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Himalayan Ecologies under Colonial strains: Reading Amitav Ghosh's *The Living Mountain* with Ramachandra Guha's *The Unquiet Woods*

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Abstract: Indigenous practices have always been dismissed as irrational or wasteful by colonial powers in order to legitimize acts of expropriation under the guise of modernization and development. Colonial forestry and state-led development strategies have altered mountains and forests into contested political terrains, both socially and ecologically. This paper presents a comprehensive analysis of these pressures on Himalayan ecologies by reading Amitav Ghosh's *The Living Mountain: a Fable for Our Times* (2022) alongside Ramachandra Guha's *The Unquiet Woods: Ecological Change and Peasant Resistance in the Himalayas* (1989). By juxtaposing Ghosh's fictional allegory with Guha's real-world accounts, the paper illuminates the devastating impacts of colonial policies on the environment and indigenous resilient ways of adapting to the altered landscapes. Applying the frameworks of postcolonial ecocriticism and eco-orientalism- the tendency of belittling and exoticizing non-western landscapes in order to depoliticize environmental degradation, the paper explores the lingering yet often ignored impacts of colonialism on vulnerable ecosystem.

The study traces the roots of environmental degradation and indigenous resilience back to the colonial development of Himalayan territories, their strategic significance, and the disastrous impact of British resource extraction and urban planning on indigenous populations. In doing so, the study calls for a decolonial rethinking of climate narratives, that transcends the eco-orientalist discussions of mountain ecologies by elevating indigenous knowledge, countering extractivism, promoting epistemic disobedience, and fostering sustainable collective living.

Keywords: Himalayan ecologies, colonial strains, postcolonial ecocriticism, indigenous resilience, eco-orientalism.

Introduction

The significant vulnerabilities caused by the rapidly changing climate in the Himalayan region, also known as the “Third Pole”, offers a compelling setting for exploring the long term colonial and neocolonial footprints that have threatened the fragile ecosystem and socio-economic livelihoods of the region. This paper situates Amitav Ghosh’s *The Living Mountain: a Fable for Our Times* within the historical account presented in Ramachandra Guha’s *The Unquiet Woods: Ecological Change and Peasant Resistance in the Himalayas* to show how mountains and forests have always been viewed as contested political terrains. These spaces have been reduced to colonial forestry practices and state-led development policies, which have transformed the social and ecological fabric of these landscapes. This process resembles a new form of colonialism- “environmental colonialism”- defined by Mary Lyn Stoll as “...the diverse ways in which colonial practices have affected the natural environments of indigenous peoples” (1155). Ramachandra Guha, in *Environmentalism: A Global History*, provides a comprehensive account of the historical roots of environmental degradation and the exploitative practices of colonial and neo-colonial powers worldwide, who viewed nature primarily as a resource for economic gain, often disregarding long-term ecological consequences. Here, the exploitation of the Himalayas is presented not as an isolated event but becomes part of a much larger historical pattern. The onset of industrialization was closely tied to imperial expansion, as colonial powers acquired vast territories worldwide and reshaped local economies to serve the needs of the metropolis. As he notes, “British ships built of Burma teak, their sailors wearing clothes of cotton grown in India, drinking Kenyan coffee sweetened with sugar planted in the Caribbean”(6), clearly illustrates the global network of colonial extractivism.

Historian Alfred W. Crosby, in *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe 900-1900*, contends that the success of colonists partly stemmed from their ability to modify native ecosystems by introducing foreign species and disrupting established ecological relationships. These outsiders introduced native societies to foreign markets by introducing exotic invasive species that limited indigenous peoples’ capacity to protect themselves against both economic and biological intruders. Crosby explains how European explorers, settlers, and traders- whether inadvertently or intentionally- introduced non-native species to new

territories, fundamentally altering local ecosystems. Wherever they migrated, they carried with them plants, animals, pathogens, and weeds. The introduction of these non-native species and the displacement of indigenous species disrupted ecological relationships as well as habitat destruction. Such disruptions were evident in India, where the degradation of Himalayan forest ecology began during colonial rule, driven by imperial exploitation through forced displacement and land degradation. Colonial authorities imposed land management practices that prioritized cash-crop farming and resource extraction, leading to deforestation and soil erosion. Indigenous communities, despite their sustainable farming methods, were marginalized and blamed (Crosby).

Guha's historical monograph presents a well-documented empirical account of how colonial forestry—through its laws, institutions and acts of commodifying forests, expanded into state-led development projects that gradually altered the social and ecological fabric of the Central Himalaya. This widespread exploitation and dispossession awakened resisting voices within indigenous communities who fought to protect their livelihoods. Amitav Ghosh's fictional narrative acts as an allegory for these real-world struggles. He presents a living mountain, an indigenous valley community (the Varvaroi) that must protect its community from external exploiters (the Anthropoi), by reasserting their sacred relationship with the land. Guha's ethnographic findings provide an analytical framework to historicize the extractive logic dramatized by Ghosh's Anthropoi. Analyzing these texts through the lens of postcolonial ecocriticism and the eco-orientalist outlook that demeans and exoticizes non-western landscapes to depoliticize environmental degradation, the paper highlights the visible but often overlooked impacts of the colonial influence on vulnerable ecosystems, as well as the persistence of such practices in postcolonial development strategies. In doing so, it advocates a decolonial environmental critique. The argument unfolds across four interrelated subsections. It begins by examining Ghosh's critique of the extractivist logic and eco-orientalist representations of nature, and then shifts to Guha's account of peasant resistance—the Chipko movement

The Living Mountain as an Allegory of Colonial Extractivism

Amitav Ghosh has persistently been concerned with contemporary issues, and climate crisis, being an urgent global concern, occupies a significant place in his current literary oeuvre. Across both his fictional and non-fictional narratives, such as *The Hungry Tide* (2004), *Gun Island* (2019), *The Great Derangement* (2016) and *The Nutmeg's Curse* (2021), he critically explores the impact of colonial industrialization, often veiled as

symbols of progress and advancement. The present paper, in view of the preceding discussion, aims at bringing up the inherent exploitation embedded in Amitav Ghosh's novella *The Living Mountain*. This short fable becomes a striking allegory for colonial intrusion, extractivist ideology, and anthropogenic control over ecology and indigenous livelihoods, thereby exposing issues of exploitation, resistance, and ecological devastation. The novella opens with a conversation between an unnamed narrator and his online book club friend, Maansi. The narrative gains momentum when Maansi comes across the term "Anthropocene", which triggers a "horrible dream", set in a Himalayan valley guarded by the sacred 'Mahaparat' (Great Mountain). The narrative adopts the framework of a dream to offer a striking allegory of environmental destruction caused due to reckless human activity. The valley people revere the mountain as a living entity, grounded in a belief that:

Of all the world's mountains, ours was the most alive; that it would protect us and look after us – but only one 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. (7)

This reflects their deep spiritual connection to the natural world, characterised by reverence and restraint rather than domination. Despite the differing opinions of the warring villages, they remain united by a common long-held belief that no outsider should ever ascend the slopes of the mountain to plunder its natural bounty. Once a year, during trading week, the Elder-people go to the visiting merchants and exchange the natural products of the valley for trading goods. After the visitors depart, the valley people celebrate the bounty of the Great Mountain through "a ceremony of gratitude" (9), feasting and dancing in honour of the Mountain and its inexhaustible gifts to the valley people and reaffirming their ecological interconnectedness.

However, this harmonious coexistence, tranquillity and ecological sacredness are soon disrupted by the arrival of outsiders- the Anthropoi. These intruders represent imperial ambition and colonial extractivist who commodifies and extracts the mountain's resources while disregarding the indigenous knowledge systems and cultural practices. The invasion of the "Anthropoi" subtly echoes Rachel Carson's warning in *Silent Spring*: "As man proceeds towards his announced goal of the conquest of nature, he has written a depressing record of destruction, directed not only against the earth he inhabits but against the life that shares it with him"(86). The valley community has a firm belief in the sacredness of the Great Mountain which is systematically undermined

by the Anthropoi. They dismiss their cultural traditions as outdated and inferior. Dismissing the sanctity of the mountain not just reflects a rejection of the indigenous cultural tradition but also exemplifies 'eco-orientalism'(Tori Bush). This Western parochialistic ideology stereotypes non-Western landscapes as primitive and hence vulnerable to natural calamities. Though the Elder-people show much apprehension, the Anthropoi soon grasp the Mountain's ecological abundance and assign commercial value to it. They send an envoy to study the riches of the valley, who meticulously records every minute detail with a hegemonic mind set to rob the valley of its long-preserved wealth. This emphasis on written documentation reflects the imposition of Western-oriental pedagogy, an encroachment of colonial ideology that disrupts the traditional oral transmission of knowledge, undermining spiritual and cultural integrity of the indigenous communities.

Like the colonizers, the Anthropoi disregard the historical and ontological significance of the Mountain and embark on a mission to conquer its biological, historical and cultural resources to expand their own power. Their savants conclude that great riches lies hidden within the mountain of which the valley people were unaware and because "...we were not making use of the mountain's riches, they were fully justified in seizing them and taking whatever they wished" (14). They assert dominance and political control by attacking the valley, deploying their army of fierce soldiers (the Kraani) and silencing indigenous knowledge systems. This mind-set exemplifies what Huggan and Tiffin describe as 'ecological exoticism', wherein non-western landscapes are transformed into aestheticized commodities to wipe out the colonial footprints. As the Anthropoi rise in authority, the valley people begin to internalize their ideology see them as superior. Gradually, they succumb to the lure of progress and economic advancement: "...we burned with the desire to ascend those slopes ourselves" (19).

The destabilization caused by the climbers, triggers catastrophic landslides and avalanches, resulting in loss of life and ecological devastation. The Varvaroi's descent into greed and collaboration with the Anthropoi underscores the insidious nature of colonial ideology and capitalist desire: "...no longer were we Anthropoi and Varvaroi- we were one."(33). Through this allegory, Ghosh bluntly exposes the impact of environmental colonialism, illuminating how the colonial powers have irreversibly marred the environment, ensnaring indigenous communities in a cycle of exploitation from which escape seems increasingly difficult.

Indigenous Activism and the ‘Chipko Andolan’ in *The Unquiet Woods*

Ramchandra Guha’s case study of Uttarakhand between 1815 and 1949 examines a dual structure of domination- the princely state of Tehri Garhwal, which claimed legitimate authority, and the colonial territory of Kumaun, which enforced authority through race and language, as presented in *The Unquiet Woods: Ecological Change and Peasant Resistance in the Himalayas*. Guha’s work justifies the idioms of social protest and lends creditability to Amitav Ghosh’s fictional depiction of the roots of ecological crisis and resistance in similarly fragile landscapes. Published in 1989, the book offers an ontogenesis of the Chipko Andolan while exposing the impact of colonial intervention on the fragile Himalayan. The document emphasizes the mutually beneficial relationship that existed between forests and indigenous societies in the region prior to colonial intervention, before being “...superseded by another system of forest management...which rested on radically different set of priorities” (34). An examination of the agricultural practices of hill cultivators in river valleys reveals an indigenous model of an egalitarian economy. Despite experiencing a challenging ecological landscape —steep terrain, inadequate cultivable land, fragile topsoil, poor irrigation—they demonstrated incredible resilience by producing two or three annual harvests of staple crops such as wheat, rice, and millet. Their subsistence farming practices allowed them to produce surplus grains for trade with neighbouring regions such as the southern plains and Tibet. Indigenous Himalayan communities relied on the natural bounty not only for sustenance but also for cultural practices.

The conservation systems traditionally governed by village councils and customary laws, emphasized collective stewardship and sustainable use. Sacred groves were revered as an essential part of cultural identity and spirituality within indigenous belief systems. However, Guha asserts that colonialism introduced disruptive policies and land tenure systems that eroded indigenous sovereignty and altered the ecological landscape, “...the only major intrusion by the state in the life of the peasant before its takeover of the forest was the system of forced labour...coolie utar, bardaish, begar, godam...”(25). Peasant resistance emerged in response to the ecological carnage caused by commercial forestry, which changed the precept of an egalitarian economy by destroying the economic kilter and the very existence of the society. Before colonial rule curtailed access to subsistence forest resources, village communities upheld the sanctity of sacred groves, enforced seasonal bans on the collection of certain forest products, and imposed collective restrictions on activities like wood gathering

and grazing to prevent the degradation of the environment and protect human habitats. However, rampant deforestation in Uttarakhand was chiefly due to the expansion of railroads, which facilitated the extraction and transportation of timber and other forest products. Furthermore, with the implementation of scientific forestry methods, the British colonial government intensified the disconnection between the peasants and their natural surroundings. By prioritizing commercial timber production over indigenous customs and wisdom, the authorities deprived peasants of their traditional rights to timber resources, a crucial source of their income. They were compelled to cultivate cash crops like tea and cinchona, which were unsuitable for the local environment leading to soil depletion and biodiversity loss. To further worsen their conditions they introduced new land tenure systems that metamorphosed traditional land-use practices by imposing strict rent obligations on peasants.

Guha provides fresh perspectives on the social policies inherent within colonial silviculture that essentialized the progressive conversion of mountain forests from their natural state, in which trees like oak and other broad-leaved trees that served essential village needs were superseded by commercially valuable coniferous species like chir, pine, and deodar cedar. This transformation enabled colonial administrations to exert authority over land use, resource allocation, and labor, thereby reinforcing colonial hegemony and perpetuating socio-economic inequalities. Scientific forestry practices, “designed to reorder nature” (59), became a major cause of ecological decline and agrarian protests, ultimately leading to movements such as the Chipko Andolan. Guha claims that commercial forestry which “...divides the forests into blocks which are completely closed after the trees are felled- disrupts existing patterns of resource utilization” (49). He also documented traditional forms of rebellion practiced by these hill peasants in Tehri Garhwal such as the *dhandak*, derived from *dand kiye gi*, a form of collective protest in response to any form of oppression (67).

Emerging from a confluence of Gandhian non-violence, the environmental activism of Sunderlal Bahuguna and Chandi Prasad Bhatt, and elements of Marxist radicalism, the Chipko Andolan responded to the ecological crises such as landslides (e.g., Tawaghat landslide of 1977) and floods caused due to commercial forestry. The movement witnessed an active participation across social groups including women, children and marginalized communities such as the Bajgis (musicians). It aimed not only to protect the woods but also to ensure sustainable resource access to the hill peasants. Guha's narrative concludes in 1984, following the

movement's triumph in persuading the state government to impose a 15-year ban on all commercial logging. However, he continues to hint at the movement's contemporary expansion- led predominantly by women, to protect the entire mountain ecosystem from three threats of destructive development- large dams, mining permits and alcoholism.

Both Ghosh's *The Living Mountain* and Guha's *The Unquiet Woods* can be read within a shared framework of environmental adversity caused by the enforcement of colonial heterogeneity, which disrupted the egalitarian and homogeneous structures of indigenous communities that relied on a delicate balance between man and nature for sustenance. Both narratives recognize the concern in women's voices and their crucial roles in environmental activism and resistance. In both works, women emerge as custodians of cultural traditions, active agents of environmental protection, and resilient pillars within their communities. Much like the Adepts in Ghosh's narrative who spiritually communicate with the massive mountain "through the soles of their feet" (Ghosh 9), the women in Guha's account demonstrate a deep connection to their natural surroundings and play instrumental roles in safeguarding their communities' ecological heritage by subverting the traditional gender roles.

This analysis further calls for a decolonial ecological turn that challenges Eurocentric narratives of progress and centers indigenous voices and knowledge systems. As contended by Malcom Ferdinand in *Decolonial Ecology: Thinking from the Caribbean World*: "... an ecology of the enslaved...an ecology that maintains continuities with the indigenous...a decolonial ecology...Decolonial ecology articulates the confrontation of contemporary ecological issues through an emancipation from the colonial fracture by rising up from the slave ship's hold" (13-14). The defiant voice of the elderly woman in Ghosh's narrative against the Anthropoi: "How dare you speak of the Mountain as though you wear its masters, and it were your plaything, your child? Have you understood nothing of what it has been trying to teach you?" (Ghosh 35), emphasizes the importance of reclaiming indigenous narratives and resisting capitalist exploitation. This turn relies on Marzec's assertion of a relationship between representation and manipulation as "the violence of assuming representational control" that becomes a form of material control. Land is no longer seen as a lived space rather reimagined as deficient of productivity. The ideology of improvement legitimized intervention by projecting privatization and exploitation as rational, progressive and thence necessary (Marzec 423). In contrast, traditional

storytelling and cultural practices represent a form of the decolonial resilience, reconnecting the valley people with their ancestral wisdom and the living essence of the Mountain.

Thus, both narratives advocate a return to an unravaged state of nature and argue for a sustainable comprehensive growth- a harmony and bond between man and nature is required. It is seen that when this bond is shattered, disharmony and chaos reign and the bounty of nature is considered only as a magic source for inexhaustible material wealth. When the ‘distance’ is lost nature smites to preserve its own resources. This ‘distance’ indicates a plea for a cordial interaction between nature and humans. It admonishes the people of the valley (or any foreign settlers) from exploiting its scenic beauty and ecological abundance (Sharma). However whether a decolonial ecological turn that demands a fundamental shift in societal values and power dynamics is practically achievable remains questionable. Both texts exemplify what Ferdinand calls “modernity’s colonial and environmental double history” (3) while foregrounding the voice of the non-whites/ the marginalized in environmental discourses and advocating for more just climate policies.

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