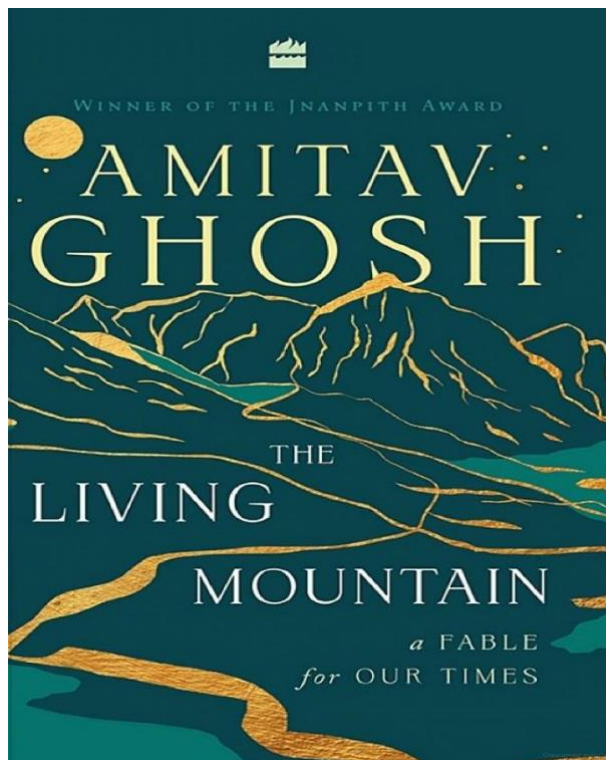


**Amitav Ghosh, *The Living Mountain: A Fable for our Times*,
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887-7**



Speculative fiction offers critical insight into our present reality through alternative forms of representation. It incorporates exquisite facets of science, fabulation, fantasy and magic realism to transform the familiar reality in order that we rethink upon it afresh, as outsiders. Today, the post-pandemic market is flooding with voluminous works of speculative fiction and invites readers and critics alike, to posit culturally urgent contemporary questions pertaining to the future of humanity. It includes a dynamic prevalence of bio-wars and biopiracy, ecological crisis amid rising capitalism, aquatic and alpine pollution due to malfunctioning industrial setups and other factors. This eventually leads to contagious viral exposure, environmental contamination, and an extensive migration of indigenous populations.

Amitav Ghosh's *The Living Mountain: A Fable for our Times* (2022) is one such work of ecotopian speculative fiction. Traversing his precursor fiction and non-fiction works such as *The Hungry Tide* (2004), *The Great Derangement: Climate*

Change and the Untinkable (2016), *The Gun Island* (2019), and *The Nutmeg's Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis* (2021), the author writes an interesting dream tale to chart the history of human-environment relationship. Ghosh's shortest book ever, this slender volume of 35 pages has much to unravel about the zeal to conquer nature and its subsequent aftermaths. Unlike the previous works that present a historical account of real-life ecological communities, *The Living Mountain* holds a speculative mirror to the harsh reality of the present and advances a caveat against this hegemonising cycle. Critiquing anthropological capitalism, the narrative is a commentary on the growing megalomania that, if not perturbed, may lead to an ecological crash.

Crafted as a fable that employs literary metaphors of the aesthetic and the sublime, this enthralling masterpiece engenders strong emotions of awe and wonder in its readers. The presentation of its fascinating content in prosaic stanzas further adds a creative dimension to the overall reading experience. Devangana Das's emblematising illustrations supplement the narrative making it vitally comprehensive to its textual audience. In fact, each illustration could be read in parallel to the semantic idea introduced henceforth. The fable begins with a voice of an unnamed narrator introducing her book club buddy, Maansi. Both of them share a common interest of engaging in thought-provoking discussions through regular reading exercises. Each New Year, they choose a subject and commit themselves to reading and discussing it in the next twelve months. The narrative takes momentum as soon as Maansi introduces the term 'Anthropocene' for the upcoming year. 'Anthropocene,' a gripping term which they cannot even pronounce correctly at first but look forward to researching and laying hold of a suitable reading list. In the meantime, the narrator waits for Maansi's response until one fine day, her message pops-up on the screen. This message invites the readers to get ready for captivating tale of the living mountain, the breathing Mahaparbat that protects its dedicated population from natural disasters and enemy attacks. From here on, the fable unfolds as a dream that Maansi visualises after digging into the term, 'Anthropocene.' In the dream

The mountain was called Mahaparbat, Great Mountain... our ancestors had told us that of all the world's mountains ours was the most alive; that it would protect us and look after us – but only on condition that we told stories about it, and sang about it, and danced for it – but always from a distance. (7)

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. The Mahaparbat is a home of exotic herbs and minerals adding to its divine charm that the inhabitants aim to maintain at all cost. However, things undergo a drastic change when colonisers get to know about the magical resources of the mountain and they attempt to plunder it of its heavenly abode.

On the surface, Ghosh's fable appears as a speculative tale of colonisation. With no specifically named characters (except Maansi, who recalls her dream), the narrative presents counteractive ideologies. On one side stands 'Anthropoi' (a term Ghosh uses for the colonisers who desire to have an anthropocentric control over the mountain) and the other side is occupied by Varvaroi (the original inhabitants of the valley). The ideological clash between the two forms the central argument of the narrative. At first, both the pressure groups struggle to maintain the interest of their respective community. The Anthropoi dominates the Varvaroi and, despite all warnings, set foot on the living mountain to ransack its bounteous resources. The Varvaroi, on the other hand, try their level best to believe in the folklore of their sanctified 'Mahaparbat' but that day is not far when they too become a victim of the Anthropoi greed. And finally, the moment arrives when both join hands and target the living mountain to fulfil their avaricious intentions.

This shift of perspective signifies an impending anthropocentric doom that the Anthropoi and Varvaroi fail to realise. None of them actually care about the Great Mountain. What matters is who climbs higher and conquers its precipitous slopes. This eventually leads to a fanatic and a competitive urge to defeat their opponent without considering the robustness of the Living Mountain. In fact, climbing high intoxicates each of the climbers and makes them desperate to reach its topmost point. In reciprocation, what untwines is the scathing wrath of the 'Mahaparbat,' an epitome of the sentient nature itself, in the form of devastating avalanches and landslides sweeping vast numbers of valley inhabitants.

However, deep down, 'The Living Mountain' is a learning lesson that resonates with human actions. It bears testimony to the insatiable needs of humans which can lead to cataclysmic consequences. This makes Ghosh's fable a touchstone of contemporary concern which requires uncompromising attention and a diligent acumen to dissolve the disastrous hegemony of man over nature. The tale presents an alarming caution towards the growing environmental concerns that most people cohose to peripheralise, or more precisely, ignore. Through a speculative storyline, it familiarises us with the truth of our negligent attitude towards nature and its resources. In actuality, it calls for a perseverant understanding of the ecological misconduct which we have unconsciously added to our everyday activities. Thus, *The Living Mountain* manifests as an extant truth that we are born with and continue to reap its harvest. It reiterates itself in each one of us through Maansi's dream, which we still fail to ponder upon.

Still, we cannot miss the author's ustopia as we read the final sentences of the fable: "How are you? she cried. How dare you speak of the Mountain as though you were its masters, and it was your plaything, your child? Have you understood nothing of what it has been trying to teach you? Nothing at all?", the author writes. These sentences add a two-fold perspective to the fable: First, it

highlights the harsh repercussions that anthropocentric greed meets in the face of an environmental catastrophe; and second, it anticipates a promising transformation of human ideology through eco-friendly actions. In short, the fable provides a remarkable opportunity to the readers to reprimand ecological mismanagement and encourage sustainable use of environmental resources.

Macroscopically, Ghosh's fable encapsulates the epistemological essence of Sustainable Development. It creatively directs its audience to explore the United Nations agenda of Sustainable Development Goals 2030, thus making it equally interesting for Development Policy critics. In particular, it focuses on Goal 15 of the charter that affirms to "protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification and halt the reverse land degradation and halt diversity loss" (Sustainable Development Goals). This further conjuncts with Indian Biodiversity Act (2002) that "provides for conservation of biological diversity, sustainable use of its components and fair and equitable sharing of all benefits out of the use of biological resources, knowledge and for matters connected therewith or incident thereto." The fable also opens up the scope for critical discussions around ideas such as rights of nature which is "grounded in the recognition that humankind and Nature share a fundamental non-anthropocentric relationship" (Harmony with Nature), and other similar manifestos implemented by global governments from time to time. All these memorandums reaffirm our 'Mother Earth' and its ecosystems as a common expression which we equally share and therefore, must be treated with respect.

A lucid expression of Ghosh's perspectival agency, *The Living Mountain* creatively acknowledges the interrelationship between humans and ecology. It re-establishes our neglected connection with Mother Earth and calls for the revitalisation of the ecosystem. The author, through a circular and a fantastical narrative, laments at the poignant deterioration of our planet. Through this engaging fable, he records the contemporary global scenario of environmental adversity that caters to a massive outreach for an optimal protection of our ecosphere. *The Living Mountain* is a remarkable read for those interested in speculative fiction and ecotopian narratives. It motivates its audience to adopt eco-friendly practices of preservation and sustenance. Entangling the past, present and future into a well-knit web, the fable creates a ground for sustainable human-nature interaction today, tomorrow and beyond.

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