

Exploring GeoHumanities: An Analysis of Amitav Ghosh's *The Living Mountain – A Fable for Our Time*

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Abstract

Geohumanities is an emerging field focusing on the multifaceted intersections between human experience, society, space, and culture. Literature often finds resonance with specific geographic landscapes. Amitav Ghosh is such a writer whose literary oeuvre has effectively shown the role of fiction and non-fiction by portraying the disastrous change of the climate and its consequences on every being in the chain of life. His fictional works, like *The Hungry Tide* (2004) and *The Gun Island* (2019), showcase how climate change and its disastrous effects have caused the dislocation of humans, animals, and plant life. This paper focuses on the impact of human interactions with nature by analysing Amitav Ghosh's *The Living Mountain – A Fable for Our Time* (2022). The present paper is an attempt to analyse these two works in the light of GeoHumanism by understanding the dislocation of nature and the complex dynamics of space, culture, and human existence.

Keywords: GeoHumanism, The Living Mountain, Nature and Human Interaction, Nature and Culture, Colonisation and Commodification of Nature

Introduction

The present age is an age of human superiority where humans have taken centre stage and control all aspects of living, thus the age is often termed as the age of 'Anthropocene'. Historians have marked this period as the 'Anthropocene' by interpreting the significant effects

of human activities on the Earth's environment and climate. GeoHumanities is an emerging field of literary studies that provides a framework for understanding significant relations between artistic creations and individuals. Human experiences are shaped by the surroundings, and 'landscape' and 'space' are very important in shaping the conscious and subconscious experiences of humans. GeoHumanities is categorised into four sub-groups, i.e. creative places, visual geographies, spatial literacies, and spatial histories by Michael Dear in his *GeoHumanities: Art, History, Text at the Edge of the Place* (2011).¹

Literary works, especially fiction, are set in a particular space and time, and this space is mostly a geographical location, either real or imaginary. For a literary narration, the time and place are significant to show the characteristics attached to it. Language as a tool serves to accurately represent the space, its understanding, and the awareness of the surrounding environment. Literature and literary fiction, being the prominent branches of the humanities, are required to address this understanding of 'space' and the 'interaction of humans with space'. Thus, GeoHumanities amalgamate different fields of investigation such as history, philosophy, literature, and art with environmental studies, geography, and other sciences. The term 'GeoHumanities' was first coined around the early 2000s as a way of

“Bringing together scholars from different disciplines to examine how people create, experience, and understand places. GeoHumanities seeks to explore the ways in which the cultural, historical and social dimensions of place are intertwined with the physical and ecological characteristics of landscapes and how this knowledge can be used to address environmental and social challenges.”²

¹ Michael Dear, 'After Word: Historical Moments in the rise of GeoHumanities', in Michael Dear, Jim Ketchum, Sarah Luria and Doug Richardson (eds.), *GeoHumanities: Arts, History, Text at the Edge of the Place* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), pp. 307.

² https://geohumanities.org/?page_id=2, accessed on 22/02/2025.

The purpose of this branch of study is to bridge the gap between humanities and natural sciences for a holistic understanding of the complex relationship structure of people, place, and environment.

Ecology, Climate Change and Fiction:

Literature has always expressed and reflected the social, environmental, cultural, and spatial changes effectively. But the changes in climate and environmental destruction are often considered supernatural or something belonging to something other than ‘this’ ‘real’ world. As Amitav Ghosh elaborately expresses in *The Great Derangement* (2016), “It is as though in the literary imagination climate change were somehow akin to extraterrestrials or interplanetary travel” (10). Earth is a ‘space’ where humans and other beings experience life in its different forms, and these experiences keep on changing with the change of human interaction. As Ghosh puts it,

“The geological record bears witness to many fractures in time, some of which led to mass extinctions and the like: it was one such, in the form of the Chicxulub asteroid, that probably killed the dinosaurs. It is indisputable, in any event, that catastrophes waylay both the earth and its inhabitants at unpredictable intervals and in the most improbable ways.” (ibid. 26)

Thus, the fiction of the present era is likely to record these changing dimensions of human interactions with the space they inhabit. Amitav Ghosh has not merely advocated this thought but also practised it by voicing it through many of his fictional works like *The Hungry Tide*, *The Gun Island*, and *The Living Mountain*. The present research paper aims to understand this human interaction with space as presented in Amitav Ghosh’s *The Living Mountain* (2022) concerning the issues of climate change, colonialism, and commodification of nature depicted in it through the lens of GeoHumanism.

***The Living Mountain* - An Analysis through GeoHumanism:**

The title of this novella itself is suggestive of the space where the whole narrative is set: the living mountain, Mahaparbat. This mountain has varied life-giving properties. The ancestors of the Valley always revered this mountain, and they were told by their ancestors 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.” (*The Living Mountain* 7)

At the beginning of the story itself, it is made clear that the space is very precious and it requires respect and care to continue giving ample life-giving substances. The mountain is no other than the humans, it is also a ‘being’ that can care for itself as well as all those who are dependent on it. The mountain also has a magic tree that produces miraculous things, and the most precious of them all was the nut that lay within the fruit. The other important law of the mountain was to never allow a stranger to enter the Valley. Apart from that, they continued singing the great stories about their mountain through Adeptes, the women folk who kept on passing these revered traditions through their songs and dances. Ghosh emphasises the importance of folk narratives and traditions, which are culturally important to retain such reverences related to space.

The Anthropoi somehow come to know about the magical properties of the mountain and the value of the nuts, and so they send their savants to know more about the mountain. The Valley people initially inform the Anthropoi about their greatest possession: the living mountain itself. The Anthropoi does not stop there. One day, they attack the mountain and start colonising the area to commodify the valuable products found on the mountain. They brought with them the ferocious soldiers named ‘Kraani’ who kept a watchful eye on the workers, the Valley people, when they toiled on the mountain to deliver products for them. The Kraanis have named these Valley people ‘Varvaroi’ – who were not strong enough, whose minds were weak,

whose beliefs were perverse, and whose hearts lacked courage. Thus, the Kraanis become controllers of Varvarois and of everything on the Mahaparbat.

Soon, the Varvarois accept this new and changed dimension of their own space and are also attracted to Kraani and their abilities. The life of the Anthropoi seems interesting to them. And the Valley people are now willing to climb the mountain like Kraanis and Varvarois. Women are also replaced by men, which represents the loss of tradition and culture. The “leadership passed into the hands of those who least understood our Mountain—Strong, covetous men who were ruthless in enforcing their will” (*The Living Mountain* 19). The dynamics of the relationship that the people shared with the mountain have changed. The sacred Mahaparbat changes to something that can be climbed and controlled.

Now the Varvarois, due to their experiences of working with Kraanis, adopt the attitudes of Kraanis and become like them. Soon, the Varvarois started enabling themselves and started killing their people to create their supremacy. The Valley people are now under the control of their people:

“A great orgy of bloodletting filled our Valley, bringing slaughter and destruction on a scale far beyond that which the Anthropoi had inflicted on us in the past. And so, it went on until some kind of order came about and a great number of Valley’s inhabitants were successfully confined to the bottom of the slope, under the guns of newly formed legions of armed guards, picked from our villages. These were the Kraani of Varvaroi.”
(*The Living Mountain* 21)

This time, the Mahaparbat is not only assaulted by the Anthropoi but also by the people of the Valley itself. Thus, it is doubly used and uprooted. The influx of the Anthropoi brings significant cultural and demographic changes to the region. The original inhabitants are relocated to different roles and relationships. This also leads to an increase in ethnic, linguistic, and cultural diversity, differentiation, and discrimination as well. With relocation, a new culture

of ‘colonizer’ and ‘colonized’ emerges. Also, the society of the Valley changed into different classes instead of living in harmony, as it was the age-old norm of the Valley.

Consequently, the displaced Valley people felt a conscious or unconscious need to assimilate themselves with the Anthropoi, which had become the mainstream culture and identity to survive. The attack of Anthropoi systematically dismantled the local structure of the Valley people, which included Adept, women workers, Elderman, and poor people. This change of relationship has a profound and lasting impact on the ethnic and linguistic identity of the people. Also, the reverse effect results in the killing and dismantling of many inhabitants. The local inhabitants are mostly the ‘tribes’, which are considered ‘primitive’ and also many times dealt with as ‘other’ than the mainstream ‘civilised society’ of Anthropoi. They face suppression and subjugation at the hands of their own Varvarois and coloniser Kraani. Thus, they are doubly marginalised. Initially, there was no such division amongst them, but Anthropoi changed this dynamic. Throughout, they all experience toil, trauma, displacement, and rootlessness.

The reverse effect is experienced by the Mountain also, as it can no longer contain the weight of these many climbers. It starts shaking. This is the moment where the Kraani, the Varvaroi and the Valley people come to realise the devastating effects of ‘climbing’ and colonising the Mountain and commodifying its produce.

The attitude of the Anthropoi now changes, and they start blaming the Varvarois for climbing the mountain and forgetting their industrialization of the produce. The harshest effects of this changing relationship between people and the mountain are faced by the people at the very base of it: the poor. These people have not played any role in this process and yet they are the ones who suffer the most. Thus, the same ‘space’ which provided them life and life-sustaining elements becomes a threat to life. They all advanced towards their doom slowly by

disrespecting the 'Living Mountain'. The gap between the people of the Valley and the Anthropoi soon closes. The author notes:

“Most of them had stopped climbing; the Kraani had turned on them, and were now forcing them, just as they had once forced us, to dig up the riches of the Mountain so that they could build machines to carry them away. But these machines were small, with room only for their leaders and the Kraani, and perhaps even a few of our own Elderman. The other Anthropoi, most of them, would be left behind.” (*The Living Mountain* 33)

The relationship between the people with the mountain changed, and they had to move to another space for their survival and create a new relationship with the new space, which they may find or may not. The difference between 'Anthropoi' and 'Varvaroi' ceases to exist, and they become one as both of them have forgotten their relationship with the space they inhabited. And the worst thing is, there was no turning back. There was no way to change the impact of their actions on the Mountain and themselves. They soon start searching for someone who might remember the sacredness of their Mountain. They all had forgotten the stories, songs, and dances related to it. And the age of Anthropoi considers such 'relationships' as foolish and fantastic. After much searching, they finally find an Adept and request her to dance and make them feel the heartbeat of the Mountain so that they can feel whether the Mountain is alive or not. When the Adept dances, the mountain starts reverberating under her feet, and everyone feels that the Mountain is *alive!*

Again, people felt that they would need to *care* for the mountain so that they would be able to look after the poor. At this, the Adept stops whirling and with blazing eyes says:

“How dare you? She cried. How dare you speak of the Mountain as though you were its masters, and it were your plaything, your child? Have you understood nothing of what it has been trying to teach you? Nothing at all?” (*The Living Mountain* 35)

The question of Adept is a reminder to all the inhabitants that ‘humans’ are always inferior to nature and nature has its ability to strive, thrive, and survive. The humans don’t own it. It owns us all beings.

It is not just the fault of the Anthropoi and Kraani but also of every human being who has played a part in making the ‘human’ a dominant species on this planet. The actions of the past are the results that we experience in the present. Everything is connected. Every community has its share. This ‘Living Mountain’ is a symbol of Earth; the planet which has created and sustained life. Humans and all the other creatures have occupied the same space i.e. the Earth. Nature evolved first on Earth. Life evolved on earth with it. Humans are the last to inhabit it. This ‘living mountain’, the ‘Earth’ is not something to be mastered or to be treated as an object which can be subjected to human whims. Humans, inhabiting this ‘space’ share a ‘spatial’ relationship where they affect and interact with each other over time. The assault on the mountain is symbolic of the commodification of nature and colonization of the environment resulting in the present destabilized ecosystem which has thrown each species, including homo-sapiens, off its balance.

Life is born out of the process of evolution and it is not a linear process, it grows in every direction like a tree. Amitav Ghosh’s narration addresses the issue of the relationship of beings with their space and also throws light on the major issues of climate change. *The Living Mountain* is a comment on the evolution of homo-sapiens and their changing relationship with their geography, environment, culture, values, and belief systems. The colonizers forced displacement and created irreparable damage on the Mountain and on the ethnic community which symbolically shows the human invasion of the Earth in the present era.

Conclusion:

The field of GeoHumanities provides a new avenue for bridging the gap between geography and humanities. The exploration of space and time provides a fresh perspective. The

shape and location have a profound impact on forming the individuals and the space also contributes to the advancement of civilization. At the same time, human civilization contributes to the transformation of the geographical landscape as explored in *The Living Mountain*. The conversion of Mahaparbat into a 'colony' of products has far-reaching and long-lasting consequences. The present era, is witnessing the clash of different groups of homo-sapiens and has created a sense of 'rootlessness' as an after-effect of climate change which has caused mass migration, extinction and deaths as appropriately portrayed in the novella. By understanding the complexities of geography, history, and literature one can understand the intersectionality. Through such interdisciplinary studies and narratives of writers like Amitav Ghosh, the nuances of human experiences within specific geographical contexts can be understood well.

Conflict of Interest: The corresponding author, on behalf of second author, confirms that there are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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