THE LIVING MOUNTAIN: A FABLE FOR OUR TIMES

Amitav Ghosh

Analysis by Francesco De Sorbo

Short Story

Amitav Ghosh's *The Living Mountain* (2022) is an allegorical fable set in the geologically active region of the Himalayas. The story revolves around the figure of Mahaparbat, "The Great Mountain", a source of both sustenance and hazards for the communities inhabiting its valleys. This duality is conveyed within the text through an animistic representation of the Mountain, offering insights into Indigenous perceptions of geological risk.

Year of Publication	2022
Publication Place	New Delhi
Editor	Fourth Estate India (HarperCollins)
Entity	The Main Himalayan Fault System

GEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

Seismic zone The Main Himalayan Fault System

REAL EVENT

Time	[ ]
Location	Central Asia Afghanistan, Bhutan, China, India, Nepal, Pakistan
Coordinates	27.856076, 86.231689
Seismic Fault	Himalayan Fault System

Typology

NW–SE-Trending Oblique-Slip Faults

over its 2500 km of length, the Himalayan range is divided into different tectonostratigraphic zones and several thrust faults. The main ones are 1) The Main Central Thrust (MCT), 2) The Main Boundary Thrust (MBT), 3) The Main Frontal Thrust (MFT). The Himalayas are part of the

Tethyan orogenic belt, the second most seismically active region in the world (Powell and Conaghan 1973); (Searle and Treloar 2019)

Anthropization Level	Remote Dwellings

"villagers believe that natural disasters occur when humans act inappropriately and offend the mountain. Such effenses may include hunting, cutting down trees, digging rocks, polluting water (including lakes, springs and rivers), or shouting at the mountain." (Hao and Lun 7)

Villages

"village committee and villager representative groups, which lead disaster risk reduction actions and jointly develop village rules and regulations. For example, those who damage vegetation or water will be fined from 500 to 3000 Yuan. Sisterhood is a group organization established by Tibetan female villagers to participate in the management and service of public affairs. Every Spring Festival, six women are selected to be the leaders for the year" (Hao und Zu 8)

Seismic zone Valley of Mahaparbat (Himalaya)

LITERARY EVENT

Location	Central Asia Not specified
Seismic Risk Ref.	Referenced
Seismic Fault	Himalayan Fault system
Anthropization Level	Villages, Public Buildings, Correctional Facilities, Agriculture Areas

INDIVIDUAL REACTIONS & AFFECTS

Attitudes

Name	Maansi
Gender	Female
Nationality	American
Reactions	Discomfort, Apprehension, Depression, Awareness

COLLECTIVE REACTIONS & AFFECTS

Group Attitudes

Name	Indigenous people
Reactions	Apprehension, Awareness, Caution, Mitigation, Acceptance

Name	Women
Reactions	Awareness, Wonder, Prayer

Name	Colonists

Reactions	Distrust, Denial

Name	The army
Reactions	Scepticism

Name	Young People
Reactions	Disregard, Unawareness

LINGUISTIC & STYLISTIC ANALYSIS

Keywords	"Alive" (Ghosh 7) "Stories" (7) "Rifts" (13) "Avalanches" (13) "Tribulation" (13), "Doom" (17)
Metaphors	“A cycle of time has ended […] and another one has begun: the Cycle of Tribulation” (Ghosh 13)
Motifs, Topoi, Mythologemes	Locus Amoenus, Deified Nature, Colonisers, Colonised People, Prophecy, Violation Of Taboos, The Downfall Of Society
Syntax	Simple Sentences

SEISMIC RISK AND INDIGENOUS GEO-CULTURAL KNOWLEDGE IN AMITAV GHOSH’S *THE LIVING MOUNTAIN*

The Himalayan Fault System represents one of the world's most seismically active regions, where geological forces continue to shape both landscape and human experience. Against this backdrop, Amitav Ghosh's meditative fable *The Living Mountain* (2021) emerges as a poignant allegory of humanity's relationship with the earth in the Anthropocene. Set within this geologically unstable environment, where earthquakes, avalanches, and landslides constitute persistent threats to human settlements, Ghosh's narrative represents different and competing approaches to planet Earth and its natural resources, which become apparent in the charachters’ interaction with the Mahaparbat, the "Great Mountain". Ghosh’s work interrogates how different communities, from indigenous peoples with their animistic worldviews, to colonial extractivists driven by capitalist exploitation, construct their relationships with nature, which ultimately determine their vulnerability to geological hazards. In this way, not only does Ghosh reflect on the tragic consequences of modernity and colonization in extra-European territories, but he also offers a critical examination of how traditional environmental knowledge systems have been systematically displaced by anthropocentric approaches, leaving non-Western contemporary societies increasingly exposed to the earth's unpredictable forces.

Over its 2500 ca. km length, the Himalayas constitute a remarkable example of “a continental collision orogenic belt” (Searle and Treloar 1). In the pre-subduction period, the Indian tectonic plate

was originally part of the supercontinent Gondwana. However, due to the tectonic movement, the Indian plate started to drift north around 130 million years ago. Since neither of the plates subducted completely, as they presented a similar density, the Indian plate began to underthrust beneath the Eurasian one, causing the crust to fold and uplift in response to the immense pressure, thus forming the peaks of the Himalayan arc (Powell and Conaghan 7-8). Nonetheless, its current height above sea level has been reached only "recently", i.e. by Late Pliocene – Early Pleistocene, and its peaks are still rising by two plates' convergence at approximately 58 mm per year. Therefore, the Himalayan belt is an extremely active seismic zone where earthquakes threaten the human settlements placed on the mountain range. Seismic activity constitutes a geological hazard, which, combined with the presence of high-altitude glaciation and monsoonal rains, can cause destructive avalanches and landslides (Dortch et al. 1053).

On these grounds, one can better understand why Amitav Ghosh has chosen this geologically active region as the setting for his meditative fable about human relationships with the earth. *The Living Mountain* allegorically recounts the tragic events many extra-European territories have undergone with the advent of Modernity and Colonisation. Furthermore, it investigates some environmental issues that contemporary society have faced and are likely to face in the Anthropocene. Regarding the actantial dimension, different groups of characters portrayed in the story are representative of different ecological views, systems of belief, and behaviours that shape their social life and reflect the different values they attach to nature. In addition, from the perspective of Critical Disaster Studies (Remes and Horowitz 2021), the ecological theme in Ghosh's *Living Mountain* provides interesting suggestions about humans' attitudes towards geological risk, epitomised by the story's central figure: the Mahaparbat, the "Great Mountain" (Ghosh 7).

Ghosh's story evokes different ecological paradigms, exploited on both a narrative and figurative level. The first ecological paradigm portrayed in the text is the ancient religion followed by the communities in the valley. Here, the Great Mountain is perceived as an active and "living being" by the indigenous people, who religiously "revered that mountain" (7). This religious culture can be interpreted as an expression of a spiritual as well as affect relationship with the Mahaparbat, echoing Wilson concept of "biophilia" (350), which is referred to in the text according to the *topoi* of the deified nature and the *locus amoenus*. This "sacred Mountain" is considered as a nurturing deity who would protect its peoples and look after them, on condition that they would tell "stories about it, and sang about it, and danced for it, but always from a distance" as they were forbidden "to set foot on the slopes of the Great Mountain" (7).

In this respect, Ghosh's representation of Indigenous communities echoes existing practices beyond literary tropes and motives. Indeed, traditional lore plays an important role in risk prevention in the Himalayas. Many Tibetans believe that humans must live in communion with nature, following an animistic worldview that features, only in Deqen County, "300 sacred mountains […], forming a complex system of sacred mountain beliefs centred on Kawa Garbo, where all living creatures, grasses, trees and animals are protected by the mountain gods and cannot be harmed, lest the gods effect punishment" (Hao and Lun 6). A similar view is also shared by many local ethnic groups, such as the Lepchas, who attribute the origin of earthquakes to the acts of the *deva-deorali*, or *lingzee*, supernatural deities who live in the mountains and hillsides (Gergan 491).

Similarly, Ghosh's fictional Indigenous communities understand the geological activity of the Himalayan region under their epistemological horizon. Seismicity is framed as the spiritual liveliness of the mountain, which is also highly personified in the text. The Mahaparbat is conceived as capable of *telling* and *listening*, but also *teaching*. Overall, the relationship between the mountain and the Indigenous population is mediated by the only female religious order of the Adepts. The Adepts are the only interpretive community among the various groups inhabiting the valley. They can interpret the soil activity with their dances by putting "their ears, and their feet, to the ground" (19) and producing knowledge. Their mediation of the "Mountain's predicaments" is vital, as they transmit practical attitudes towards geological risks through keen observation and an affective attunement to the mountain's activity. As the Mahaparbat *shakes* and *heaves*, it can cause dangerous "rifts" (Ghosh 13) and "avalanches" (13), which, if not monitored, would harm the people living in the valley. In this sense, Indigenous women have developed a particular set of skills and a holistic, performative semiotic code over time that can produce geo-cultural knowledge from the earth's movements.

In contrast to the eco-centric approaches of the Indigenous religions and the Adepts' female epistemologies, *The Living Mountain* also dramatizes greedy and careless environmental attitudes. Regarding their relations to the earth, the new colonisers who arrived in the valley, the Anthropoi, exhibit an extractivist orientation towards nature, determined to seize the "mountain's riches" (14). They also show little care of the "inherited ideas of the Mountain's sacredness" claiming that "was all ignorant, pagan superstition […] All mountains were the same" (26). However, their disinterest towards what might be considered traditional environmental knowledge (Mishori and Levi 129) is also a denial of geological risks. In addition, the valley's condition after of colonisation is worsened by the Kraani's upsurge to power; indeed, their army "imprisoned […] [the] Adepts, and forbade all our ceremonies and songs, stories and dances" (17), contributing to the loss of significant geological knowledge and the increase of people's vulnerability.

In analogy with the aftermaths of Global Capitalism, the Anthropoi's idea of development exposes the whole valley to seismic hazards and correlated phenomena, such as avalanches. The results of what might be framed as an "epistemicide" (Santos "Epistemologies of the Global South, Conclusion"), i.e. the disruption of the traditional eco-cultural paradigm, is that the younger generations from the colonised people, the Varvaroi, are left unprepared and exposed to hazards: "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 no place in the Age of Anthropoi" (34). At the end of the story, both Anthropoi and Varvaroi rush to search for the long-forgotten local lore, hopeful of finding it to prevent their doom. To their dismay, once they see the old dances again and learn how "to feel the Mountain reverberating under our feet as though in answer to the dance" (35), they prove unable to abandon their human-centred worldview and adapt to the demands and challenges of the Himalayan riskscape.

Ghosh's story ends with a warning, which invites the reader to be careful to consider our species as the masters of nature and to reflect on the importance of traditional environmental knowledge from an ecological and geological perspective. Luckily enough, the role of Indigenous worldview and conventional wisdom in geo-education and risk mitigation programmes have started to be reevaluated, proving to be a crucial factor in disaster risk reduction strategies and policies (Mercer et al. 214), which lets space to hope of more sustainable and resilient communities.

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