

## **Imagining Apocalypse Through the Prism of Spiritual Crisis in *The Living Mountain***

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### Abstract:

As several observers have pointed out, a common topic in environmental debate is the apocalypse. The word “apocalypse,” which originally applied to any kind of divine revelation, literally means “to uncover or disclose.” Despite having a genealogical connection to the Christian tradition, historians started using the term more liberally in the 20th century to refer to a variety of different religious and secular movements. Similar to other apocalyptic ideologies throughout religious history, environmental apocalypticism is defined by a set of common ideas regarding the past, present, and future. The narrative, which recounts humanity’s fall from ecological grace, can be divided into three acts. The first two are concerned with history, while the last act concerns the future. Act I presents mankind as existing in perfect harmony with the natural world and, in many cases, as considering it to be sacred and alive. Act II describes how people started to rebel against the natural world. All of the world’s issues stem from people’s anthropocentric, individualistic mind set. Due to ignorance, greed, arrogance, and the conviction that humans are essentially different from or superior to “nature,” as well as a desire to conquer the “feminine” natural world and gain overall control over it, humans started modifying nature to suit their needs at the expense of other living creatures. Act III opens in the twentieth century, as pollution, biodiversity loss, overpopulation, deforestation, climate change, and other environmental woes start to manifest as the consequences of humanity’s actions. All of these changes are said to be the catalyst for an ecological disaster that will “end the world as we know it” and have apocalyptic consequences. Amitav Ghosh’s brief work, *The Living Mountains: A Fable of Our Times*, is less than the length of a novella and covers a variety of subjects, such as colonialism and the ensuing exploitation of people and resources, the devaluing of traditional knowledge, de-sacralisation and disillusionment, consumerism and greed. Amitav Ghosh vividly depicts the saga of humanity’s reckless attempts to reach forbidden peaks, sending it hurtling towards environmental apocalypse in *The Living Mountain*. The novella serves as a warning about how human exploitation of nature has resulted in an environmental collapse.

The paper examines how environmental storytelling, as a component of indigenous orality, is reinvented by Ghosh in his latest fiction, *The Living Mountain: A Fable for Our Times* (2022), which tends to view the Anthropocene through the prism of spiritual crisis. It draws on the insightful studies of the ecological aesthetics of stories and storytelling and the apocalyptic imagination.

Key Words: Apocalypse, Anthropocene, Exploitation, Environment, Spiritual Crisis

As several observers have pointed out, a common topic in environmental debate is the apocalypse. The word “apocalypse,” which was originally applied to any kind of divine revelation, literally means “to uncover or disclose.” Despite having a genealogical connection to the Christian tradition, historians started using the term more liberally in the 20th century to refer to a variety of different religious and secular movements. It is noteworthy, however, that the use of science has not completely eliminated religion. Therefore, it is appropriate to think of environmental apocalypticism as a syncretic tradition that includes both religious and secular elements to variable degrees rather than as a strictly secular phenomena, even while it largely draws from science and typically affirms human responsibility.

Similar to other apocalyptic ideologies throughout religious history, environmental apocalypticism is defined by a set of common ideas regarding the past, present, and future. The narrative, which recounts humanity’s fall from ecological grace, can be divided into three acts. The first two are concerned with history, while the last act concerns the future. Act I presents mankind as existing in perfect harmony with the natural world and, in many cases, as considering it to be sacred and alive. Act II describes how people started to rebel against the natural world. All of the world’s issues stem from people’s anthropocentric, individualistic mind set. Due to ignorance, greed, arrogance, and the conviction that humans are essentially different from or superior to “nature,” as well as a desire to conquer the “feminine” natural world and gain overall control over it, humans started modifying nature to suit their needs at the expense of other living creatures. Act III opens in the twentieth century, as pollution, biodiversity loss, overpopulation, deforestation, climate change, and other environmental woes start to manifest as the consequences of humanity’s actions. All of these changes are said to be the catalyst for an ecological disaster that will have apocalyptic consequences.

The Anthropocene and Ecocritical movements are dividing the modern era, and finding a middle ground between them is challenging. If anthropocene focuses on the human

centeredness, ecocriticism stresses the necessity to maintain ecosystem as it is the most essential objective. Speaking about the term ‘anthropocene’ Swarnalatha Rangarajan says that:

The term indicates a new geological era replacing the Holocene in which human agency has become a significant geophysical force at par with natural forces, modifying the world’s ecosystem with a greater rapidity than witnessed in any earlier period of human history. Finding new ways of responding to this planetary tragedy poses both a conceptual and representational challenge to human scholarship. (1)

As the transition of anthropocentrism is linked to the advancement of culture and civilization, re-establishing values that safeguard the environment is a moral obligation of anthropologists. Moreover the shifting structure of the environment challenges us to reconsider and reframe our understanding of nature. Ecological crises frequently result from cultural crises. The “Great Turning” is the term used by Joanna Macy to describe this deliberate shift from a paradigm of unchecked resource exploitation to a recovery paradigm based on the idea of a society that sustains life. The major ethical discussions and debates that occurred in the fields of philosophy, literature, science, and culture during the 1960s and 1970s show that public discourses on the environment, which are mostly expressed in legal terms, are insufficient to affect this shift on their own. Hence, virtue ethics is essential to appropriate environmental action because it enables people to shift from anthropocentric viewpoints to the forefront of change, where they perceive themselves as collaborators rather than conquerors in the logical domain of the natural world. Developing a critical awareness of human attitudes that deplete and pollute the earth is a common concern of both environmental ethics and ecocriticism, despite the fact that environmental ethics is a subfield of applied philosophy that focuses more on human interaction with the environment than with literary texts and other works of art.

Thus climate change arises as a result of existing institutions rather than being a distinct issue to be handled or resolved within them. While the narrative styles discussed in climate fiction place an emphasis on continuity and progressive evolution, apocalyptic narratives are characterized by violent rupture. Therefore, while delving deeply into degradation; environmental authors will sometimes imply that calamity is just around the corner.

Indian author of English literature Amitav Ghosh is well known for his literary fiction, which is firmly based in historical and geographical study. Concerns about the condition of the environment are consistently brought up by Amitav Ghosh's work. He is the first English author to win the Jnanpith Award in 2018. *The Living Mountain* (2022), his most recent book, portrays the horrifying reality of the ecosystem's complete collapse, which is being gradually destroyed by humanity. Ghosh's book, on the other hand, stands out for giving climate justice, a subject that is frequently overlooked in climate fiction. The intersections between climate change and other domains of political activity and resistance are examined in the book. The narrative of the book also revolves around the fight against oligarchy and ethno-nationalism and the efforts to fairly share wealth and political power. The protagonists acquire a critical perspective on the institutional framework that unfairly distributes the effects of climate change as well as its structural and cultural causes. This temporal frame of reference reveals surprising dependencies and inheritances, chains of cause and effect that extend beyond lifetimes and across borders.

Profit-driven capitalist societies had been systematically robbing the planet and its surroundings. Although the imperial purpose of human-centeredness represents a tremendous accomplishment in all conceivable stages of development, it frequently disregards the need to preserve the environment. Global repercussions resulted from the shift in imperialism and the neo-colonial drive to assert hegemonic dominance over underdeveloped nations. Through the fictitious scenario of *The Living Mountain*, Amitav Ghosh revisits the anthropocene against the backdrop of native ecology motivated by environmental consciousness and the aspiration for a better future. The book emphasizes how crucial it is for people to realize that, in order to remain on Earth, they must drastically alter their lifestyles, re-evaluate their values, and embrace ecology.

*The Living Mountain: A Fable for Our Times*' narrative structure combines a blend of realism and mythology to give the reader the singular experience of travelling back in time to earlier and more recent eras of discovery. The two distinct images of the mountain on the first few pages capture its vitality. If one drawing depicts a visible mountain with a river flowing through it and a tree, another sketch displays the mountain's hidden eye, which is capable of perceiving everything. Thus, the two drawings blend mythology and realism to support the idea that there is a secret mystery underneath widely held beliefs about the real world. The search of the anonymous narrator and his online book club companion Maansi for the phrase 'anthropocene' lead us into this gripping tale:

‘Anthropocene.’

I rolled the word gingerly around my tongue. ‘What on earth does it mean?’

‘I don’t know,’ Maansi confessed. ‘But I need to find out. My company’s adopted it as its fashion theme for the year.’

‘But Maansi,’ I protested. ‘It sounds like a made-up word. Do you even know how it’s pronounced?’

‘No,’ she said, ‘but we can easily find out.’(7-8)

Both Maansi and the narrator were perplexed by the pronunciation and literal meaning of the term “anthropocene,” and their quest to understand it is what gives this brief work its narrative framework. Ghosh demonstrates how concepts of respect, ownership, and accountability in the collective human conscience underpin our interaction with the natural world through this deceptively straightforward yet incisive parable. A dream or archetypal memory that can be understood as an allegory for a global environmental history is at the center of *The Living Mountain*. The book describes how the arrival of a new race, the Anthropoi, causes the peaceful existence of the indigenous Valley people, who live beneath the majestic Mahaparbat, a snow-capped mountain in the Himalayas, to be broken by the forced imposition of the capitalocene (The capitalocene is a proposed epoch in human history that focuses on the socioeconomic system that has allowed humans to exploit nature and human resources on a large scale. It’s an alternative to the anthropocene era):

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. We heeded our ancestors and kept away from this mountain. Even though we Valley People fought over many things, we were all in agreement on one matter: strangers would never be allowed to enter our Valley (10-11).

These kinds of stories and customs have assisted the indigenous people in safeguarding their cultural and environmental values for decades. Even though the Valley’s

residents were frequently at conflict with one another in the Maansi's narrative, they all held a deep reverence for the mountain that gave them sustenance. The Magic Trees, which the mountain nourished, gave them access to miraculously manufactured goods that they could not obtain elsewhere. As per the unwritten law of the Valley, the peasants exchanged these goods with the merchants who came from the town, but they were not permitted to go inside the valley or ascend the mountains. The valley people's existence had never been effortless, but their commitment to staying close to nature allowed them to continue living in harmony and tranquillity.

However a mysterious new kind of people known as the Anthropoi, forced their way into the Valley due to their fascination with the mystery surrounding the native region. The Anthropoi, with their sophisticated military equipment and helmeted warriors, conquer the Valley people because of their curiosity to discover more about the Valley and the Mahaparbat. This new age of imperialism brings about disastrous outcomes. By bringing up the "Law of the Valley" (12), the residents of the Valley attempt to dissuade the Anthropoi. They even forbid the throngs of Anthropoi from ascending and taking use of the mountain's wealth, but in spite of their heroic resistance, they are defeated, subjugated, and overpowered. The narrator asserts that some of them were drugged and "reduced to quiescence." The Anthropoi behave similarly to colonists who want to get to know their new area before claiming it.

The village elders are dismissed and the Adepts of the villages are forbidden by the Anthropoi from using their abilities. Their actual imperial goals are disclosed in the later sections, but by then, the people of the valley and the mountains had already suffered terrible repercussions for upsetting the natural order. Every sentry on the mountain was held captive by the Kraani, the Anthropoi army. Before making an effort to climb the mountain, the Anthropoi then carefully review all of the information that is currently known about it. They attempted to establish their dominance over the valley people by first frightening them and then making them feel "inferior," as opposed to acquiring them.

Only their capital-making motifs captivated the curiosity of the Anthropoi army. To accomplish this, they first destroyed the locals' social structure and replaced it with their own authoritative order, which gave them indirect authority over the native territory. The valley population's conditions were reduced to a "state of degradation and despair" (16) by such imperial motives. The valley people's attempt to respond to the Anthropoi army was

ineffective in the face of the colonial plans. While many of the villages were destroyed, the ones who remained were led astray to battle their own neighbours. The colonists' successful land-control tactics forced the valley's inhabitants to acknowledge that Anthropoi are "different species of being" (16).

These lines of demarcation give rise to binary classifications akin to haves and have not's. The Kraani's intrusion into the native culture and social structure, which they used to manipulate it in order to gain control, is a sign of their covert imperial capitalist intentions. The Anthropoi represent the pinnacle of colonialism, as they want to establish political, economic, and ecological dominance over territories occupied by other people. They are prepared to use extreme measures to undermine social norms and delegitimize indigenous authority in order to achieve it.

When the indigenous shifted their respect for the sacred Mountain to the foreign explorers, their attempt to disparage the ancient wisdom, rites, stories, and songs that honour the living Mahaparbat was successful. They have turned nature into a limitless resource that should supply them with everything, but they are unwilling to heed the tribe's age-old wisdom to preserve the land without infringing on it. By design, capitalism ignores how the earth's geological circumstances change and instead views nature as a reducible, controllable property. Consequently, the Valley people were degraded to the rank of varvaroi, the lesser ones, but they are still allowed to participate in some of the explorations:

Some of us Varvaroi witnessed the ascent more closely than the rest – they were the porters, the muleteers, the sherpas, all from the families of the chosen Elder man. The stories they told us about the ascent of the Anthropoi further inflamed our appetites. (19)

The peasants' respect for Mahaparbat diminishes as they see the Anthropoi ascend it. The idyllic notion of an eco-friendly lifestyle giving way to the predatory reality of capitalism threatens the existence of its people. The elders of the valley begin to be influenced by the Anthropoi's profit-driven goals as they determine their prospects of gaining financial advantage in the capitalist colonial missions. The elders considered the prospect of "usurping the Kraani's place" (19) as a result of the original culture's transition to Anthropocene values. The Mountain witnessed the Kraani of the Varvaroi supplanting the Kraani of Anthropoi. It was "another assault upon Mahaparbat" (21).

The Anthropoi advise the locals to abandon their purpose of exploitation in response to the unanticipated circumstances. However none stop climbing the mountain. As a result the mountain becomes destabilized. Unfortunately, their greed drives them forward, even if it leads to ruin, and neither the Anthropoi nor the native valley inhabitants can or will turn around. In the book *Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History and Crisis of Capitalism* (2016), Jason W Moore mentions that:

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

Jason Moore’s concern for Earth is symbolized by the chaotic state of Mahaparbat. Prior to their excursion, the locals observe that the once-holy site has become overrun with rubbish. The people of the valley put a lot of effort into reaching the cloud-wrapped pinnacle of the mountain, which the Anthropoi could not yet reach, although being aware of the condition that was damaging the environment. Native people purposefully choose to disregard the changes occurring to their country and way of life in order to increase their profit and money. The army of Anthropoi attempted to warn the locals about the growing weights that would cause the snow on the mountain to become unstable, “As a result, a series devastating landslides and avalanches had swept through our Valley, killing vast numbers of our fellow villagers” (23). The inhabitants living in the valley are terrified by the sudden trembling and heaving of the mountain, which causes landslides, avalanches, and rifts. They feel compelled to investigate the cause of these unexpected calamities.

This catastrophic encounter powerfully illustrates to them the dreadful transition of Earth into an irreversible condition of despair. The only aspect of nature that the aboriginal people knew was the tranquility of the mountain, not its wrath. However, the Anthropoi are also unwilling to give up on their profit-driven goals. Rather, they make an effort to learn more about the villagers’ inherited belief in the mountain’s sacredness from them. After the accusations of mutual pity between the Anthropoi and the indigenous subsided, the valley people stood by their decision to carry on with the exploration for the sake of the other villagers. The Anthropoi help the villagers in their attempt to defend themselves as they fear



similar tragedies in the future. The colonists were driven to look for indigenous assistance in order to restore natural equilibrium because of the ecological imbalance that had an impact on their life, "... no longer were we Anthropoi and Varvaroi – we were one" (30).

The newly established balance between the locals and the imperials encouraged the former to enlist the latter's assistance in revisiting their long-forgotten customs and legends. Eventually, the Anthropoi acknowledged that their stories were not based on the actuality of seeing life in mountains and trees, but rather on the notion that there are living mountains. After a long search, the Valley people and the Anthropoi locate the final Adept who can still execute the ritual dance and unveil the answers that the living Mountain hides. 'How dare you?' she cried. '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?' (31)

The book thus illustrates how the desire to copy and accept the superior way of life of the Anthropoi causes the native people to begin to see their own, naturally based society as worthless. The capitalists' initial perception of the Mountain as a free resource, followed by a recognition of the need for its protection, reflects their fundamental desire to dominate both the natural environment and the indigenous culture. At the end of the story, The Adept chastises all humans—exploiters and exploited alike—for robbing the environment in order to further their own capitalist interests. The aforementioned quotation's use of "masters," "plaything," and "child" highlights the fact that members of the anthropocene race believed themselves to be superior. However, nature possesses sufficient strength to reorganize the planetary shift. Fictional narratives possess the ability to persuade readers to reevaluate how they engage with their environment. The author provides readers with an alternative way of comprehending the real issues with nature by having them visualize a different scenario.

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