservation projects considers the interests of the elites and international environmentalist organizations. But these threaten the survival of local population as it diverts focus from other environmental problems like fuel, food, water shortages, pollution (Guha 75). This is the reason why a Western model of development does not fit in a developing country. Postcolonial ecocriticism is not anti-development but vouches for a ‘biocentric’ way of development that does not demand the cost of the lives of natives.

Guha also mentions that the Eastern spiritual philosophy, especially in native cultures, has been following a conservation model through their belief in animism and nature worship, much before the introduction of deep ecology. It is the industrial-minded ‘ecological imperialism’ (Crosby) that creates this binary between nature and culture.

Resistance and Agency

As the Varvaroi started to climb, they realised their strength, and hence they began to resist the dominance of Kraani soldiers. This started a battle between Varvaroi and the powerful Anthropoi. Khanal and Gupta in their article, “*Exploring the Nexus of Colonialism, Indigenous Knowledge and Climate Action in Amitav Ghosh’s The Living Mountain- A fable for our Times*”, explore the relation between colonialism and climate change through a postcolonial ecocritical approach, asserting that in the story the native inhabitants are committed to protect nature and hence they try to resist the merchants (7-8). The Anthropoi left behind in the battle of climbing made the Varvaroi realise that it’s the traditional knowledge and forgotten tales that have given them sustenance. As they grew in numbers they became equal in strength but this time they saw some Anthropoi has stopped climbing. The kraani were now forcing these Anthropoi to climb further as they were forcing the Varvaroi. Ghosh presents the colonial mindset in the era of globalisation, the Kraani are the

neo-colonists, the global elite businessmen and corporatists who continue to hegemonise both urban and rural people, taking over their land for material resources. They exploit the environment and disturb the natural balance of the place. Then they leave that exploited place to search for a new one. The marginalised people left behind become victim of the catastrophe and its aftereffects. Rob Nixon states this process as 'slow violence' (Nixon 2). He explains slow violence is the kind of violence "that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all" (Nixon 2). Ecological damage that leads to cultural erosion is a kind of slow violence.

When the Anthropoi were put under the same severity by the Kraani soldiers, brought the Varvaroi and Anthropoi together; they "joined hands and embraced: no longer were we Anthropoi and Varvaioi—we were one" (Ghosh 33). The Anthropoi began to acknowledge the indigenous culture and their belief, that "there was some wisdom in your beliefs after all."

They ask the natives about their stories, but unfortunately, the epistemic violence made them forget their own stories, dances, and songs. This is how a dominating culture hegemonises and makes existing culture subordinate. They too had come to believe that their traditions "had no place in the Age of Anthropoi". Said writes, "In the context of imperialism, culture is used to justify and maintain domination over other peoples and cultures" (Said 3). Colonisers create a binary between the "civilized" West and the "barbaric" East, promoting their cultural values and suppressing the culture of the colonised. The natives realised that their mountains have stopped communicating with them thus, Ghosh insinuates a loss of culture that took place with the change in ecological demography. They realise that these colonisers did not understand the sacredness of their trees and mountain; "it had never held any meaning for them. The only thing they cared about was being higher on the slope than we were.." (Ghosh 30). But for the valley people, the mountain is their cultural heritage. After some frantic search, they met an old woman who had been Adept once. Her dance restored their connection with mountain. This astonished the Anthropoi and they cried out,

"You were right! The mountain is alive! We can feel its heartbeat under our feet. This means we must look after the poor, dear mountain; we must tend to it, we must care for it." (Ghosh 35)

To this the old woman filled with rage, shouted that humans are not the masters of mountains. Mountains are not helpless but humans are. The Mountain is not a child that needs protection, mountain needs to be respected so that it can give us the protection.

The fable ends with a rhetorical question, thrown directly to the modern world-

"Have you understood nothing of what it has been trying to teach you? Nothing at all?" (Ghosh 35)

The fable questions conservation policies and ecological mismanagement. It is an urge to revitalise the old eastern philosophy of biocentric vision and to check on the developmental models. At the end it is the traditional dance and song that restored the harmony. The last retort of the old woman is an allegory of indigenous people taking back their authority and showing everyone the right path towards sustainability.

Conclusion

In recent years, the preservation and conservation of indigenous communities have garnered attention, as their knowledge can be of use in mitigating the present debate on development and conservation. Amitav Ghosh's *The Living Mountain* considers the environment and crisis of unique Himalayan ecology in the text. It addresses the changes brought to the harmonious equilibrium by some foreign invaders. Capitalist forces with their unhinged material obsession erupt destruction on both the natural ecosystem and the indigenous populace. With the new model of development, ecological degradation takes place which creates cultural erosion among indigenous people and spoils their relationship with their land. Ghosh creates a literary space, proposing attention to traditional knowledge that includes the local practice of sustainable living, water management, farming and soil conservation. Western idea of development erodes both nature and culture. For maintaining a biocentric model of development which is the need of the hour, we should look into the indigenous practices and knowledge so that their culture is preserved and we can achieve sustainable development.

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