

Beyond Human Exceptionalism: Re-Reading Amitav Ghosh's The Living Mountain From The Perspective Of Deep Ecology

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Abstract

The interdependence between humans and nature is a dynamic process. The rampant misallocation of natural resources has placed us in an unregulated predicament. The deterioration of ecological calamities is exacerbating our connection with the natural world. Hence, the human tendency to prioritise their own interests and dominate nature should be reconsidered from a biocentric perspective. In this context, Worster argues, "We are facing a global crisis today, not because of how ecosystems function but rather because of how our ethical systems function" (27). Deep ecology is a developing field within the study of ecocriticism. Arne Naess, a philosopher from Norway, coined the term to foster ecological awareness and a sense of harmonious coexistence between humans and non-humans. Deep ecologists argue that humans are but one species among many in nature, rather than being superior. The notion that mankind is exceptional is rapidly driving us toward human-caused destruction of the natural world. Amitav Ghosh's *The Living Mountain* (2022) delves into the complex interplay between humans and the natural world, with a specific focus on the Himalayas. This study examines the ecological issues present in Ghosh's tale, with a focus on the interaction between nature and human existence. The research focuses on Ghosh's literary strategies and how the novel functions as a means to promote ecological awareness. The analysis examines the

consequences of Ghosh's decisions, including the depiction of local communities, the effects of climate change, and the interdependent connection between man and nature.

Keyword: Ecocriticism, Deep Ecology, Shallow Ecology, Intrinsic Value, Anthropocentrism

Introduction

Arne Naess and George Sessions formulated and introduced deep ecology, a contemporary environmental philosophy, in April 1984, with the aim of consolidating environmental thinking around eight fundamental principles. Nevertheless, it is actually the culmination of much contemplation and concepts regarding the environment, derived from several religious and philosophical perspectives over several decades. The deep ecology movement emerged as a direct result of the ecological concerns that arose in the 1960s (Zimmerman 161). Over time, it has garnered significant influence from numerous individuals. Naess and Sessions argue that "deep ecology" has theological origins in several religions, while its intellectual foundations may be traced back to ecocentrism and the social criticism of Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, D.H. Lawrence, Robinson Jeffers, and Aldous Huxley (Sessions ix).

Deep ecology is an environmental philosophy and social movement that focuses on the intrinsic value of nature, placing it at the centre of its concerns. It examines the environmental perspective from a profound ecological standpoint, in contrast to anthropocentric views that interpret or consider the world based on human values and experiences. However, "deep ecology" is a more extreme ideology based on principles of preservation. The key figures in this ideology are Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess, American sociologist Bill Devall, and American philosopher George Sessions. They, like social ecologists, have scepticism against capitalism and industrial technology and instead advocate for decentralised forms of social organisation. Deep ecologists argue that it is necessary for humans to reestablish a "spiritual" connection with nonhuman nature by extending one's "ego self".

As a radical ideology, "deep ecology" questions the centrality of humans as the ultimate arbiters of value. Furthermore, it argues that our attempts to modify the global ecology are futile, as they ultimately injure ourselves. The aim

is to cultivate an ecological awareness that necessitates the interconnectedness of humans, plants, animals, and the Earth. Deep Ecology is significant both as a philosophical proposition and as a movement within the realm of environmental ethics. As a form of philosophical advocacy, its objective is to enhance the quality of human interactions with the natural world by subverting the notion of “instrumental value”.

Deep ecology presents itself as “deep” because it delves into profound inquiries regarding the role of human existence and our perspective about the world of non-humans. The fundamental tenet of “deep ecology” is the scientific understanding of the interconnectedness of all forms of life in the biosphere. They consider anthropocentrism, which is the belief that humans are the central focus of existence, to be a flawed perspective. Deep ecologists argue that adopting an eco-centric perspective aligns more accurately with the reality of life on Earth. Instead of viewing people as completely distinct, they see us as essential components interwoven within the tapestry of existence. They advocate for the necessity of adopting a more submissive and non-confrontational stance towards the earth in order to ensure the survival of both humanity and the planet. Consequently, anthropocentric perspectives are labelled as “shallow ecology”, while biocentric views are referred to as “deep ecology”, as they explore the interdependence of all elements on the planet. The deep ecology platform comprises eight fundamental principles that serve as guidelines for a restructured approach to understanding our relationship with the world of nature. This approach extends beyond the conventional notion of the environment, encompassing not only living organisms but also the broader context of the world in which we live. The fundamental essence of deep ecology lies in its foundational principles and beliefs (Sessions 85). The eight principles are as follows:

- The well-being and flourishing of human and non-human life on Earth have value in themselves. These values are independent of the usefulness of the non-human world for human purposes.
- Richness and diversity of life forms contribute to the realization of these values and are also values in themselves.
- Humans have no right to reduce this richness and diversity except to satisfy vital needs.

- The flourishing of human life and cultures is compatible with a substantial decrease of the human population. The flourishing of non-human life requires such a decrease.
- Present human interference with the non-human world is excessive, and the situation is rapidly worsening.
- The dominant socio-political living situation must therefore end. This will affect basic economic, technological, and ideological structures. The resulting state of affairs will be deeply different from the present.
- The ideological change is mainly that of appreciating quality (dwelling in situations of inherent worth) rather than adhering to an increasingly higher standard of living. There will be a profound awareness of the difference between big and great.
- Those who subscribe to the foregoing points have an obligation directly or indirectly to participate in the attempt to implement the necessary changes.

(Sessions 68)

Amitav Ghosh is a notable Indian writer who is known for his innovative approach to his work. He produces literature that aids in transforming people's conflicting attitudes towards the environment. He is a renowned author in the literary sphere, born on July 11, 1956, in Kolkata. He obtained his graduate and postgraduate degrees from the University of Delhi and thereafter pursued his Ph.D. at Oxford University. His exceptional ability to engage with the subject matter has earned him numerous esteemed accolades, including the 54th Jnanpith Award in 2018, the Grand Prix of the Blue Metropolis Festival in Montreal, the Padma Shri in 2007, the Sahitya Akademi for *The Shadow Line*, the Ananda Puraskar, and the Dan David Prize. He has been bestowed with a multitude of prestigious literary accolades, solidifying his prominent position in the literary realm. His primary focus is on the domination of living organisms by the anthropocentric mindset of contemporary society. His works explore the oppression exerted by humans on both other humans and the natural world. The natural world has emerged as a significant obstacle for humanity in the twenty-first century, and what is ironic is that humans themselves are to blame for this predicament.

Nature is a repository of valuable resources, yet the insatiable greed of humans has extensively abused it. It has become a global issue that individuals are reluctant to acknowledge. Through his writing, the author delves into the problem's intricacies. His literary works revolve around environmental issues, such as *Gun Island*, *The Great Derangement*, and *The Living Mountain*. His persistent endeavours bring attention to the challenges of the Anthropocene, which denotes the impact of the environment and the harm inflicted by humans. Human beings have intentionally harmed the environment in an attempt to enhance the natural beauty of their surroundings. The urban landscape is adorned with plotted plants. Consequently, people neglected their obligations to protect and preserve the environment. The relentless exploitation of nature causes the earth to confront the challenges of climate change. Despite several warnings from scientists and researchers about the contemporary ecological crisis, human beings persisted in their pursuit of infrastructural expansion. The degradation of natural resources has steadily worsened over time. The farmer required additional chemical fertilisers to cultivate crops, resulting in a decrease in their nutritional value and flavour and negatively impacting the human immune system.

Amitav Ghosh skilfully examines the significant problem of environmental deterioration in his book *The Living Mountain* (2022) by raising a vital issue regarding the notion of “deep ecology” with certain questions against the concept of “shallow ecology”. The world is currently grappling with the issue of ecological disruption, and it is imperative to raise global awareness about it. This research illustrates the deep affection and concern for the environment exhibited by the inhabitants of the valley, who diligently adhere to their age-old customs in order to save the natural resources. The book scrutinizes the alternative viewpoint of urban dwellers, frequently depicted as harsh and environmentally harmful. The urban population portrays itself as contemporary intellectuals and expects others to follow in their footsteps. The author introduces a surprising turn of events at the climax and emphasises the significance of ancient philosophy. The rituals and customs, often dismissed as stupid, actually serve a significant purpose in maintaining a harmonious equilibrium between humans and the environment. The author shows that it is very pertinent to embrace ancient rituals and customs with a view to dispelling anthropocentrism for the sake of

advocating biocentric egalitarianism. The book ends with the “self-realisation” of the urban people regarding the deep association between the valley people and the living mountain. The writer has attempted to emphasise the significance of nature in the contemporary living environment, which is increasingly plagued by toxic air pollution.

The text focuses on climate change and serves as a compelling illustration of the profound influence of the activities of human beings, which is dominated by the notion of anthropocentrism. The book vividly portrays the immense force of nature by questioning the philosophy of a humancentric worldview. Humans have a strong affinity for their intellectual capabilities, and some individuals aspire to possess complete control over everything. Through his powerful articulations, Ghosh portrays the conflict between the forces of humanity and the forces of nature. Both sources function in distinct ways: nature exists to support living beings, while certain humans want to exploit it for the sake of their personal gain. He has virtual acquaintances with whom he engages in discussions about new topics to investigate. This emerging trend of knowledge acquisition offers a multitude of opportunities to address significant matters. The writer’s friend had a dream about the Anthropocene and the potential of the human intellect, which she wanted to explore with him. Maansi, a friend of the author, had a dream about the exquisite scenery of a mountain valley. The abundant wonders of nature adorn the mountain valley, transforming it into a heavenly oasis on earth. The valley’s inhabitants lived within its confines and held a deep reverence for the natural surroundings. They gained knowledge about the mountain while showing respect, love, and reverence for it. They did not hoard their knowledge, but instead shared it with the next generation. They summoned the Mahaparbhat to their cherished mountain, where they engaged in singing and dancing. Their existence revolved around the Mahaparbhat, as this mountain provided them with valuable resources such as trees, honey, herbs, mushrooms, flowers, and nuts. The people of the valley engage in bartering their valuable Mahaparbhat’s treasures with metropolitan merchants in exchange for the products they need. The mountain’s valuable resources brought joy to the inhabitants living in the valley until an outsider succumbed to their thirst for those resources. The urban trader had a strong fascination for the valley’s riches and made efforts to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the mountainous region. The

urban merchant's fascination caused anxiety among the inhabitants of the valley. Urban merchants perceive Valley people, who worship nature as God, as ignorant. The residents of the valley revered nature as a divine entity. The level of communication that was established between the indigenous people and the Mahaparbhat during the worship ceremony clearly depicts the inseparable bond between humans and non-humans. They danced, and their feet's beat was influenced by a unique signal from Mahaparbhat. The signal from Mahaparbhat is decoded, and the message is believed and understood. These signals primarily notify individuals of both favourable and unfavourable situations. The predictions assist individuals in mentally preparing themselves to handle future circumstances. On one occasion, the exact same event occurred when Mahaparbhat warned them about an impending catastrophe. "a cycle of time has ended,' they said, 'and another one has begun: the cycle of tribulation. Strangers are coming from afar, a hord of them, armed with terrible weapons" (Ghosh 13). Their love and peace intertwined so deeply in their lives, enabling them to experience true happiness. The author conveyed his ecological concern by foregrounding the deep association between humans and the non-human world. He embodied nature's essence and reciprocated its love for them.

The intrusion of purportedly contemporary individuals has marred the splendour of the pristine valley. Initially, the anthropoids issued a threat to either surrender or face enslavement. Consequently, it would be more advantageous for the individuals to collaborate with the anthropoids. Their advanced weaponry instilled fear and caused them to surrender as a result of their diminished confidence. They were compelled to engage in actions that went against their volition, moral principles, and customary practices. The inhabitants of the valley avoided the mountain, but the anthropoid compelled them to ascend Mahaparbhat in order to get the treasure hidden within it. The treasure of Mahaparbhat has the potential to make someone very wealthy. The inhabitants of the valley were reluctant to ascend, but the anthropoids exerted pressure on them to climb the Mahaparbhat. As a consequence of this ascent, the inhabitants of the valley were confronted with a calamity that they had been anticipating. A group of intrepid mountaineers find themselves in a perilous predicament, teetering between life and death. This gruesome spectacle causes the anthropoid to comprehend the veracity of

the beliefs of people of the valley. Human beings quickly recognise their error and are unable to discover any means of escape from this challenging predicament. This Mahaparbhat was an unfamiliar location for them, and the inhabitants of the valley were the sole protectors of the rescuer. The anthropoids had no alternative but to collaborate with the valley inhabitants. The situation deteriorated for everyone, yet somehow a few individuals were able to extricate themselves from the impending catastrophe. They encountered fatalities among the mountaineers on their expedition to Mahaparbhat and witnessed mortality firsthand. This traumatic event altered their perspective on life. Their sense of superiority dissipated, leading to an enhanced attitude of acceptance towards the world. They returned from Mahaparbhat as transformed individuals. They said, “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).

The elderly grandmother wept at this calamity. She pointed out their impolite behaviour towards them and their Mahaparbhat. “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?” (Ghosh 35). The writer has portrayed the valley people as exceptionally gifted individuals who have demonstrated the notion of intrinsic value through the extension of their narrow “ego self”. The author contemplates the omnipotence of nature as the ultimate force that sustains the planet.

Amitav Ghosh has effectively refuted the modern ideology of the colonisers and reinstated belief in the traditional concept of the valley people. In the book, the author presents two contrasting elements. The first image portrays the profound affection between humans and nature, while the second image depicts the self-centred desire of individuals to harness the force of nature for personal gain and financial advantage. The book depicted a conflict between love and hatred towards nature, with the eventual triumph of those who hold a deep affection for the natural world. The author portrays this triumph as a manifestation of an abundance of knowledge, love, patience, respect, and other such qualities directed towards nature.

This book explores the concept of the anthropocene, which highlights the clash of ideas. The contemporary era has oscillated between ancient thought and modern ideology. Hence, it is essential for everybody to comprehend the value of nature. Contemporary society continues to display a lack of awareness and understanding regarding environmental concerns. Their acts result in the destruction of the environment and do significant damage to our world. The impact of nature's destruction extends beyond itself and has significant repercussions for our overall existence. In modern culture, individuals exert significant effort to uphold a healthy lifestyle; nevertheless, regrettably, this endeavour has had adverse effects on their health. The bountiful resources bestowed upon us by nature have been misused and mismanaged by humanity. Therefore, every living thing must confront the unpleasant aspects of the environment. Through his lucid articulations, Amitav Ghosh sheds attention on the environmental crises that arise primarily from our humancentric worldview.

This study centres on the human mindset that refuses to acknowledge the dominance of the environment. Contemporary individuals use the natural world, thereby exposing themselves to perilous viruses and infectious diseases. The global population experienced the pandemic as a means of comprehending the significance of safeguarding the environment. Humanity has reached a critical point where it is imperative for all individuals to take action in order to preserve our planet. To protect the planet, it is necessary to follow age-old rituals that pertain to nature. This book emphasises the significance of ancient wisdom that is disregarded in favour of modernism. The writer endeavours to persuade the readers to cultivate a profound connection with nature and adhere to the longstanding tradition of recognising the presence of divinity in the natural world.

Works Cited

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