

# Decolonizing the Anthropocene: Amitav Ghosh's *The Living Mountain*

Nafisa Afsara Chowdhury

Lecturer, Department of English and Modern Languages, North South University,  
Bangladesh

nafisa.chowdhury03@northsouth.edu | ORCID: 0009-0005-8619-1921

## Abstract

In an era of unprecedented environmental catastrophes that have become increasingly difficult to ignore, the term “Anthropocene” has gained prominence, denoting the profound human-induced planetary changes shaping the climate crisis we face today. However, dominant climate change discourses often rely on hegemonic Western techno-scientific paradigms of knowledge that deliberately obscure the enduring influence of colonial agendas in the making of ecological violence over centuries. Consequently, this paper argues for a critical reframing of the Anthropocene through a transdisciplinary approach that foregrounds the unequal power relations and cultural histories that structure contemporary planetary crises. Amitav Ghosh's fable *The Living Mountain* serves as a vital decolonial literary intervention that recontextualizes the Anthropocene within a historical framework of colonialism to address the complex interplay between ecological and cultural challenges. Drawing on postcolonial theory and Indigenous studies, this paper examines how Ghosh's narrative dramatizes the structural continuities between colonial extractivism and present-day ecological collapse. Simultaneously, Ghosh highlights the epistemic violence inherent in colonial worldviews that fundamentally sever human and non-human relations, proposing instead the centrality of Indigenous epistemologies for a decolonial understanding of the Anthropocene. Through a close textual analysis of Ghosh's fable, this paper contends that literature offers powerful alternative imaginaries that contest dominant climate narratives and expose the colonial continuities embedded in global environmental discourse. *The Living Mountain*, thus, exemplifies the potential of storytelling to enact epistemic shifts necessary for confronting the Anthropocene in more just and relational ways, beyond Western epistemes that sustain violent legacies of colonialism.

**Keywords:** Anthropocene, colonial legacies, transdisciplinary, decolonial, epistemic violence, Indigenous epistemologies

In an era of unprecedented environmental catastrophes that have become

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increasingly difficult to ignore, the term “Anthropocene” has emerged as a dominant framework for conceptualizing the scale and impact of human-induced planetary transformations. Originally coined by biologist Eugene F. Stoermer in the 1980s and later popularized by atmospheric chemist Paul J. Crutzen in the early 2000s, the influential concept of the “age of humans” has catalyzed vital interdisciplinary dialogue between the natural sciences and the humanities, proposing a new geological epoch in which human activity constitutes a major geophysical force. Scholars argue that this epoch, following the Holocene, took shape during the mid-twentieth century industrial boom, when “human activities on earth and atmosphere, and at all, including global, scales” (Crutzen and Stoermer 484) began to significantly reshape planetary systems. At present, the dramatic rising atmospheric temperatures, rising sea levels, melting glaciers, and increasingly erratic weather patterns are only a few of the observable and measurable cataclysmic effects of this new epoch.

Yet while the Anthropocene has undoubtedly helped contextualize the ravaging changes to our climate in the 21st century and comprehend the human role in environmental destruction, its prevailing usage also occludes the deeper historical and political origins that underlie the current crisis. Dominant anthropogenic climate change discourse remains tethered to hegemonic, techno-scientific Western paradigms that universalize climate change while obscuring the enduring colonial legacies and epistemologies that have long structured environmental violence. Although techno-scientific knowledge is indispensable for quantifying environmental change, these approaches alone are insufficient to trace the deeper genealogies of empire, extraction, and dispossession that continue to disproportionately structure the planetary present and underpin global environmental governance.

Thus, this paper approaches the Anthropocene not merely as a neutral geological epoch but as a deeply contested site of knowledge production – one that necessitates critical interrogation of whose knowledge defines the crisis, and whose histories it erases. Employing a transdisciplinary methodology grounded in postcolonial, decolonial, and environmental humanities frameworks, it draws on literary analysis to explore how narrative, particularly from the Global South, can reorient climate critique toward colonial histories of ecological devastation and reclaim marginalized epistemologies.

### **The Coloniality of Western Climate Discourse**

Amitav Ghosh has emerged as a formidable voice among a growing body of Global South thinkers who challenges the Anthropocene’s depoliticized and technocratic framing across both his fiction and nonfiction work. In his recent nonfiction *The Nutmeg’s Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis*, Ghosh challenges

the prevailing Western tendency to conceptualize climate change primarily as a “phenomenon that pertains mainly to technology and economics” (147), arguing that such a reductive framing “narrows down the world to quantifiable data and measurements” (152), obscuring the cultural, ethical, and historical dimensions of the crisis. This intervention builds upon his earlier work, *The Great Derangement*, where Ghosh identifies a broader failure of political and literary imagination to reckon with the complexity of the planetary crisis (12). His fictional works, *Gun Island*, *The Hungry Tide*, *A Sea of Poppies*, have also similarly skillfully evinced the entanglement of climate precarity with colonial displacement and made visible the submerged histories often excluded from dominant scientific discourses.

These insights resonate with broader postcolonial climate discourse that have become increasingly vital in the radical rethinking of life in the Anthropocene. Dipesh Chakrabarty, a foundational figure in postcolonial climate thought, argues in *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age* that climate change challenges the distinction between human and natural history, compelling a reconfiguration of dominant historical and political narratives shaped by colonial modernity (76). Transdisciplinary geographer Kathryn Yusoff, in her seminal work *A Billion Black Anthropocene or None*, similarly asserts that “anthropogenic climate change is as much a political, social and cultural event, as it is a scientific one” (516), drawing attention to the erasures produced by technocratic governance and data-driven solutions. Farhana Sultana, a Bangladeshi scholar of climate justice, introduces the notion of “climate coloniality” to describe how colonial structures continue to shape the governance and discourse of climate change (3). In tandem, Jenni C. Stephens, a leading climate justice scholar-activist, believes that “action toward major societal transformation is hindered by the dominant mainstream approach to conceptualizing the climate crisis as an isolated, discrete, scientific problem in need of individualistic and technological solutions” (60).

Together, these perspectives illuminate the limitations of neoliberal climate governance, which perpetuate homogenized, technocratic solutions that ultimately reproduce the structural inequalities it purports to address. To fully grasp the complexity of today’s multifaceted, interconnected climate crisis facing humanity, we require transdisciplinary approaches that foreground the Anthropocene as a historical formation inseparable from the enduring legacies of colonialism and racialized capitalism.

To counter these erasures, this paper turns to *The Living Mountain: A Fable for Our Times*, Amitav Ghosh’s shortest fiction to date, as a decolonial literary intervention within Anthropocene discourse. The fable allegorizes the colonial foundations of ecological collapse by critiquing extractivist logics and

mechanistic worldviews that sever human-non-human entanglements. Through its parabolic structure, *it* envisions alternative modes of being grounded in Indigenous epistemologies and reciprocal ecological relations, worldviews often marginalized in Western climate discourse. Thus, situating this analysis within the growing field of postcolonial and decolonial environmental humanities, this paper demonstrates how literature can serve as a critical mode of knowledge production capable of imagining decolonized ecological futures no longer beholden to the violent legacies of Western modernity.

### **Reframing the Anthropocene: Legacies of Extractive Colonialism and *The Living Mountain***

*The Living Mountain* opens with an unnamed narrator introducing Maansi, a Nepalese woman working in New York, who proposes “the Anthropocene” as her virtual book club’s annual theme. Anticipating scientific accounts “with lots of numbers and charts” (Ghosh 5), Maansi instead finds herself confronted by a visceral childhood memory evoked by a book about “some poor people on a remote island who suffer a terrible fate” (5). This recollection, manifesting as a “horrible dream” (5) of the sacred Mountain becomes the vehicle through which Ghosh critiques the structural violence of colonialism and the epistemological ruptures it inflicts upon Indigenous worlds.

Ghosh’s deliberate framing of the narrative through a dream sequence itself functions not merely as a literary device, but as a decolonial epistemic rupture. As Goutam Karmakar and Rajendra Chetty have rightly observed, such strategies dismantle the “empirical rigidity” of dominant Western knowledge systems that curtail the cultural and spiritual dimensions of ecological crises (“Episteme and Ecology” 316). The allegorical dream opens up a radically different space, one predicated not by empirical data but instead embodied memory, ancestral knowledge, and storytelling, modes of knowing traditionally marginalized by Eurocentric frameworks.

At the heart of Maansi’s dream-tale is “Mahaparbat,” the Great Mountain, a vital source of sustenance described as a “living being that cared” (Ghosh 8) for the people of the Himalayan Valley for generations. The Mountain, regarded as sacred by the local people and their ancestors, was an intrinsic part of Indigenous life and had been fiercely protected at all costs. In fact, its sanctity is preserved through restraint and cultural practices: “they told stories about it, and sang about it, and danced for it – but always from a distance” (7). Jasmine Sharma insightfully notes how this culturally enforced distance “admonishes the people of the valley against exploiting its scenic beauty and ecological abundance” (28). However, this delicate balance is disrupted when the Mountain’s most revered

gift, the “Magic Tree” with medicinal properties, becomes the object of desire for Lowland traders.

Historically insulated from outside interference, the Valley's ecological and cultural equilibrium is violently ruptured with the arrival of an invasive settler group known as the “Anthropoi.” Perceiving the Mountain solely as a repository of “valuable trade goods” (Ghosh 11), they enact a colonial mode of appropriation that Chilean environmental humanities scholar Macarena Gómez-Barris conceptualizes as the “extractive view”: “the extractive view sees territories as commodities, rendering land as for the taking, while also devalorizing the hidden worlds that form the nexus of human and non-human multiplicity” (5). Here, Ghosh's narrative echoes his larger literary oeuvre, such as the British colonial exploitation of the dense Burmese teak forests in *The Glass Palace* and the fertile landscape of the Gangetic plains transformed into a monocultural commodification of poppy cultivation in *A Sea of Poppies*. In *The Living Mountain*, as in these earlier works, Ghosh employs richly symbolic terrains to trace the contours of colonial extractivism and the asymmetrical culpability of empire in producing the present planetary crisis.

The Anthropoi's critique of Indigenous stewardship, claiming that the natives “did not abide by what constituted a proper use of the environment” (Ghosh 63), epitomizes what Karmakar and Chetty describe as the “hegemony of capitalist thinking and the legitimization of extractive practices” (“Episteme and Ecology” 317). Indeed, once the Anthropoi seize the land, a familiar colonial pattern unfolds – dispossession, coerced labor, and the transformation of sacred geographies into extractive frontiers, justified by claims of making the land productive. Their ascent of the Mountain, in defiance of the “Law of the Valley” (Ghosh 11), illustrates what Ghosh elsewhere refers to as “terraforming,” a process of “planetary reengineering” that violently remakes landscapes to suit colonial economic ends (53). The replication of these colonial practices has intensified in the neoliberal present, now adopted by postcolonial states, where development, framed as progress, reconfigures ecologies into resource frontiers, as seen in the construction of hydroelectric dams in Uttarakhand, contributing to recurring floods and landslides, or the forced displacement of the Dongria Kondh for bauxite mining in Niyamgiri Mountain. In parallel, the rich Himalayan terrain in Ghosh's fable becomes a microcosm of this enduring political ecology of extractivism, its exploitation benefiting actors geographically far removed from the ecologies they deplete.

Far from being an isolated event, this fictitious invasion set in the Himalayas is resonant with real-world racialized histories of extractive colonialism in the Global South, where violent encroachment of colonial regimes systematically

restructured and impoverished ecologies for profit. In *The Nutmeg's Curse*, Ghosh traces the violent global trajectory of such extractivist thinking back to the 17th-century European conquest of the Banda archipelago, where Dutch colonizers massacred the Indigenous population to monopolize the nutmeg trade. Similarly, Cameroonian-American novelist Imbolo Mbue's novel *How Beautiful We Were* dramatizes ecological collapse as the inevitable outcome of extractive greed imposed on a once-sacred African village endowed with vast natural resources. These literary parallels underscore that ecological interventions were not an unintended consequence but a constitutive logic of empire, central to the making of the Anthropocene as a racialized, colonial formation. The colonial logic that drives the conquest of Mahaparbat is the same perverse logic driving mining companies, land grabbing, and oil and gas exploitation to serve settler colonial occupation and global capital in today's world. As Sharma incisively observes, *The Living Mountain* "holds a speculative mirror to the harsh reality of the present" (27), compelling us to confront how the afterlives of colonialism continue to structure the uneven geographies of environmental exploitation.

The Indigenous inhabitants of the Valley, despite concerted efforts of resistance, are violently subjugated: "we must help them do it, or else they will kill or enslave us" (15). Here, Ghosh dramatizes a central mechanism of colonial domination, the conscription of colonized subjects into the racialized labor systems that facilitate their own dispossession. Forced to become "provisions and porters" (17), the Indigenous people are rendered unwilling participants in the destruction of the sacred ecology they once protected. More insidiously, the circumstances worsen when the colonized subjects soon begin to internalize the Anthropoi's values, as Ghosh notes, "reverence slowly shifted away from the Mountain and attached itself instead to the spectacle of the climb" (19). Being indoctrinated to accept Western ideals of civilization and progress, "the Indigenous people begin to harbor aspirations of climbing the Great Mountain, and the ecological sacred transforms into the sacred of materialism" (Mahasweri et al. 1783).

This large-scale assault profoundly disrupts the local ecosystems upon which the Valley's inhabitants depend, systematically depleting the Mountain's natural resources and culminating in "a series of devastating landslides and avalanches" (Ghosh 24) that engulf the surrounding communities. Under the relentless advance of capitalist modernity, the Mountain becomes increasingly destabilized, as "crevasses were opening up everywhere" (25), threatening to "drown the Valley below and sweep everything away" (26). What was once a protective landscape is transformed into a site of catastrophe, its devastation emblematic of what Karmakar and Chetty describe as "the insidiousness of

colonial capitalist extraction” (“Episteme and Ecology” 322). Importantly, the destabilization of Mahaparbat’s landscape is set in motion not by tectonic forces or weather anomalies, but by the violent human-induced encroachment of the Anthropoi, whose actions directly precipitate ecological collapse.

The Mahaparbat, like real geographies, thus, is rendered what Naomi Klein calls a “sacrifice zone” (169), a space rendered expendable, “poisoned, drained or otherwise destroyed” (169) in service of capitalist accumulation. Crucially, such zones are not anomalous but structurally integral to capitalism’s global expansion, which advances through the systematic externalization of ecological costs onto marginalized populations. As Sultana notes, climate coloniality ensures that “the costs of planetary crisis are distributed unevenly, along lines of race, class, and geography” (6). In Ghosh’s narrative, the Valley’s inhabitants, like many frontline communities today, are consigned to bear the disproportionate burdens of ecological collapse, their disposability inscribed within the structural logics of a geopolitical economy that defines the Anthropocene, disrupting the illusion of a singular planetary condition shared equally by all.

In the face of global ecological violence, the allegorical collapse of Mahaparbat as seen through Maansi’s dream reflects not only historical colonial exploitation but also environmental destruction resulting from rapacious capitalist development in its current guise of neo-extractivism. Karmakar and Chetty stress that the fable “foregrounds capitalism’s dominance and anthropogenic control over ecology and Indigenous livelihoods” (“Episteme and Ecology” 317), while Amit Kumar and Vikas Sharma read it as sustained “critiques of colonizing cultures, capitalist modernity, human greed and unsustainable economic development” (3). Ghosh resists the technocratic abstraction of the climate crisis into mere metrics and projections, instead foregrounding its entanglement with cultural histories, racialized geographies, and colonial continuities. Aarthi R.M. and Rani P.L. extend this critique, noting the fable’s indictment of the empire’s persistence in “contemporary climate governance and policy failures” (6). In this way, the Anthropoi’s exploitation of the Mahaparbat functions as a powerful allegory for the broader failure of global systems to confront the colonial-capitalist foundations of ecological collapse. In doing so, the text calls for a reimagining of climate consciousness, one grounded not in abstract data, but in lived experience and historical specificity.

This intervention aligns with other critical Indigenous scholars like Heather Davis and Zoe Todd, who also argue for dating the Anthropocene to the beginning of colonialism, contending, “the Anthropocene is not a new event, but is rather the continuation of practices of dispossession and genocide, coupled with a literal transformation of the environment, that have been at work for the last

five hundred years” (761). Likewise, Yusoff identifies the epoch as a product of “an extractive economy that began with the colonial conquest of the Americas, Africa, and Asia. The Anthropocene is a planetary expression of colonialism’s environmental legacy” (24).

Like these scholars, Ghosh critically examines the concept “beyond its current Eurocentric framing” (Davis and Todd 763) that pose it simply as a collateral effect of modernity, and instead contends that our current ecological predicament “are the result of a series of decisions that have their origins and reverberations in colonization” (Davis and Todd 763). These decisions, “borrowed from the Western colonial extractive models” (Saha 130), continue to be replicated globally under the banners of development, progress, and modernity, remaining foundational to today’s global order. Thus, through the tragic unraveling of the Mahaparbat, Ghosh compels us to reject dominant Western narratives that treat climate change as “a technical problem that can be solved by engineering solutions” (Ghosh 138), and instead, adopt storytelling from those who embody the impact of extractivism as a form of planetary critique that opens up imaginative possibilities for decolonial futures. Ghosh’s narrative, through its allegorical power, insists that storytelling itself is a mode of resistance, one that “holds the potential not only to chronicle the realities and repercussions of the Anthropocene but also to shape its course” (Kumar and Sharma 3).

### **Temporalities, the Nonlinear Present, and the Anthropocene**

By encasing the fantastical tale of Mahaparbat within a contemporary context – a book club where two individuals grapple with the term “Anthropocene” in their reading – Ghosh deliberately collapses Western linear temporalities, foregrounding the continuity between colonial histories of extraction and present-day capitalist and ecological crises. This narrative structure exemplifies what Dipesh Chakrabarty calls a turn toward “deep history” (212) in his influential article, “The Climate of History: Four Theses”: a mode of historical consciousness that situates human activity within planetary time without severing it from the enduring legacies of empire. As Chakrabarty asserts, the climate crisis forces us “to mix together the immiscible chronologies of capital and species history” (220), challenging the modernist impulse to isolate historical epochs through rigid temporal demarcations. While the mainstream Anthropocene discourse often positions the climate crisis as a novel rupture in planetary history, Ghosh rejects a rigid timeline and a future-oriented discourse, instead emphasizing a temporal continuum in which environmental degradation is an extension of colonial violence.

In aligning with Chakrabarty’s insistence that climate history cannot be disentangled from colonial-capitalist histories, he also echoes Indigenous climate

justice scholar Kyle Whyte's assertion that the dystopian futures imagined in mainstream climate discourse are, in fact, "conditions that Indigenous peoples have already endured due to different forms of colonialism" (226). For Whyte, and for many Indigenous scholars, time is not a linear sequence progressing toward catastrophe, but a recursive structure in which historical injustices reverberate into the present. Ghosh's narrative similarly urges readers to reconceptualize climate change not as a sudden rupture but as cyclical repetition – part of an ongoing process in which colonial-capitalist logics of domination and accumulation remain structurally intact. In other words, the story of *Mahaparbat* becomes not only a speculative allegory, but a mode of deep historical thinking, one that challenges the reliability of dominant historical frameworks and compels a reckoning with the temporal structures that sustain planetary inequities.

### **Politics of Vitalist Modes of Thought: Anthropoi vs. Varvaroi**

Beyond the material subjugation of land and people, *The Living Mountain* dramatizes an epistemological struggle intimately linked with colonial conquest by contrasting two fundamentally divergent worldviews that remain acutely relevant today. Though the fable is devoid of named characters, it introduces two archetypal groups: on one side are the Anthropoi, the outside invaders whose extractive logic mirrors Western modernity, and, on the other, the Varvaroi, the valley's original inhabitants, who embody a worldview deeply grounded in relationality with the non-human world. Through this symbolic opposition, Ghosh critiques the modern colonial mindset that reduces nature to inert resources, epitomized by the Anthropoi's accusation that the natives failed to exploit the "Mountain's riches" (Ghosh 14). For them, the sacred Mountain "had no meaning except as resources that could be harnessed to generate profit" (Ghosh 36), and this capitalist commodification of nature allowed them to believe that they were "fully justified in seizing them" (14) at the cost of the local environment and people. The Mountain, stripped of all its cultural and spiritual significance, becomes merely a passive object of trade and a product meant to serve the Anthropoi's extractive desires. In *The Nutmeg's Curse*, Ghosh points out how this "mechanistic vision of the world" (37) is central to the Western colonial thought, shaping an understanding of the natural world as objects to be exploited, devoid of intrinsic value. This "colonial envisioning of nature as a vast mass of inert resources" (40), he argues, laid both the material and philosophical groundwork for the Anthropocene long before its formal naming.

Ghosh traces its genealogy to Enlightenment thinkers such as René Descartes and Francis Bacon, whose philosophies institutionalized a dualistic ontology that continues to contemporary modes of thought (37). He particularly critiques Descartes' theory of ontological dualism, also known as Cartesian dualism, which

posits a fundamental separation between the rational human mind (*res cogitans*) and the inert material world (*res extensa*), establishing an ontological divide in which human reason legitimizes mastery over a passive nature. Ghosh's fable allegorizes this imposition with the arrival of the Anthropoi, whose rationalist worldview initiates an ontological rupture. Similarly, Bacon's vision of nature as something to be interrogated and mastered through science similarly underpins the logic of conquest foundational to colonialism and capitalist modernity (Ghosh 187). This Enlightenment-driven modernity elevated reason as the basis for civilization, establishing an epistemic hierarchy that continues to shape global thought and delegitimize other modes of knowing (Karmakar and Chetty, "Cognitive (In)justice" 120).

Crucially, these epistemic hierarchies do not merely structure thought but shape material realities that now contribute to contemporary climate instability. Ghosh emphasizes how this hierarchical categorization of "human" and "nonhuman" systematically destroyed "the entire web of nonhuman connection that sustained a certain way of life" (41), illustrating the inextricable link between environmental and epistemic injustices. The consequences of such a view of nature as brute and inert, available for dominion and conquest, are symbolized in the destruction of the Mountain, "highlighting the inherent and apprehensive dangers of an overwhelming capitalist episteme prevalent in the Global South" (Karmakar and Chetty, "Episteme and Ecology 331).

Opposing this worldview, Ghosh foregrounds a radically different epistemology grounded in Indigenous cosmologies. For the Varvaroi, the Mountain is not a site of production but a sentient being integral to their cultural identity and lifeways, a "component of their holistic sense of livelihood" (Karmakar and Chetty, "Cognitive (In)justice" 123). Unlike the Anthropoi's reductive "vision of the world as resources" (Ghosh 76), the natives recognize the Mountain as a metaphysical presence endowed with agency, serving as a temporal conduit between the living, their ancestors, and the nonhuman world. This animistic ontology is vividly expressed during the ceremonial rituals in which the Adepts, female spiritual custodians of Mahaparbat, sense the Mountain "speaking to them through the soles of their feet" (10). The Mountain itself becomes an active agent in the narrative, issuing warnings of colonial incursion through seismic disturbances: it "began to shake and heave" and "rifts opened up in the Valley" (13). The Adepts, who possess the spiritual ability to communicate with the Mountain, warn the natives about the impending destruction: "Strangers are coming from afar, a horde of them, armed with terrible weapons" (13). Such moments underscore a vitalist cosmology in which the Mountain emerges as an active participant in history, challenging the foundational assumptions

of human exceptionalism that underpins modernist thought. This worldview, already practiced in many different epochs and regions of our planet, calls for a fundamental rethinking of humanity's relationship with nature, grounded in intergenerational relationality long eroded by colonial modernity.

Ghosh's representation closely resonates with Vanessa Watts's concept of "Indigenous Place-Thought." In her seminal essay "*Indigenous Place-Thought & Agency Amongst Humans and Non-Humans*," Watts asserts that land is "alive and thinking," and that both human and nonhuman entities "derive agency through the extensions of these thoughts" (13). This framework radically departs from Western dualisms, rejecting the ontological severance central to it. Instead, it affirms a relational cosmology in which agency is distributed across a network of animate beings and landscapes. Similarly, departing from the human-nature binaries, Ghosh uses the relationship between the natives and the Mountain to challenge the presumed universality of Western epistemes and reassert the legitimacy of Indigenous modes of knowing that emphasize kinship, reciprocity, and non-exploitative relations with the land. Significantly, this epistemological tension between scientific rationalism and localized, embodied knowledge is also a recurring motif in Ghosh's work. In *The Hungry Tide*, he stages a similar conflict through the figures of Piya, an American cetologist trained in Western science, and Fokir, a local fisherman, whose deep, intuitive understanding of the Sundarbans emerges from lived, intergenerational experience rather than formal education.

For the Anthropoi, however, the notion that the Mountain might possess agency or generate meaning is dismissed outright as "merely superstition," or even "idolatry" (Ghosh 36), as this animist belief transcends the colonial understanding focused on immediate human interests only. Following the subjugation of the Valley people, their cultural practices and ancestral wisdom, "songs, stories, and dances," are derided as "ignorant, pagan superstition," and their "false, local beliefs" (26) are invalidated. The supremacist nature of the Anthropoi is explicit in their claim that "this is the Age of the Anthropoi" and they "always know best" (29). More than a physical occupation, this marks an ontological colonization, one that forcibly displaces their worldview and imposes a new, singular epistemic order anchored in capitalist modernity. As Walter Mignolo argues, the logic of modernity operates as a rhetoric of salvation while concealing coloniality, "the logic of oppression and exploitation" (162). The Anthropoi embody this logic, positing the Indigenous worldview as a hindrance to progress and asserting that only through embracing their own extractive, developmentalist ideologies can the valley be "civilized."

Moreover, this imposition reflects a broader historical pattern of epistemic

violence, wherein Western scientific paradigms are universalized while Indigenous knowledge systems are suppressed. In her groundbreaking work *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, Linda Tuhiwai Smith articulates how colonial Western systems of knowledge production often served to marginalize and exploit Indigenous peoples and reaffirm their own positions as she states, “Western culture constantly reaffirms the West’s view of itself as the center of legitimate knowledge, the arbiter of what counts as knowledge, and the source of ‘civilized’ knowledge” (63). Like Ghosh, she further demonstrates how colonization has been not only a material process but also an epistemic one:

Colonialism not only meant the imposition of Western authority over Indigenous lands, Indigenous modes of production and Indigenous law and government, but the imposition of Western authority over all aspects of Indigenous knowledges, languages, and cultures. (Smith 64)

In *The Living Mountain*, this epistemic subjugation becomes symbolic of the broader erasure of non-mechanistic and vitalist thought systems. Ghosh observes that “over centuries of suppression, non-mechanistic, and vitalist modes of thought were pushed to the margins of Western culture” (38), revealing how colonial modernity constructed the natural world as inert, passive, and exploitable. The denial of nonhuman agency, then, was not incidental but central to legitimizing environmental extraction and conquest.

This critique extends beyond history into the present, where mainstream environmental discourse often privileges technocratic solutions and scientific data, while marginalizing traditional ecological knowledge systems. As Farhana Sultana notes, “coloniality discursively limits the terms of global debate” on climate change, and “hegemonizes knowledge of and about climate change” (6). In this sense, the epistemic and ontological forms of violence perpetuated by the “myth-making of modernity” (Ghosh 19) have erased the very possibility of conceiving of alternative ways of being, knowing, and relating to the nonhuman world. The hegemonization of climate narratives, financing, and solutions effectively forecloses cognitive justice and epistemic decolonization, entrenching a colonial logic that continues to shape global environmental politics. Contemporary initiatives such as carbon offset markets, geoengineering, and techno-fixes often reproduce the Cartesian ontology of a passive, external nature to be managed or manipulated, rather than engaged with as a living system. As such, Ghosh underscores that the Anthropocene, as a scientific concept, must also be understood as a “seismic shift in consciousness (242), one that calls into question the foundational assumptions of Western modernity.

Ghosh’s repudiation of colonial and capitalist frames of thinking reaches its

most poignant expression in the story's final act, where the collapse of the Mountain compels the Anthropoi to confront the profound limitations of their worldview. Redemption, Ghosh asserts, requires that Anthropoi "acknowledge that their stories were false, because their storytellers could not see that trees and Mountains were living beings" (31). This moment of epistemic reckoning subverts the "totality and dominant epistemology of the 'Anthropoi'" (Karmakar and Chetty, "Episteme and Ecology" 327). Once corrupted by the Anthropoi's ideals of rationalism and progress, the natives too must recognize the inadequacy of colonial frameworks to restore their Mountain's ecological balance. In rejecting the path of extractive modernity, they turn to the repressed histories and epistemologies of their "old ways" (Ghosh 35), modes of knowing once delegitimized. Through rituals and reverence, the Adeptes catalyze the Mountain's regeneration, reclaiming epistemic authority over their animated world again. The Anthropoi, in turn, are forced to concede to their ecological wisdom of the Mountain's sacredness: "You were right! The Mountain *is* alive!" (35). This admission marks a profound epistemological rupture, dismantling the Anthropoi's "illusion of omnipotence" and the foundations of their Western exploitative attitudes. In this moment lies the potential for what Dipesh Chakrabarty might call "decentering" in his influential work *Provincializing Europe*, shifting the locus of authority from Western rationalism to alternative, situated, relational knowledge systems (6).

The Adeptes' final refusal to yield to conquest: "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) as Karmakar and Chetty argue, becomes the narrative's pivotal act of "epistemic disobedience," echoing Walter Mignolo's assertion that decolonial thought must challenge "the foundation and authority of hegemonic knowledge" ("Episteme and Ecology" 327). This moment is not merely a narrative climax but a decisive rupture with the colonial epistemologies that have long framed the natural world as subordinate to human mastery. Through this powerful rejection, Ghosh not only subverts the imperialist dichotomies but also reclaims the ethical imagination needed to radically envision decolonial futures grounded in local knowledges, ontological plurality, and cultural specificity. The Mountain's symbolic refusal to be commodified or controlled illuminates what Ghosh elsewhere terms a "vitalist form of politics" (232), one grounded in the rights of nonhuman beings to exist beyond the instrumentalist imperatives of capitalist extraction. This gesture also mirrors the real-world struggles of Indigenous communities who have steered and sustained the battle for climate justice for centuries, such as the Dongria Kondh's successful resistance against bauxite mining in the sacred Niyamgiri Hills or the Kayapo's ongoing defense of

the Amazon rainforest, whose activism articulates both material resistance and epistemological defiance against the global machinery of neoliberal extractivism.

Importantly, the Mountain's resurgence is not framed as a technocratic solution, but as an epistemic reorientation, rooted in Indigenous worldviews "that have long resisted those systems creating the current crisis" (McEwan 87). This reorientation necessitates "a repoliticization of climate instead of the depoliticized techno-economist utopias that never deliver" (Sultana 2). Through a deceptively simple yet symbolically rich narrative, Ghosh restores voice and agency to nonhuman actors, offering a radical alternative to dominant modes of climate governance. In recognizing the Mountain as a storyteller, the text challenges the hegemonic frameworks that have long excluded the nonhuman world from narrative legitimacy. It is precisely this recovery of these voices that makes possible the epistemic reorientation the story calls for.

Thus, *The Living Mountain* is not only a story about environmental collapse, it is a narrative about epistemic justice where Ghosh reminds us that the struggle against ecological degradation is inseparable from the struggle against colonial ways of knowing. Through the Mountain's parabolic symbolic arc, from desecration to resurgence, Ghosh insists to readers that genuine planetary futures must begin with the decolonization of thought itself, the same colonial thought that not only dismissed colonized peoples as voiceless but also denied history, agency, and voice to the Earth and its nonhuman inhabitants.

### **Unsettling the Universalizing "Anthropoi" in the Anthropocene**

Ghosh deliberately names the invaders "Anthropoi," from the Greek word for "humans," and the Indigenous inhabitants as "Varvaroi," derived from the Greek for "barbarians," which operates as a critical intervention into both epistemological and ontological debates surrounding the Anthropocene even further. The figure of the "Anthropos," which geologists use to define the current epoch, is often presumed to denote a unified, species-level agency. By invoking the same term ironically, Ghosh directly confronts the universalizing assumptions embedded in the very term "Anthropocene," which has been widely critiqued for flattening the historical and geopolitical differences between those who caused environmental destruction and those who suffer its consequences. This literary act stages a powerful counter-discourse: rather than a neutral species category, "Anthropoi" becomes a historically and politically situated figure of imperial violence and epistemic domination.

As Métis anthropologist Zoe Todd argues in "Indigenizing the Anthropocene," the dominant Anthropocene narrative oversimplifies humanity into a singular, undifferentiated subject, as she voices:

The complex and paradoxical experiences of diverse people as humans-in-the world, including the ongoing damage of colonial and imperialist agendas, can be lost when the narrative is collapsed to a universalizing species paradigm. (244)

Similarly, Yusoff contends that the Anthropocene invokes a “universalist geologic common” (14), masking its “politics of denial” (Karmakar and Chetty, “Cognitive (In)justice” 122), which actively erases the stratified histories of dispossession. Ghosh, echoing such critiques, rejects the undifferentiated, seemingly singular figure of the Anthropos, challenges the historical oversight embedded in the Anthropocene, and instead makes visible the deep geopolitical and racialized inequities the term disavows.

In contrast, the term “Varvaroi,” the label imposed on the natives by the Anthropoi, functions as a colonial signifier that positions Indigenous peoples outside the realm of reason, civility, and legitimate knowledge. The *Anthropoi* regard the natives as “credulous and benighted people” (14), wholly lacking the technological and moral “advancements” of the invaders, who are described as “a different species of being” (16). This radical disidentification draws from a long lineage of imperial ideology that framed non-Western peoples as primitive and their lifeways as obstructions to progress. By invoking the language of barbarism, Ghosh unearths the narrative scaffolding of colonial conquest, its myth of civilizational superiority, which transforms dispossession into a moral imperative. As the Anthropoi “conjure up terrifying illusions of omnipotence” (16), the Varvaroi begin to internalize these projections of inferiority:

Our bodies were not suited to the climb, we were not strong enough, our diets were enfeebling, our habits degenerate, our beliefs persevere, our minds weak, and our hearts lacking in courage. (Ghosh 17)

Linda Tuhiwai Smith notes, “Imperialism and colonialism are the specific formations through which the West came to ‘see’, to ‘name’ and to ‘know’ Indigenous communities” (60). Naming here becomes a deliberate act of domination, a way of fixing Indigenous identity within a colonial imaginary that denies its complexity and autonomy. Ghosh extends this critique in *The Nutmeg’s Curse*, arguing that “the questions of who is a brute and who is fully human, who makes meaning and who does not, lie at the core of the planetary crisis” (195). These distinctions are not merely discursive, they are foundational to the ecological catastrophes of the present. He further elaborates, “our plight is a consequence of the ways in which certain classes of humans – a small minority, in fact – have actively muted others by representing them as brutes, as creatures whose presence on Earth is solely material.” The sacrifice of

landscapes and peoples, especially Indigenous communities who, as in Ghosh's narrative, revere the land as sacred, is not collateral but calculated. Echoing this, Sultana asserts that, "it is indeed through racialized Othering that climate change proceeded and proceeds" (6), marking Indigenous peoples and their lands as expendable in the calculus of capitalist development. Thus, Ghosh's deployment of the term "*Varvaroi*," a fictional yet deeply symbolic category, functions as a powerful allegorical critique of these dehumanizing regimes. It exposes the racialized hierarchies that continue to structure global systems of environmental exploitation. Yet, Ghosh also suggests that it is precisely those marked for sacrifice under Western modernity who hold the epistemic and political resources necessary for enacting decolonial futures.

### **Conclusion: A Decolonial Turn in an Age of Crisis and Hope**

Amid the mounting ecological challenges confronting the world today, the urgency for alternative imaginaries, ones that move beyond hegemonic Western paradigms, has never been more acute. In *The Living Mountain*, Amitav Ghosh mobilizes the haunting parable of Mahaparbat, deeply rooted in Indigenous epistemologies, to reimagine the Anthropocene and envision radical modes of existence beyond the temporal and ideological constraints of the present. Though the singular event in the Himalayan Valley between the Anthropei and Varvaroi may appear minor in the grand narrative of the world, this literary intervention reminds us that such stories carry profound relevance for our present predicament. Ghosh's insistence on foregrounding culture and cosmology shifts the conversation beyond the narrow confines of technocratic, depoliticized environmental discourse, and instead opens up transdisciplinary spaces of storytelling that engage what Farhana Sultana calls "epistemic and material outcomes" of the climate crisis (3). This transdisciplinary engagement expands the scope beyond the presumed objectivity of scientific and policy debates toward decolonial hope, imagination, and praxis.

Ultimately, Ghosh deploys symbolic landscapes as sites of epistemic contestation, historical reckoning, and speculative reimagination across his literary works, and *The Living Mountain* continues this trajectory. The Mahaparbat is not simply a geographic setting but a storied, sentient being through which histories of conquest, resistance, and ecological violence are told and reinterpreted. Against this backdrop, Ghosh urges us to pay closer attention to disparate voices from within and far beyond the mainstream discourses of Western modernity. It is only by dismantling colonial knowledge systems and reclaiming Indigenous epistemic traditions that we can begin to address the entwined ecological and epistemic injustices that structure the contemporary moment. Most importantly, the narrative symbolic threads of *The Living Mountain* remind us that to rethink

our climate crisis, we must not only rethink the relations between nature and culture but also rethink our very understanding of ourselves as humans, embedded within complex, relational worlds. As Ghosh astutely reminds us, “the fate of humans, and all our relatives, depends on it” (257).

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