Journal of South Asian Exchanges
A Multidisciplinary Journal of South Asian Research
ISSN: 3048-8877 | Peer Reviewed
Pine Press

JSAE: 2.1, 2025 | https://saexchanges.com/v2n104 | https://doi.org/10.21659/jsae/v2n1/v2n104

Research article

Amitav Ghosh's *The Living Mountain* (2022): An Interconnectivity between Colonialism and Climate Change

Aarthi R.M.[1] ✉ & Rani P.L.[2] ✉

[1]Assistant Professor, Department of English, Sri Sathya Sai Institute of Higher Learning, Andhra Pradesh, India.

[2]Professor, Dean of Humanities and Social Sciences, Sri Sathya Sai Institute of Higher Learning, Andhra Pradesh, India.

Abstract

This paper examines Amitav Ghosh's "The Living Mountain: A Fable for Our Times" to understand the interconnections between colonialism and climate change. Ghosh's narrative explores the impacts of colonial expansion on the environment, revealing a historical continuity that links colonial practices with the contemporary climate crisis. By employing an ecocritical framework, the paper analyses how Ghosh critiques colonialism's destructive impact on nature and challenges modern readers to reconsider the long-term environmental consequences of imperialist endeavours. The paper further delves into how the novella serves as a clarion call to rethink human relationships with nature and to advocate a symbiotic coexistence.

Keywords: Amitav Ghosh, colonialism, postcolonial ecocriticism, ecological degradation, *The Living Mountain*.

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS **Climate Action**

During the colonial era, the European Enlightenment was marked by a belief in rationality, scientific progress, and the moral imperative of "civilising" non-European peoples. These ideas were not merely philosophical but deeply political, often deployed to morally justify the violent expansion of European empires. Rudyard Kipling's poem *The White Man's Burden* (1899) encapsulated this ideological mission, casting colonisation as a noble

Article History: Received: 30 Mar 2025. Revised: 22 April 2025. Accepted: 12 May 2025. Published: 14 May 2025

Citation: R. M., Aarthi & Rani P.L. 2025. Amitav Ghosh's *The Living Mountain*: An Interconnectivity between Colonialism and Climate Change. *Journal of South Asian Exchanges* 2.1 < https://saexchanges.com/v2n1/v2n104.pdf>

endeavour in which Europeans bore the responsibility of uplifting "uncivilised" societies. As Ottuh (2020) articulates in his analysis of Nigeria's colonial experience, the imperial project was driven by the "Three C's"—Civilisation, Christianity, and Commerce—all of which legitimised the domination and exploitation of colonised peoples. In recent discourse, scholars have proposed a fourth "C", **Climate**, as a new front in the enduring legacy of colonial domination (Gonzalez, 2020).

The link between colonialism and climate change has been increasingly recognised in contemporary environmental literature. Notably, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) in its Sixth Assessment Report titled *Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability* (2022), explicitly identifies colonialism as both a historical and ongoing driver of climate vulnerability. The report states that "historical and ongoing patterns of inequity, such as colonialism... contribute to climate vulnerability" (IPCC, 2022, p. 13). These patterns persist today in the form of coloniality, a term used to describe the systemic inequalities and power structures that endure beyond the official end of colonial rule (Maldonado-Torres, 2007). The consequences of these structures are most acutely felt in the Global South, where nations face the harshest climate impacts despite contributing the least to global emissions.

European colonial expansion, which began in earnest during the late fifteenth century, was enabled by technological innovations such as the mariner's compass, which allowed explorers to navigate distant lands. While these early voyages were ostensibly about trade, they quickly evolved into full-scale territorial conquest. European powers established lucrative trade routes and began extracting resources from colonised lands, eventually imposing foreign governance systems and erasing indigenous knowledge and practices. These extractive economies were designed to benefit the metropoles, laying the groundwork for patterns of industrialisation and urbanisation that have since contributed significantly to greenhouse gas emissions and global warming.

Scientific studies have long established the role of industrial activity, particularly the burning of fossil fuels, in global warming. As early as the 19th century, Eunice Foote (1856) and later Svante Arrhenius (1896) demonstrated how carbon dioxide emissions could trap heat in the Earth's atmosphere. While industrialisation has created widespread environmental degradation, countries in the Global South disproportionately bear the brunt of climate change's consequences, from rising sea levels and desertification to food insecurity and displacement (Agarwal & Narain, 1991).

Colonialism not only exploited the human and natural resources of colonised regions but also disrupted traditional ecological knowledge and sustainable environmental practices. The imposition of Western systems of agriculture, mining, and land use replaced more harmonious relationships between communities and their ecosystems. This historical dislocation, compounded by continued economic dependency and climate injustice, illustrates how colonial legacies are embedded in the current environmental crisis. This paper argues that the ideologies and practices of European colonialism—legitimised

through Enlightenment rationality and imperialist discourse—laid the material and philosophical foundation for contemporary climate change. Through a historical examination of colonial extraction, industrialisation, and the enduring structures of coloniality, this essay explores how the climate crisis disproportionately affects the Global South and reflects the unfinished project of decolonisation.

Amidst this growing recognition, several contemporary thinkers and writers have begun to interrogate the historical roots of environmental degradation. Among them, Amitav Ghosh stands out as a pioneering South Asian voice writing explicitly about climate change and its entanglement with the colonial legacy. His literary oeuvre—including *The Hungry Tide* (2011), *The Great Derangement* (2016), *Gun Island* (2019), *The Nutmeg's Curse* (2021), *Jungle Nama* (2021), and *The Living Mountain: A Fable for Our Times* (2022)—offers nuanced reflections on the ecological fallout of empire and capitalist expansion. In *The Living Mountain*, Ghosh weaves a fable that allegorically explores the deep-rooted interconnections between imperialism and environmental collapse. Through a narrative that interlaces the legacies of colonial conquest with the degradation of the natural world, he presents a poignant critique of how colonial ideologies continue to shape postcolonial societies' relationship with nature. While the novella adopts a mythic structure, it functions as a powerful lens through which one can reevaluate the environmental consequences of colonial expansion, not merely as a historical process, but as a persistent structure of domination that informs our present crisis.

Amitav Ghosh's *The Living Mountain: A Fable for Our Times* is his shortest fictional work, yet it is imbued with profound insights concerning humanity's disintegrating relationship with the natural world. The novella can be situated within the tradition of the dream allegory, wherein the protagonist, Maansi, envisions herself as a descendant of an ecotopian valley society. This imagined community sustains a harmonious and reciprocal relationship with the natural environment, with its existence centered around the Mahaparbat—the titular living mountain, revered not merely as a geographical entity but as a sentient and sacred being.

The Mahaparbat functions as both a physical and spiritual anchor for the valley's inhabitants, whose culture and worldview are shaped by an ethos of ecological reverence. This symbiosis is ritualised through the "ceremony of gratitude," a communal event through which reverence for the mountain is passed on to future generations. Central to this ritual are the Adepts, women dancers believed to possess a spiritual connection with Mahaparbat. Through their movements, these Adepts transmit ancestral knowledge, reaffirming the community's cosmological and ecological beliefs. The valley, abundant in natural resources such as mushrooms, medicinal herbs, and a unique, miraculous nut, sustains a modest trade with distant lands. However, access to the valley is strictly regulated; outsiders, including tradesmen, are prohibited from entering, thereby preserving the sanctity and isolation of Mahaparbat. This equilibrium is irrevocably

disrupted with the arrival of colonisers, marking the narrative's pivot from ecological harmony to environmental degradation.

This paper proposes to undertake a critical reading of *The Living Mountain* as a postcolonial ecological allegory, aligning its thematic concerns with the arguments presented in Ghosh's earlier nonfiction work, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (2016). In Part II of this text, titled "History," Ghosh articulates a compelling critique of colonialism and imperialism, asserting that the rise of industrialisation and urbanisation in Western nations was made possible through the exploitation of the Global South. He cites numerous historical instances to illustrate how Asian countries, in particular, have disproportionately borne the consequences of environmental devastation. While Ghosh implicates colonial structures in precipitating the climate crisis, he does not exonerate the broader human community. Instead, he offers a sweeping indictment of modernity and anthropocentrism, suggesting that the current ecological catastrophe is a cumulative consequence of humanity's collective estrangement from the non-human world. Within this framework, *The Living Mountain* emerges as both a fable and a warning—a mythopoetic narrative that critiques colonial extractivism while mourning the loss of ecological consciousness. The paper aims to explore this nexus by applying an ecocritical framework to understand how Ghosh critiques the destructive impact of colonialism on nature and the environment. By probing the novella's portrayal of imperialist exploitation, the paper seeks to uncover the long-term ecological consequences that have often been overlooked in traditional historical accounts. Ghosh's narrative suggests that environmental degradation a nd the crisis resulting from colonial practices are not a relic of the past but an ongoing influence on the present, resulting in the contemporary climate crisis. As such, the work of art is not merely a reflection on past injustices but a clarion call to action, urging modern readers to critically examine the environmental legacies left by colonial expansion.

Furthermore, the novella extends beyond the historical critique to challenge the contemporary assumptions about humanity's place in the natural world. Ghosh ideates a world where human existence is not characterised by control over nature but by an interdependent relationship with it. This vision of Ghosh encourages a re-evaluation of how humans understand human-nature relationships, pushing for a more sustainable and equitable approach to environmental stewardship. Through this exploration of the convergence between colonialism and climate change, the writer invites readers to reconsider the long-term effects of imperialism on both the physical environment and the ideological constructs that shape one's understanding of it.

This research paper will investigate these critical themes, offering a nuanced analysis of *The Living Mountain* as both a historical commentary and a contemporary call to rethink human-nature relationships. By unpacking the novella's ecocritical framework, the researchers hope to illuminate how Ghosh's work critiques the lasting impacts of

colonialism while providing a framework for reimagining a more harmonious relationship between humanity and the planet.

Literature Review

Amitav Ghosh's *The Living Mountain* has emerged as a pivotal text within the environmental humanities, engaging critically with themes of colonialism, ecological degradation, and indigenous resistance. Scholars have approached the narrative from diverse perspectives, collectively situating it within the broader discourse of environmental justice and decolonial thought.

Khanal and Gupta (2023**)** analyse Amitav Ghosh's *The Living Mountain* through a postcolonial eco-critical lens, highlighting the intricate relationship between colonialism, indigenous knowledge, and climate action. Their study reveals that the novella portrays the Anthropoi's exploitation of the sacred Mahaparbat and the subsequent erosion of indigenous ecological wisdom. The authors argue that Ghosh critiques the colonial mindset that views nature as a resource to be conquered, emphasising the importance of indigenous knowledge in developing sustainable solutions to the climate crisis.

Extending this critique, Karmakar and Chetty (2023) analyze the epistemological dimensions of Ghosh's narrative within the framework of the "decolonial turn" in environmental humanities. They contend that the story not only critiques material exploitation but also challenges the epistemic violence wrought by colonial modernity. By invoking the sacredness of the mountain, Ghosh offers an ontological alternative—one in which nature is not an inert resource but a sentient, spiritual force, demanding reverence and reciprocity.

Sharma (2022) highlights the story's contemporary relevance, describing it as a modern fable that distills urgent ecological and historical concerns into an accessible narrative form. She emphasises how Ghosh uses the fable genre to address ecological vulnerability and historical trauma, thereby enhancing the story's resonance across a wide audience.

In a complementary reading, Sarkar (2022) situates the narrative within the discourse of the Anthropocene. He underscores the paradox at the heart of human experience: the simultaneous assertion of anthropocentric dominance and the species' deep ecological fragility. According to Sarkar, *The Living Mountain* exemplifies this tension, serving as a cautionary tale about humanity's precarious entanglement with nature.

Thakur and Singh (2024) examine *The Living Mountain* as a critique of green imperialism, highlighting how colonial forces, represented by the Anthropoi, exploit both the environment and indigenous culture. They find that Ghosh uses the sacred mountain as a symbol of ecological and spiritual harmony disrupted by colonial intrusion, showing how extractive practices lead to both environmental degradation and the erosion of traditional knowledge systems.

Taken together, these studies underscore *The Living Mountain* as more than an environmental parable; it is a significant literary intervention that challenges extractive

worldviews and calls for decolonial ecological justice. Through his blending of myth, fable, and ecological consciousness, Ghosh constructs a narrative framework capable of resisting dominant paradigms and articulating a vision of environmental repair and reverence.

Literature Gap: Colonialism and Climate Change Nexus

The reviewed scholarship compellingly links *The Living Mountain* to the entwined legacies of colonialism and ecological degradation. Khanal and Gupta (2023) illuminate how Ghosh portrays colonial and neoliberal impulses through the figure of the Anthropoi, situating the exploitation of the Himalayan mountain within a longer history of environmental colonialism. Similarly, Karmakar and Chetty (2023) extend this critique by emphasising the epistemic dimensions of colonisation, particularly the erasure of indigenous ecological worldviews.

However, while these studies establish that colonial ideologies underpin contemporary environmental crises, the causal and systemic link between historical colonialism and modern climate change remains underexplored. The literature tends to frame colonialism and climate change as thematically aligned or symbolically interconnected, but it stops short of investigating how colonial extractivism has structurally evolved into present-day carbon capitalism and global environmental inequality.

This gap suggests a need for deeper analysis of Ghosh's narrative about historical continuities—how the exploitative logic of empire laid the groundwork for the current climate crisis. Such an approach could benefit from interdisciplinary dialogue with environmental history, political ecology, and postcolonial climate studies, illuminating how *The Living Mountain* critiques not only the ecological consequences of empire but also its persistence in contemporary climate governance and policy failures.

Colonial Exploitation and Environmental Degradation

Amitav Ghosh's *The Living Mountain* dramatises the enduring entanglement between colonialism and environmental degradation through the allegorical figures of the Anthropoi—invaders whose arrival signifies a rupture in the spiritual and ecological harmony once sustained by the native community. The Mahaparbat, a sacred mountain venerated as a living and sentient being, is gradually reduced to a site of extractive desire. As the narrator reflects, "As time went by, our attitude toward the mountain began to change—our reverence slowly shifted away from the mountain and attached itself instead to the spectacle of the climb. Gradually, as the spectacle took the place that the Mountain had once occupied in our hearts, we burned with the desire to ascend those slopes ourselves" (Ghosh, 2022, p. 19). This transformation parallels the environmental histories described by Mahony and Endfield (2018), who argue that colonial administrations often reimagined colonised environments as laboratories for economic and agricultural experimentation. In their article *Climate and Colonialism*, they detail how European

powers implemented large-scale ecological modifications, such as the introduction of monocultures and non-native species, while disregarding indigenous ecological knowledge. These practices not only disrupted local ecosystems but also laid the groundwork for persistent patterns of environmental degradation that now contribute to contemporary climate instability.

Viewing Ghosh's narrative through this lens reveals *The Living Mountain* not simply as a fable of ecological caution but as a literary intervention into the historical roots of the climate crisis. Mahony and Endfield (2018) emphasise that the colonial exploitation of land was inseparable from its ideological framing: colonised nature was seen as inert, empty, and available for extraction. Ghosh captures this epistemic shift through the changing attitudes of the natives, who initially relate to the Mahaparbat with reverence but gradually adopt the exploitative ethos of the Anthropoi. This mirrors the broader legacy of colonialism, where once-colonised communities, having been dispossessed of their ecological traditions, continue to struggle with the long-term consequences of resource depletion and environmental vulnerability. The landslides and disasters that follow in the novella allegorise the ecological aftershocks of colonial violence. In this way, Ghosh's work resonates with Mahony and Endfield's (2018) call to recognise colonialism's structural role in shaping today's uneven climate burdens, particularly those borne by the Global South.

Ecological Imperialism

The native people and their ecosystem further suffered under the effects of ecological imperialism. The term "ecological imperialism" was coined by Alfred Crosby in his seminal work *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900–1900*, in which he highlights the introduction of non-native biological species—animals, plants, and pathogens—by European colonisers into their colonies. This biotic transfer aided in the expansion and consolidation of colonial empires in South Asian and African regions. According to Crosby (1986), the introduction of foreign species often led to the destruction of native livestock and ecosystems, resulting in the exploitation and extinction of indigenous flora and fauna.

Crosby's concept of ecological imperialism is mirrored in Ghosh's *The Living Mountain* through the disruptive arrival of the Anthropoi, who introduce new technologies and practices that unravel the Valley's ecological equilibrium. Similar to the colonial imposition of foreign species and agricultural methods, the Anthropoi force the Varvaroi to abandon their traditional, nature-aligned practices, such as gathering fruits, honey, and herbs along the riverbanks, and adopt exploitative systems of agriculture. The Anthropoi compel the Varvaroi to clear forested lands for mass cultivation, producing goods solely to benefit the colonisers, the Kranaai. As the narrator recounts, "...under the Kraani's watchful eyes, we toiled in the fields to produce the materials they needed for the assault" (Ghosh, 2022, p. 16). This coerced transformation of land use and the resulting environmental

degradation reflect the historical impact of European colonisers on indigenous environments.

Cultural Disruption and Erasure of Indigenous Knowledge

Like many postcolonial narratives, Amitav Ghosh's *The Living Mountain* is steeped in colonial elements that underscore the fall of the native people. One of the primary tools used by the Anthropoi is the instillation of doubt and fear in the minds of the Varvaroi. Unfamiliar with the warfare technologies and advanced weaponry of the "civilised barbarians," the natives were outsmarted and overpowered. The Kranai—natives who served the Anthropoi—functioned as colonial agents by cultivating fear and reinforcing illusions of the Anthropoi's omnipotence. "...they created such a distance between themselves and us that we came to accept that the Anthropoi were not like us, that they were a different species of being" (Ghosh, 2022, p. 26).

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, a seminal voice in postcolonial theory, introduced the concept of the "cultural bomb" in *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*. He defines the cultural bomb as the colonisation of the native psyche through the imposition of the coloniser's language, culture, and educational systems. According to Ngũgĩ (1986):

> The effect of a cultural bomb is to annihilate a people's belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities, and ultimately in themselves. It makes them see their past as one wasteland of non-achievement... It even plants serious doubts about the moral rightness of struggle (p. 3).

Ngũgĩ argues that such colonisation results in long-lasting damage to cultural identity and collective consciousness. Ghosh's novella mirrors this dynamic. The Varvaroi gradually began to abandon their traditions, becoming increasingly disconnected from their cultural heritage. As the narrator reflects, "The Anthropoi had always told us that one of the reasons why they were so much stronger than us was that their ideas were universal, unlike the false, local beliefs that circulated amongst us, the Valley folk. They laughed at our inherited ideas of the Mountain's sacredness: that was all ignorant, pagan superstition, they had said" (Ghosh, 2022, p. 26).

While Ngũgĩ points to language and religion as primary agents of this cultural colonisation, Ghosh presents a subtler narrative of erosion—one that emerges from internalised doubt and the conditioning imposed by the Kranai. The Adepts were silenced, prevented from dancing or narrating tales about the sacred Mountain. This resulted in a cultural vacuum, deliberately created by colonial agents. The erasure reaches its peak when the Anthropoi themselves acknowledge the value of the very traditions they had dismissed. "...there was some wisdom in your beliefs after all... But, to our dismay, we found that we had forgotten the old stories and songs, and dances. We too had come to

believe that they were foolish and fantastical and had no place in the Age of Anthropoi..." (Ghosh, 2022, p. 34).

Resistance and Reclamation of Indigenous Knowledge

The novella's conclusion, where the Varvaroi reflect on their loss and seek to recover their ancestral wisdom, signals a moment of awakening. This narrative arc echoes broader movements in contemporary environmental thought that emphasise the importance of integrating indigenous knowledge into ecological restoration. Ghosh's work, therefore, can be read as a critique of colonialism and a call for the reclamation of cultural and ecological knowledge. The story argues that healing from environmental and cultural degradation involves revaluing the wisdom and practices once dismissed by colonial narratives.

Conclusion

Amitav Ghosh's *The Living Mountain: A Fable for Our Times* is a deceptively simple yet powerful allegory that charts the loss of reverence for nature and the rise of the Anthropocene. It interrogates the colonial ideologies that promoted ecological exploitation and disrupted indigenous ways of life. Through this modern fable, Ghosh illustrates the consequences of severing ties with traditional ecological knowledge and the need to restore these connections to address the environmental crises of the present. The novella is ultimately a plea to return to our roots—our long-lost wisdom, folk traditions, and reverence for the Earth—as a means of forging a more sustainable future.

References

Agarwal, A., & Narain, S. (2019). Global warming in an unequal world: A case of environmental colonialism. In *India in a Warming World* (pp. 81–91). Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780199498734.003.0005

Crosby, A. W. (1986). *Ecological imperialism: The biological expansion of Europe, 900–1900*. Cambridge University Press.

Ghosh, A. (2016). *The great derangement: Climate change and the unthinkable*. University of Chicago Press.

Ghosh, A. (2022). *The living mountain: A fable for our times*. HarperCollins.

Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. (2022). *Climate change 2022: Impacts, adaptation and vulnerability*. Contribution of Working Group II to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (H.-O. Pörtner et al., Eds.). Cambridge University Press. https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg2/

Karmakar, G., & Chetty, R. (2023). Episteme and ecology: Amitav Ghosh's *The Living Mountain* and the decolonial turn. *South Asian Review, 45*(2), 1–21. https://doi.org/10.1080/02759527.2023.2206307

Khanal, B., & Gupta, P. P. (2023). Exploring the nexus of colonialism, indigenous knowledge, and climate action in Amitav Ghosh's *The Living Mountain: A Fable of Our Times*. *Nepalese Journal of Multidisciplinary Research, 6*(2), 23–32. https://doi.org/10.3126/njmr.v6i2.62045

Mahony, M., & Endfield, G. H. (2018). Climate and colonialism. *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Climate Change, 9*(1), e512. https://doi.org/10.1002/wcc.512

Maldonado-Torres, N. (2007). On the coloniality of being: Contributions to the development of a concept. *Cultural Studies, 21*(2–3), 240–270. https://doi.org/10.1080/09502380601162548

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. (1986). *Decolonising the mind: The politics of language in African literature*. James Currey.

Sharma, N. (2022). A fable for our time: Ecological storytelling in *The Living Mountain*. *Contemporary Literature Review India, 9*(2), 89–103. https://doi.org/10.21659/rupkatha.v16n1.11

Thakur, R. S., & Singh, A. (2024). Amitav Ghosh's *The Living Mountain*: A tale of green imperialism. *International Journal of Atharva, 2*(2), 60–70. https://doi.org/10.3126/ija.v2i2.69833

Aarthi R.M. is an Assistant Professor at the Department of Languages & Literature, Sri Sathya Sai Institute of Higher Learning (a Deemed-to-be University), Anantapur, Andhra Pradesh. Her areas of interest include British Literature (1660 -1900), Ecocritical Writings, Women's Writing, etc. Currently, she is pursuing her PhD in Cli-Fi studies.

Prof. Rani P L is a Professor of English at the Department of Languages & Literature, Sri Sathya Sai Institute of Higher Learning (a Deemed-to-be University), Anantapur, Andhra Pradesh. Postcolonial literature, Media linguistics, and Academic writing are some areas of her interest. Prof. Rani has delivered both academic and spiritual talks in many national and international forums. She is also a co-author of the book *From the Colonial to the Carnival: An English Game and Its Indian Tale*.