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Navigating Ecological Dystopia and Apocalyptic Predictions in Amitav Ghosh's *The Living Mountain: A Fable for Our Times*

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Abstract— *This paper intends to explore ecological dystopian reality and subsequent apocalyptic scenario caused by excessive exploitation of Nature as exposed in Amitav Ghosh's fabulous book The Living Mountain: A Fable for Our Times (2022). Contextualizing within a dystopian set-up, Ghosh's The Living Mountain: A Fable for Our Times operates as one of the most significant pieces of writing which brilliantly exposes the man-Nature interaction considering human beings as an integral part of Nature. The narrative exhibits an ecological dystopia where the Great Mountain or the Mahaparbat and its native dwellers have gone through a terrible catastrophe. By mapping the consequences of both harmony and disconnectedness among living and non-living beings of the environment, the narrative concentrates on analyzing the reasons behind this imbalanced man-Nature relationship and its adverse impact upon the environment. However, by encapsulating the ideas of Deep Ecology, Eco-criticism and the features of apocalyptic/post-apocalyptic literature, Ghosh's text tries to reconcile this imbalanced relationship through an awareness of following sustainable outlook in terms of the protection of Nature.*

Keywords— ***Ecological dystopia, Deep Ecology, Eco-criticism, climate change, apocalyptic predictions, Amitav Ghosh***

I. INTRODUCTION

The growing popularity of the writings regarding Environment and its degradation signifies the urgency of rectifying the reasons behind the imbalanced man-Nature relationship at present time. Although the slogan of 'environmental crisis' started in the 1970s, rapid extinction and growing environmental breakdown have increased its velocity in the 21st century. Simultaneously, the implications of its importance have found manifestation within the global literary and cultural paradigm. The plethora of contemporary writings and films especially depicts these dystopian realities and anxieties through the scenario of rapid change and alteration of ecological processes leading to global warming and species extinction. They present that the reason behind the catastrophic end engulfing the human race is not nuclear bombs, but environmental degradation. However, the articulation of these environmental catastrophes within the matrix of dystopian parameters is prominent in Indian English literature too. In India, various writers and critics have established their views on climate change and eco-disaster through a dystopian prism. Among them, Amitav Ghosh (1956-) stands out predominantly as one of the most significant voices who focuses on various issues of the environment and marginalized communities. His book *The Living Mountain: A Fable for Our Times* is one of the most significant literary creations which highlights ecological dystopian reality along with certain apocalyptic predictions within the frame of a dream sequence. Although it is narrated in the form of a dream, the narrative reveals the devastating and dystopian reality that every living and non-living beings will confront in the near future. Narrated by Maansi, the story unfolds how the

Great Mountain and its resources have gone through gradual destruction due to mass exploitation and over-consumption exercised by the powerful 'Anthropoi' and their 'Kraani' and later the native dwellers of the mountain.

However, the application of dystopian setting in the narrative initiates the process of examining it through the theoretical perspectives of Eco-criticism and Deep Ecology. Eco-criticism strongly focuses on "literary (and artistic) expression of human experience primarily in a naturally and consequently in a culturally shaped world: the joys of abundance, sorrows of deprivation, hopes for harmonious existence, and fears of loss and disaster" (Cohen, 2004, p. 10). The narrative also exposes this fear of loss and disaster as the Nature or the environment is going through rapid destruction. Moreover, as Deep Ecology is "a philosophical activity, an inquiry, and also a social movement that aims to reopen the conversation with nature and between communities of beings that has been largely interrupted by certain developments in modern industrial society" (Drengson, 1987, p. 224), the prioritization of Nature over human beings is one of its basic concerns. As Eco-criticism studies the relationship between literature and the environment, Deep ecology addresses the intrinsic values associated with the interconnectedness of man-Nature relationship. So, writers like Amitav Ghosh incorporate the ideas and key concerns of these perspectives by placing the importance of preserving Nature at any cost and reveal how rapid degradation of Nature is threatening the existence of all living and non-living beings.

II. OBJECTIVES

This paper attempts to articulate ecological dystopia and apocalyptic predictions as depicted in Ghosh's book *The Living Mountain: A Fable for Our Times.* It seeks to show the consequences of over-exploitation of natural resources and a society disintegrated by unequal distribution of these resources. It also tries to show the significance of balanced man-Nature relationship and a hope for renewal or realization of the importance of protecting our Nature or environment amidst chaos.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study is a qualitative research that concentrates on how ecological dystopia and apocalyptic predictions are prophesied by Amitav Ghosh in the book *The Living Mountain: A Fable for Our Times.* It employs descriptive as well as analytical method to examine the primary and secondary sources to decipher how Ghosh designs the narrative to create an urgent environmental awareness through catastrophic events such as loss of bio-diversity, climate change, cultural crisis, and over-exploitation and their impact upon the people.

IV. DISCUSSION

Dystopian fiction as a genre holds a significant position in the context of contemporary literature. Among several themes of dystopian fiction, political, social, and ecological dystopia are widely acclaimed for acknowledging the perilous outcome and pessimistic predictions of both human and non-human entities. The idea of ecological dystopia denotes a kind of dystopian reality where the devastation of ecological elements leads to a catastrophic end. As utopia signifies positivity and beauty, dystopia signifies the opposite: "if utopias offer models that depict a society based upon equality, enhanced friendship and trust, dystopias alienate individuals from one another and destroy the social fabric by enforcing a number of disintegrating processes" (Herrero, 2020, p. 216). In the context of environmental domain, dystopian reality discloses a collapsed world distorted by massive environmental catastrophes. As the world is "increasingly lost to pollution, contamination and industry-sponsored bio-disaster" (Nayar, 2010, p. 241), the study of this dystopian reality in terms of environment automatically leads to arrive at various apocalyptic predictions. It is obvious that human beings are making the planet inhospitable for living through ecocide or destruction of Nature. So, since the late 1960s, the thoughts regarding the environment have strongly been associated with "prophecies of doom, apocalyptic predictions, and dystopian scenarios" (Garforth, 2005, p. 393). Although various attempts and possibilities have been proposed to rectify the reasons behind such crisis to make better future societies, the threat of ecological breakdown and a catastrophic end resides in our consciousness. So, the ecological dystopian fiction tries to provide a new possibility in terms of reducing environmental degradation and over-exploitation.

Ecological dystopian fiction indulges in representing the consequences of environmental crisis or catastrophes upon human beings. It focuses on the idea of human beings as malevolent towards Nature, while the following catastrophes are the revenges from Nature upon human beings. However, the exposition of environmental catastrophe and apocalyptic predictions/realities of a devastated society and Nature has found manifestation in Indian English fiction too. Writers like Amitav Ghosh, R.K. Narayan, Vishwas Patil, Kamala Markandaya,

Vandana Shiva, Indra Sinha and many others concentrate on expressing their views on the environment and its aspects through artistic lens. Amitav Ghosh, being a distinguished figure of Indian English literary canon explicates his views on environmental crisis, climate change, global warming, biodiversity, wildlife conservation, and marginalized communities through his works such as *The Hungry Tide* (2004), *The Great Derangement* (2016), *Gun Island* (2019) and many more. His book *The Living Mountain: A Fable for Our Times* (2022) takes into account environmental decay and persisting social inequalities which are leading human beings towards a catastrophic end.

The narrative of *The Living Mountain: A Fable for Our Times* portrays the Great Mountain or the Mahaparbat and its inhabitants who witness a catastrophic event for disrespecting the mountain by the 'Anthropoi' and their soldiers 'Kraani'. The story begins by describing and praising the peculiarity and extra-ordinary nature of the Great Mountain, while rejoicing the unity and interdependency of both the inhabitants and the Mahaparbat. Locating within the story-telling tradition, Ghosh focuses on how tradition and culture bear significance in terms of maintaining environmental harmony and interdependence:

> …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. (Ghosh, 2022, p. 7)

The inhabitants of the Valley near the Great Mountain live in close proximity with Nature where "strangers would never be allowed to enter" (Ghosh, 2022, p. 8). Out of sheer respect, they never put their feet on the slopes of the mountain. For them, the mountain is a 'living being', which cares for them. Their interaction with the mountain signifies mutual dependency upon each other. But, one day, a stranger along with a few people called 'Anthropoi' have entered into their land to explore and gather knowledge regarding the resources of the Valley and the Great Mountain:

> …a stranger of a new kind had come to the pass that year from a land very far away. His people, he said, were called the Anthropoi; their savants had heard about our nuts and he had been sent on a mission to learn about our Valley, and all that it contained. (Ghosh, 2022, p. 10)

Although it is an act against the rule of their Valley as well as the wishes of the Great Mountain, the strangers are insisting on learning about it and its "valuable trade goods that it produces" (Ghosh, 2022, p. 11). The Elder people have refused to tell the 'Anthropoi' about the mountain as it is not a product of trade. Their engagement with the Mahaparbat and sheer respect towards it are apparently visible through their refusal to expose anything about it. Their assertion of not treating the Mahaparbat as a means of trade stands in stark contrast with the motive of the 'Anthropoi' towards the environment. However, the 'Anthropoi' have compelled them to tell about it and left the place by gathering knowledge of the miraculous mountain as much as possible.

Later, one day, while the Adepts are dancing by praising the mountain, they notice the arrival of strangers who are coming towards the Valley armed with terrible weapons to "conquer the Great Mountain" (Ghosh, 2022, p. 14). The strangers have studied almost everything about the mountain and they have decided that since the Valley people are not "making use of the mountain's riches" (Ghosh, 2022, p. 14), they are fully "justified in seizing them and taking whatever they wished" (p. 14). First, they have explored and then they have begun to exploit the great riches like minerals, metals and other resources hidden underneath the mountain. The strangers have forcefully exploited the mountain and given no ear to its inhabitants' requests. The Valley people are common people who are living their life by working tirelessly for their basic needs. Still, they do not exploit the natural resources until the arrival of the 'Anthropoi'. They are ignorant of profit-making policies and do not treat Nature as an object of profit accumulation. Rather, they consider the Mahaparbat as a repository of their identity, culture and a storehouse of memory of their ancestors. They love to listen to stories about the Great Mountain and its magical trees, sing their songs by performing dance to praise it. This mutual dependency gets shattered due to the 'Anthropoi', who have forcefully involved the Valley people to exploit the mountain. The coercion upon the mountain and the villagers by the 'Anthropoi' and their soldiers 'Kraani' presents a catastrophic scenario of both Nature and humanity.

In an ecological dystopian setting, the imbalanced relationship between man and Nature is not only presented as holding great significance, but also the gloomy world of devastating humanity is explicitly replicated through the sequence of events. The replication of chaos among the human beings and the exercise of coercive power upon the vulnerable ones reveal social disintegration and a divided society ruled by oppression. It shows how the politics of knowledge offers the space to exercise power over the Valley people by the 'Anthropoi'. They have involved the

villagers in the task of extracting minerals from the mountain:

> Once we had been subjugated, the Anthropoi herded us together and told us that from now on we would be ruled by some of their most ferocious soldiers- they called the Kraani, or 'The Helmeted Ones'. They were to be our guards and overseers, to make sure that we did all the work that was assigned to us. (Ghosh, 2022, p. 16)

Considering them as powerless 'Varvaroi' (the villagers) possessing weak minds, degenerated habits with a heart lacking in courage, the 'Anthropoi' have begun to ascend the mountain by excavating its slopes. Later, having seen this act as more exciting, the 'Varvaroi' or the villagers also begin to climb the mountain to compete with the 'Anthropoi' in collecting the resources from the mountain. Consequently, a serial destruction befalls on the inhabitants of the Valley as the 'Kraani' have alternated the previous positions held by the elders and imprisoned the Adepts. The 'Kraani' have disrespected the cultural ambience of the place through disregarding their ceremonies, songs, stories, dances etc. and threatened the Adepts to death and enslavement. Earlier, in the Valley, the storehouse of wisdom was resided in the hands of women. But, now, it is transferred to the hands of Eldermen. Gradually, the Valley people have outnumbered the 'Anthropoi' by winning "a few skirmishes and battles" (Ghosh, 2022, p. 20) in their competition to extract the resources from the mountain. The fight between the 'Varvaroi' and the 'Anthropoi', disrespect towards women, attacking the neighbors and killing each other in the hope of getting ahead to possess enough resources from the mountain have brought slaughter and destruction to the Valley. Former unity and mutual respect of the 'Varvaroi' towards each other have now been transformed into violence and aggression. The 'Anthropoi' have inflicted these thoughts in the minds of the 'Varvaroi', which has resulted in chaotic social situation. Moreover, the slopes of the mountain have now been covered with trash by the 'Anthropoi', which signals the intense pollution of the environment. The mountain once alive with natural beauty has now been transformed into a lifeless place. It is used merely as an agency of earning profit.

Ecological dystopian fiction often presents a picture of existence of both living and non-living beings loaded with apocalyptic predictions. It also demonstrates how Nature or environment is both the victim and violent character. Here, in the book, it is shown through the beginning of the arrival of a terrible time in the Valley and its people. The role of Nature as avenger is explicitly exposed in this dystopian setting while delivering a warning against the misdeeds created by human beings like the 'Anthropoi' and their 'Kraani'. As the climbers of the mountain have unsettled its atmosphere, the snow of the lower slopes has started melting:

> We saw that the combined weight of all the climbers had unsettled the snow on the lower slopes of the Mountain. As a result, a series of devastating landslides and avalanches had swept through our Valley, killing vast numbers of our fellow villagers. (Ghosh, 2022, p. 24)

The arrival of an awaited dystopian future has been prophesied through the thoughts of the villagers who are climbing the mountain: "we stood there aghast, watching in horror, but there was nothing to be done-to turn back was impossible now" (Ghosh, 2022, p. 24). As they keep on climbing the mountain, they face mudslide, which is sweeping some of the members of the 'Anthropoi'. After a few steps, the 'Anthropoi' declare that the mountain can afford only a few climbers; it is because, "if that number increased beyond a certain point then the ice would begin to melt- as it was now" (Ghosh, 2022, p. 26). The imagery of snow melting indicates the issues of the growth of population and the threat of global warming and its impact on climate change.

The narrative also unfolds the persisting inequality among human beings in terms of distribution of resources and the consequences of over-exploitation. Here, the poor villagers are more prone to suffer destruction than the 'Anthropoi' because they have already preserved enough of resources for themselves; only the villagers or the 'Varvaroi' have to suffer the wrath of the mountain:

> …and so we did, but with heavy hearts now, for we could not forget that with every step we took we were advancing towards our doom. (Ghosh, 2022, p. 32)

Moreover, when the 'Anthropoi' condemn the Valley people and scold them for slowly climbing the mountain, at that moment, they realize the motive of the 'Anthropoi' as well as the meaning and emotional engagement with the mountain. They realize that the mountain holds no significance for the 'Anthropoi'; they just care to climb higher on the slopes of the mountain to collect its resources. But, this is not similar to the case with the villagers. Even though they realize the significance of the Mahaparbat later, they do not find any ways to come back to their former place. However, towards the end of the story, the 'Anthropoi' and the 'Varvaroi' are united as one to protect the mountain, but they fail to revive it in its

former form. After searching for solution to maintain the former relation with the mountain, they meet an Adept (who dances earlier to praise the Mountain) and request her to dance again. Although she refuses to dance at first, she agrees to perform later. After some time, they gradually begin to feel that the mountain is alive; they can feel the 'heartbeat' under their feet and determine to take care of it, to "look after the poor, dear mountain" (Ghosh, 2022, p. 35).

Through the views of the Adept, Ghosh asserts the urgency of saving the Nature or environment from further destruction through apocalyptic predictions. In this context, Eco-critics like L. Garforth (2005) have also expressed that "the figure of the large-scale eco-disaster signifies the urgency and gravity of the environmental crisis and the need for radical action in response" (p. 398). This kind of intense emphasis on the preservation of Nature resonates the key concerns propounded by Deep Ecology as it considers Earth as first priority and believes on the "fundamental interconnectedness of all life forms and natural features" (Nayar, 2010, p. 246). Criticizing the anthropocentric views regarding the environment, Ghosh's story outlines the systematic exploitation of Nature and its resources resulted in environmental catastrophe because the Great Mountain is used as a means of commercial profit rather than a source of ecological importance.

V. CONCLUSION

The presence of apocalypse in terms of ecological and social systems has been a matter of debate and discussion in the discourses of both green studies and science fiction since the late 20th century. The threat of large-scale ecological disaster and symbolic depictions of catastrophic end in literature explicate a critique of industrialism and commercial motive of contemporary society. In this context, ecological dystopian fiction emerges with a new possibility. Ecological dystopia situates environmental collapse within a dystopian setting, predicting catastrophic events and their consequences for human beings. The intention of such projection is to make people aware of environmental crisis. To project this awareness, Amitav Ghosh's *The Living Mountain: A Fable for Our Times* serves as one of the best examples which uses the imagery of a catastrophic event to create awareness and to raise ecological consciousness about the dangers of human-made exploitation. As the narrative presents a gloomy and dark world of excessive exploitation, Ghosh tries to map how such exploitation leads to utter destruction of both the environment and human beings. The dystopian setting offers him the space to show the urgency of preserving our nature, as its degradation is increasing day by day, and to cease over-exploitation of natural resources to make a sustainable future; otherwise, nature will take revenge in times to come.

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