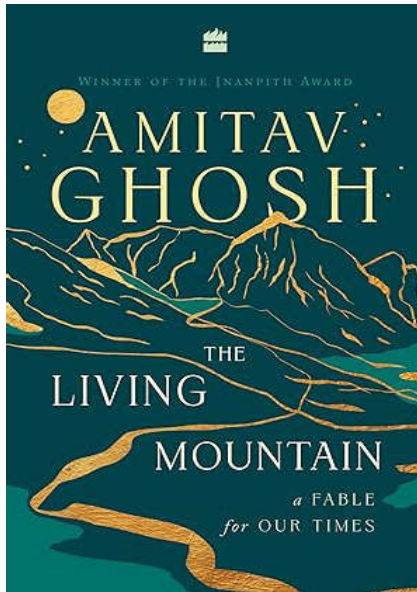


The Living Mountain: A Primer for Our Troubled Times

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The Living Mountain

Amitav Ghosh

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The twentieth century witnessed the rapid growth of urbanization all over the world. In place of natural forests, the concrete jungles sprang overnight like mushrooms. This was in total contrast with the sylvan settings of the previous era. This sudden change brought about new human habitats and also a new set of problems which initially defied solutions due to the changed human mindset. Since literature is said to be the mirror of societal norms, the new social conditions began to make inroads into the realm of

literature too. Gradually, the focus was shifted to day-to-day struggles of human beings and the writers were busy painting the real-life travails and moments of happiness on the broad canvas of life. In the process, the man-nature interaction, which had been center stage in literary writings for generations, took a back seat. In the wide spectrum of Indian writing in English, not much has been written with focus on man-nature interaction. However, this theme can never be out of place.

Amitav Ghosh is a renowned author on the Indian literary scene. He is one of the most prominent litterateurs who has profusely written on the theme of man-nature relationship. In this connection, his book *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* directly deals with the ominous crisis of climate change which has started troubling mankind in ample measures. This is an open secret that the present situation is created by disturbing the fine balance between man and nature. In this ground-breaking work of nonfiction, Ghosh examines our inability, at the level of literature, history, and politics, to grasp the scale and violence of climate change. He has changed the narrative of climate change as a scientific question into the wide precincts of culture, politics, and power. His recent book, *Jungle Nama*, is a story of the Sundarbans where he has narrated in verse the popular fictional tale of Dokkhin Rai and the Mistress of the Forest, Bon Bibi. The story mirrors the intricate human-nature relationship which is so relevant in the current perspective.

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The original print version of this legend dates back to the nineteenth century, composed in a Bengali verse meter known as *dwipodi-poyar*. *Jungle Nama* is a free adaptation of the legend, told entirely in the same meter, replicating the cadence of the original. Incidentally, he wrote this tale in prose in his famous novel, *The Hungry Tide*, a few years ago. His latest book, *The Nutmeg's Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis*, brings to life alternative visions of humans flourishing in consonance with the rest of nature.

His recent book *The Living Mountain* “is a cautionary tale of how we have systematically exploited nature, leading to an environmental collapse,” according to the introductory comments on the book. This is a fable, narrating a dream about Mahaparbat, the Living Mountain. One fateful day, a girl named Maansi randomly selected a book for reading. The book was about some poor people stranded on a remote island suffering a terrible fate. The whole scenario gave birth to a haunting dream in the night that was reproduced in the present form of a fable by the illustrious writer. In the dream, the young girl found herself living in a valley which was a “cluster of warring villages” in the Himalayas. The Great Mountain, Mahaparbat, a gigantic and snowy mountain peak, remained firm overlooking the valley. There was a storehouse of a large variety of herbs, trees, and other natural resources. But the inhabitants of the valley strictly followed a cardinal rule that they would never set foot on the slopes of Mahaparbat. Besides, they considered it very alive. They told stories, sang about it, and danced to it. In a nutshell, the Great Mountain was an object of great reverence for the local communities. Their dances were led by women including Adepts who were undoubtedly, most skilled amongst them. Adepts, while dancing, would go into a trance and it was believed that the Great Mountain spoke to them through the soles of their feet. The communities were aided and advised by the elders, both men and women, who were worldly wise and the real protectors of the natural resources lying in the lap of the great mountain. Once a year at the time of melting snow, they proceeded towards a fixed point outside their villages and indulged in a barter trade with the foreigners who came there for trading purposes. The whole idea was that no person from the outside world should cross the threshold of the valley. They revered their Great Mountain and cared for it at all costs. In return, the inhabitants of the valley surrounding this gigantic Mountain had survived the ravages of time under its sprawling shadows. However, a dent was successfully managed by the people from outside, known as Anthropoi, who gathered the knowledge about the geography and the natural resources found in that hinterland first by sending their savants. Thereafter, they sent their armed forces to infiltrate the area surrounded by the Mahaparbat. They crushed the local resistance without making any serious effort and rushed forward along the high peak in search of the most valuable natural resources. Adorned with the colonial mindset, they replaced the old village elders and introduced the new faces of their choices. Elderly women who were the repository of age-old wisdom found no place in their scheme of things. They deliberately tarnished the image of the old village system which was based on practical experiences and worldly wisdom. The inhabitants there were made to believe that they were inferior in all respects to the Anthropoi class. They plundered the natural wealth of the region at their own sweet will. But with the passing of time, their strength was reduced and their appetite for more

riches had also diminished. Consequently, the baton was taken by the interested locals who saw an opportunity there in the exploits of the outside invaders. They filled up the gap created by the Anthropoi. The same vices and the elements of avarice crept into their behavior, leading them to natural calamities such as avalanches, landslides, crevices in the slopes of the mountain, etc. The people below, toiling in the fields, and others were the worst casualty. The unbridled avarice for the natural resources resulted in the gradual destruction of the once flourishing human habitation. In the process, they learnt that they had forgotten the stories, songs, and steps to dance in the praise of Mahaparbat. In the last sequence, when an Adept, the skilled dancer, dances like before, she could feel the Mountain reverberating under her feet as though in response to her dance. Thereafter, she scolds her fellow inhabitants and gives the message that the people are not the masters, and the Mountain is not the child which needs care. The only thing is that humans should understand nature and honor her majestic presence.

The fable is a reminder of the colonial approach in the political field being replicated in the realm of nature. Here also, the faces change with time to do the damage. Every newcomer barges into a country or specific territory and starts by attacking the very roots of its intellectual and moral moorings. Next lies the step of imposing the new philosophy, morality code, and the principles of ethics. This has been well articulated in this fable. By the end, the reader is apprised of the genesis of climate catastrophe and the frightening results of wantonly playing games with nature. But the question remains as to what is the way out? How can people exactly know about the coming tragedy? Moreover, how to balance the development process necessary for human beings with the conservation of nature or the natural resources? These questions require plausible answers given the condition that people now are more aware about the phenomenon of climate change and global warming. Everyone is in search of answers which are missing in this otherwise interesting literary fable where it was possible to conceive some solutions. People want answers and solutions to these horrendous problems of our times. This book is a must read for those who care about nature and the environment.