Chapter 7
Learning from the Paradigmatic South: Amitav Ghosh's *The Living Mountain* as a Parable of Environmental Resistance

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Abstract

Amitav Ghosh's short story *The Living Mountain* is here seen as a parable appended to his previous *Nutmeg's Curse*. The essay discusses the literary genre to which the story belongs, whether fable, as the subtitle suggests, or myth, highlighting its relations with pop music, Western philosophy, and Hindu beliefs. Eventually, though much simpler in its structure, the short story may gesture towards a new way of perceiving the opposition North vs. South, as an opposition of epistemic paradigms rather than a territorial question.

Keywords

native knowledge; environmental humanities; global warming; Western philosophy; climate justice.

Introduction

In 2005 the British virtual rock group Gorillaz published its second album, *Demon Days*, that included a song entitled "Fire Coming Out of The Monkey's Head" (Gorillaz 2005). It recounts the story of a community where a population called "Happyfolks" lives in harmony at the foot of a mountain, unbeknown to the rest of the world. One day "Strangefolks" with black spectacles that hide their true intentions arrive and occupy the higher regions of the Mountain, which was inhabited by the great souls of the community. They shoot many "Happyfolks" and find precious stones. So they start digging the Mountain till it turns out to be a volcano that erupts and destroys everything and everyone.

The album containing the song went six times platinum in the UK and double platinum in the US, so it is not unlikely that it found its way also into the playlists of an eclectic listener like Amitav Ghosh. The storyline adapts itself to many experiences of colonialism and exploitation, though the virtual band has never commented on the inspiration for the song.

The storyline of Amitav Ghosh's *The Living Mountain* (2022; hereafter cited in the text as *LM*) is quite similar in its simplicity, and yet this narrative addresses a number of issues, which complicate its reception. The rich gamut of details Ghosh adds offers many insights and interpretive possibilities, not only foregrounding the ecological implications of the tale, but also challenging the reader to react. While in the Gorillaz's case it is easy to pick a side and tell the goodies from the baddies, Ghosh makes it slightly more complex, as we shall see.

The Literary Genre

The first issue that I would like to address is what literary genre *LM* belongs to. Answering is more than a mere critical exercise because the response and the interpretation of a story depend on its genre. The author himself calls it in the subtitle "A Fable for Tomorrow". However, rather than a declaration of poetics, this is just the first of the many instances of intertextuality that fill the story. "A Fable for Tomorrow" is the title of the first chapter of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962), where the pioneer of eco-studies introduced her work on the damages of pesticides with a story in which a beauteous countryside was suddenly attacked by mysterious forces, which are initially thought of as an evil spell and eventually turn out to be side effects of DDT (dichloro-diphenyl-trichloroethane).

LM, however, is not a fable in that it does not rely on any of the features that usually characterize the genre, particularly the happy ending. Ghosh's story begins with a frame narrative in which an I-narrator introduces the second-degree narrator and her transcription of a dream, which forms the main story. Interpreters of this story never linger on the frame narrative, which takes place

in New York City and is written in a downright realistic manner. However, the dream is an important feature. Sigmund Freud did not distinguish between real and invented dreams, but rather between manifest and latent content. Thus, while here the manifest content is quite plain, the latent content has at least two levels. As the frame narrative is quite realistic, its characters can be investigated through the ordinary means of realistic fiction. What do the frame narrators think of the story? How do they see themselves in it? I shall argue that the dream is induced by the reading of *The Nutmeg's Curse* (Ghosh 2021b), but at a deeper level it hints at some controversies that are still unclear to the characters and possibly to the author himself.

Some scholars have suggested that the story should be considered a myth, mostly because of the notion of the profanation of the sacred mountain and its anger (Saha 2023; Karmakar and Chetty 2023). Besides, they argue that writing a myth would be a homage to the mythical knowledge that Ghosh wishes to uphold. They certainly have a point; however, myths usually do not have realistic frame narrators, and when they do, as in the case of Ulysses telling his adventures to Alcinous, they belong to the same world of the myth itself. Here Maansi does not belong to the world of her dream. There is, however, a further reason why this cannot be called a myth. Mythical writing tells truths that have never happened. A myth explains mysteries that cannot be explained otherwise, and serves as a foundation for a cult or for an ethical attitude. The myth of Bon Bibi, which Ghosh himself revisits in *Jungle Nama* (2021a), for instance, is the foundation of Bon Bibi's cult, provides a rationale for the aggressivity of the tigers, and an ethics for Sundarbans' people who work in the jungle. As with most myths, its value may well be universal, but it is firmly grounded within a given society (Strenski 1992). Moreover one of the themes of the *LM* is cultural appropriation and epistemicide (Karmakar and Chetty 2023); it would not make sense for a world writer like Ghosh with an anthropological background to invent a myth.

Jasmine Sharma (2022) inscribes the story within the category of speculative fiction. I tend to agree with her that the dream narrative has much in common with speculative fiction: Maansi reads a book on the Anthropocene and, mulling over this, falls asleep so that her intuitions on the subject are merged with her memories of Nepal and elaborated in the form of a nightmare, which she subsequently decides to write down. And yet, a necessary feature of speculative fiction is that it points at the future, projecting present trends into a dystopic world. Here the opposite happens: the story seems projected into the past, not future.

The oneiric part of *LM* falls best into the category of parable, a word that Ghosh subtly employed as a subtitle for his previous book, *The Nutmeg's Curse. Parables for a World in Crisis* (2021b). The literary genre of the parable does not work like the myth or the fable. Its primary aim is not to entertain but rather to

help the reader or listener grasp some truth, which, in the New Testament, is often counterintuitive or even paradoxical. Often parables are an embodiment of a spiritual or ethical insight. The word itself comes from Greek παραβολή, which means "comparison" or "illustration" (literally, to cast one thing next to another), and indeed parables are by necessity allegorical. A parable persistently points outside of itself to other truths. This is exactly what happens in Ghosh's story: all characters and the events described in Maansi's dream point to ideas, actors, and facts of the Anthropocene, and it culminates with an unexpected turn of events. Ghosh's modern parable establishes a peculiar relationship with the world of ideas: the storyline recalls concepts that can be traced in Ghosh's previous books or in the insights of other contemporary intellectuals.

The Nutmeg's Curse begins with the history of the Banda Islands, in the Moluccas archipelago, which used to be the only place where nutmegs grew. The description of the mythical tree in *LM* recalls that of the nutmeg tree. Ghosh recounts that the islands live under the threat of a volcano called Gunung Api, which often erupts with devastating force.

> Yet there is also something magical about these eruptions, something akin to the pain of childbirth. For the eruptions of Maluku's volcanoes bring to the surface alchemical mixtures of materials which interact with the winds and weather of the region in such a way as to create forests that teem with wonders and rarities.
>
> In the case of the Banda Islands the gift of Gunung Api is a botanical species that has flourished on this tiny archipelago like nowhere else: the tree that produces both nutmeg and mace. (2021b: 8)

In *LM* we read:

> we knew in our hearts that our mountain was a living being that cared for us; we saw proof of this every day, all around us, in the form of a tree that grew along the streams that descended from its slopes. This tree, which grew only in our Valley and nowhere else, produced things that were so miraculous that we called it the Magic Tree. Its leaves kept insects away; its wood was impermeable to water; its roots nourished rare mushrooms; its flowers produced exquisitely scented honey; and its fruit was delicious to eat. But the most miraculous thing of all was the nut that lay within the fruit: its fragrance was incomparable, and it had so many medicinal uses that traders from the Lowlands would travel long distances in search for it. (*LM*, 7-8)

Besides the image of the tree and the mountain slopes, which appear in both texts, there is a stylistic continuity between the two. The former, which is not fiction, deploys metaphors that bring the text into the realm of legend. The reference to the pain of childbirth evokes the idea of the mountain as a Mother Goddess. In the subsequent lines, the substances coming from the Volcanic

eruptions are called "alchemical" rather than simply "chemical", thus bringing them into a kind of pre-scientific past. Likewise, in *LM*, the mountain is a divinity that takes care of the Valley People, while the tree is "miraculous".

This way of writing opposes the rationalistic prose of essayistic and realistic tradition to the non-secular knowledge of non-Western cultures, and universalizes the experience of the Valley People; they are, at the same time, a Himalayan tribe, the Moluccans, the Mahoris, the Aztecs, but also the Mondas or the Jarawas.

Ghosh is particularly fond of female divinities. *The Calcutta Chromosome* (Ghosh 1996) features two priestesses, one Mangala, who is worshipped by local subalterns, and one upper-class Theosophian called Countess Pongrácz, inspired by Madame Blavatsky. More recently, the novelist has published a version of Bon Bibi's legend, *Jungle Nama*, and adapted the legend of Manasa Devi (the goddess of serpents) for his novel *Gun Island* (2019). It comes as a little surprise that, while the mountain has no gender attributes, its cult is kept alive by women shamans called Adepts. Interestingly, in *The Nutmeg's Curse*, Ghosh mentions shamans with great respect, in particular with reference to the Amazon. However, it is in the Himalayan region that one finds women shamans, and mountains are held sacred. The Adepts dance themselves into a trance, which permits them to communicate with the mountain through the soles of their feet. As Arnab Panda and Anway Mukhopadhyay (2024) argue in their paper, this is not an invention, but a cult well documented in South Asian Shakta-Tantra, a form of performative devotion of Shakti, which is the feminine cosmic energy. The name Adept points to someone who has had an initiation and is the custodian of some sacred lore. It is no coincidence that Adepts are only women, who are kept in great esteem, and that the narrator is a woman herself. The last line of the story is also given to an adept.

In *The Nutmeg's Curse* Ghosh explains that on the Banda islands, the Dutch perpetrated an omnicide, destroying humans and entire species alike, in order to ensure the monopoly of production and trade of nutmegs. This little-known historical event offers Ghosh the opportunity to expound on the mentality of Western colonization, arguing that European colonizers applied the same omnicidal behavior against other races as against the lands that they occupied. The behavior of the Dutch in the Moluccas is very close to that of other Europeans in America. The rise of capitalism and colonization obviously went together, but, he claims, it was colonization that fostered the idea of "terraforming", namely changing whatever land they colonized into something as similar to Europe as possible — basically a New England, a New Scotland, a New Wales, etc. Likewise, colonizers would make the colonized as similar to the Europeans as possible; they wanted the subject to become as productive as the capitalist Europeans and consume as much as them. Indeed, they despised Native Americans and Indians because they were allegedly lazy and would live content

with what they had got instead of pursuing a loftier lifestyle. Ghosh goes so far as to argue that positivism and rationalism are a consequence of colonialism and not the other way around.

> Yet this form of economic rationality was predicated on armed conquest, the elimination of natives, and the creation of a racialized social structure similar to that of European colonies in the Americas, with a dominant Euro-descended minority ruling over a majority of enslaved Asians. In no way can the role of unfree labour in the functioning of this otherwise rationalized economy be explained away as an archaism or a holdover from the past; not only was it a foundational aspect of the project — it was a sign, precisely, of its modernity. […] its basic structure lasted for almost two and a half centuries, well into the modern era—that is to say, until 1868, when slavery was banned in the Dutch East Indies. (2021b: 117)

It goes without saying that the beliefs of inferior races are likewise inferior. Hence, every form of vitalism has been considered heathenish and irrational, ethically reprehensible, because it does not agree with the extractive and exploitative spirit of the colonizers. On the contrary — Ghosh argues at the onset of *The Great Derangement* (2016) — it makes no sense to consider nature as inert. It is becoming increasingly urgent to discard the destructive paradigm of Western rationalism to embrace alternative vitalistic paradigms that consider the world as a unity, as Gaia, or as a divinity for that matter — whatever commands respect. This last point is literally vital; indeed Ghosh notices in *The Nutmeg's Curse* that «These developments are making it ever more evident that many "savage" and "brutish" people understood something about landscapes and the Earth that their conquerors did not» (2021b: 84).

A Good Story

In the dream section, the narrator Maansi is a nondescript woman of the people, and chooses to speak in the first-person plural, as if hers was the voice of the community. They live in relative tranquility, keeping a distance from the sacred mountain called "Mahaparbat", the great mountain — incidentally, this is the title given to most Indian translations of the story. Exactly as in the case of the Bandas, men from a foreign land invade the Valley and enslave local people. They call themselves "Anthropoi". This name is polysemic, as it is the exact plural nominative of the Greek word ἄνθρωπος, meaning human. Obviously, the name refers to the etymology of Anthropocene, as the era of humans, but the Greek ending also reminds us that the European philosophy that underlies their deeds was born in Greece, and Western epistemology is an evolution of the Greek one. Thus, the Anthropoi are not only *conquistadores* but also bearers of a different outlook, a different epistemology, which will soon

become hegemonic, denigrating, and obliterating forms of local non-rationalistic knowledge.

The Anthropoi also give a name to the indigenous population, dubbing them "Varvaroi". This is hard to explain as it is the modern Greek pronunciation of the ancient Greek βάρβαροι, from which the modern "barbarian" or "barbaric" are derived. The word was used to designate non-Greek foreigners, who were considered inferior. It remains unclear why Ghosh did not opt for the more common transcription "Barbaroi". The third Greek word designates soldiers, and it is even more difficult, Kraani, which Maansi translates as «the helmeted ones» (*LM*, 16). In modern Greek the term means indeed "helm", though the ending in -i is not to be found either in ancient or modern Greek, nor does the word refer to soldiers in either language. A possible rationale for this choice may be the notion that Spanish conquistadores in Mexico stood out for their iron helmets. The Spanish also invented a widely believed legend that Motecuhzoma deemed that the invaders were actually gods whose arrival had been predicted by an ancient prophecy (Hinz 2022: 405ff.), which resonates with Maansi's dream (*LM*, 12-13).

The Anthropoi also bring along some "Savants", as they base their strategy of conquest on violence and cultural denigration, brought about by the Kraani and Savants respectively. The Savants denigrate the Varvaroi, alleging that they are primitive and entertain ridiculous beliefs about the life and sacrality of the Mountain. The Anthropoi, on the contrary, consider themselves modern and clever and the Mountain simply a piece of rock. Where the primitive Varvaroi see a sacred mountain, they see a natural resource and riches to be extracted; so they start climbing higher and higher, obliging the Varvaroi to work for them and supply them with victual and other objects needed for their enterprise. The exact aim of their ascent is never really specified. It seems to be no other than climbing higher and higher, above all higher than the despised Varvaroi. As the native culture is crashed and forgotten, the leadership of the Varvaroi passes from women to "covetous men", who admire the Anthropoi and aspire to become like them. They defy the Kraani, who eventually quit the Valley and join the ascenders.

Here the story shifts from allegory to symbolism, which is a distinctive feature of dreams. Climbing is no longer a means to an end but an end in itself. So, while it initially stood for colonialism, it now stands for capitalism or consumerism, and its relentless craving for more. Some former Varvaroi, inflamed by the desire to ascend the once sacred mountain, start climbing, obliging other countrymen less fortunate or less bellicose than themselves to stay back and provide the necessary supplies, as they had done for the Anthropoi.

At this point there is hardly any difference between Anthropoi and Varvaroi, except for their respective histories and the advantage the Anthropoi had accumulated.

Presently, it turns out that the combined pressure of Varvaroi and Anthropoi creates avalanches and landslides, and parts of the mountain collapse, killing many in the Valley. The two groups have some discussions in which the Anthropoi tell the Varvaroi that they were not supposed to ascend the Mountain, as their weight is too much for the soil. If they mean to ascend at all, they should at least learn the new ways of climbing that the Anthropoi have just invented, which are lighter. The Varvaroi realize that the Savants of the Anthropoi had lied all along when they said that their knowledge was universal and that the mountain was there for everyone to climb. Yet now they cannot afford to tread lightly because they have started too late and people down in the Valley count on them to climb as fast as possible. Even then, the pressure of the Anthropoi and Varvaroi on the slope of the Mountain is causing disasters down in the Valley. Eventually, when the Mountain is about to collapse, the Anthropoi recognize that the natives (they no longer call them Varvaroi), had been right all along and that climbing the Mountain had been a mistake from the start. Maybe the natives were right after all. They find an old woman who used to be an Adept and still knows the holy dance. They persuade her to perform in order to understand the Mountain. Thus, it seems that the two groups are understanding each other at last and recognize that the Mountain is alive and agentic. The woman consents to dance, and as she does, the mountain responds with vibrations. This is when the Savants recognize the power of the older ways that they had so long despised:

> We were all amazed but none more so than the savants of the Anthropoi, who cried out: 'You were right! The Mountain is alive! We can feel its heartbeat under our feet. This means we must look after the poor, dear Mountain; we must tend to it; we must care for it.' (*LM*, 35)

If this tale was a fable, this recognition should mark its happy ending. Valley People and Anthropoi finally understand each other and will soon find a solution. But with the next paragraph the parable reveals its paradoxical nature. The only surviving Adept, far from being pleased at this recognition, infuriated retorts:

> '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? (*LM*, 35)

These are the last words of the story, which surprise the readers who actually expected a fable compelling them to understand why the Adept is furious and to imagine what these words meant in New York City to Maansi who had written them and to the I-narrator as they had just begun to comprehend the implications of the Anthropocene. After all, isn't Maansi one who has left her

native Nepal for the glamour of the American metropolis? Is this a shock of recognition to her?

The Adept's reaction can be explained in two ways: from her viewpoint as a shaman, or from the viewpoint of Maansi as a dreamer/writer. Arguably, the Adept rages against the impiety of the Savant whose attitude towards the mountain is patronizing, as the attitude of the human species towards other species, which may be protected, but never worshipped. In spite of everything, he has not understood that the mountain is a sacred entity and not just another insensible "species" to tender and cultivate. The Savant recognizes that the mountain is more complex than he had hitherto believed, but is confident that his knowledge and technology will allow him to find a way to "care for the mountain" while continuing to extract its riches. He may recognize that the mountain is agentic, but he still does not recognize its sacredness.

The Adept's viewpoint has a counterpoint in Ghosh's *The Nutmeg's Curse*, where he discusses the concept of TEK (Traditional Ecological Knowledge). Ghosh writes that «the very name is suggestive of a fundamental misunderstanding: it assumes that Indigenous understandings are usable 'knowledge' rather than an awareness created and sustained by songs and stories» (2021b: 84). TEK is a commodification of indigenous cultures which does not make amend for the epistemicide perpetrated by colonialism. Ghosh concludes his discourse writing that «[t]he planet will never come alive for you unless your songs and stories give life to all the beings, seen and unseen, that inhabit a living Earth—Gaia» (*ibidem*).

Maansi's reaction to all this as a New Yorker of Nepali origin may be a recognition or even a sense of guilt for following the ways of the Anthropoi. If we consider her next act, that is writing down her epiphanic dream, we can conclude that she has chosen writing as a kind of activism. After all, Maansi is another name for the goddess Saraswati, the goddess of knowledge and arts; the name itself means intellectual or spiritual endeavor. Not being a researcher or a philosopher, she translates what she has understood into a story, a fable. She endorses what Richard Powers writes in *The Overstory*, that «[t]he best arguments in the world won't change a person's mind. The only thing that can do it is a good story» (Powers 2018: 335, 487).

From Global to Paradigmatic South

One might argue that the short story does not add much to what Ghosh had already written in *The Nutmeg's Curse*. It is possible, but the function of allegory is to make an idea clear for anyone, not necessarily to offer new insights. That essay contains many pages in defense of a vitalistic approach to the Earth and a scathing critique of rationalism. However, readers of essays tend to agree with the viewpoint of the author without considering the implications. The final

reversal of the happy ending in the short story, on the contrary, challenges the reader to pick a side and pay its price.

Furthermore, there may be a point on which Ghosh is still reflecting, and possibly shaping a more complex opinion than he held before; I am referring to the debate on climate justice. In *The Great Derangement* (2016), Ghosh's position was quite terse: he strongly criticized the Paris Agreements because they do not mention climate justice and make no provisions to help the historically disadvantaged countries, while they grant the countries that consume the most the right to do it. On the contrary, he showed appreciation for the encyclical letter *Laudato sii* (Francis 2015) which openly relates poverty and environmental politics.

In *The Nutmeg's Curse* Ghosh quotes again the encyclical letter, but discusses climate justice at the level of social classes rather than nations (2021b, see in particular pages 156-157). He addresses the notion that justice might entail that those who are born in historically underdeveloped countries (it is debatable if China and India should still fall into this category) have a right to achieve the same wealth as the scions of former colonizers. Thus Ghosh:

> Words like these came as no surprise to me; I have heard their like many times, not just in Indonesia, but also in India, China, and elsewhere. Across much of the global South these beliefs are held with a strength of conviction that belies the idea that the planetary crisis can be addressed merely by "fixing" capitalism. (2021b: 160)

The author of *The Nutmeg's Curse* sympathizes with those who lament a historical disadvantage, writing that these issues cannot «be wished away», but then admits that it may make the crisis even more «intractable» (*ibidem*). The solution that he envisages is an equal degrowth, in which the values of the rich align themselves with those of the poor:

> "Until I have what the Other has, I am poor"; or "Not till I have what the Other has will justice be served." It follows then that this conception of wealth is founded on the Other's conception of the Good Life, as a standard to be aspired to. Hence, if the Other's conception of the Good Life were to change, then the resonances would be felt everywhere. (*ibidem*)

Thus, Ghosh prefers to speak of "urban" or "global elites" rather than global North. In *The Nutmeg's Curse*, the global North, is a place where things happen, but global elites have the agency to make them happen.

LM does not discuss global elites, let alone urban ones, but focuses on the process whereby the natives are perverted into accepting a toxic epistemology that brings them to forsake their beliefs for capitalistic lifestyles. Since the Varvaroi are as good as the Anthropoi at climbing the mountain, it follows that,

in the end, their responsibility towards the mountain is no lesser. If possible, it may be even greater, as they had known the true nature of the mountain and forgotten it.

The short story withholds many details, but it dwells at length on the mimicry that follows the process of cultural denigration. It is true that the Anthropoi have converted the Valley People with the sword and the market, promoting their values and lifestyle, but it is also true that the Varvaroi are fascinated by the idea of climbing.

When it becomes clear that the Earth cannot afford that everyone climbs as high as the Anthropoi once did, the Varvaroi may well complain to the Anthropoi claiming the same right to exploit the Mahaparbat, but what does it mean to the Mountain itself? The Mountain does not distinguish between Anthropoi and Varvaroi, especially when the latter struggle to be so similar to the Anthropoi.

Moreover, the elites are now global as capitalism or ecological crisis. Hence justice must be achieved by drastically downsizing the Northern lifestyle, rather than upgrading the lifestyle of the South. It is undeniable that, historically, the global North has plundered the global South, if one casts a general look at statistics. But it is also true that elites in the global South live far better than the middle class in the global North. Even in the early twentieth century, the Down and Outs in Paris and London were at par with the Coolies in Calcutta or Bombay. On the contrary, the Tagores and the Jejeebhoys enjoyed the privileges of capitalism even when India was a colony.

Rather than reasoning according to the category of nations, or North and South, Ghosh seems to envisage a different distinction for the Anthropocene; on the one hand, the capitalistic, which also means rationalistic, colonial or neocolonial, and extractivist mindset; on the other hand the traditional, sober, sustainable one. Rather than opposing two hemispheres, he seems to oppose two paradigms. Instead of global North and South, we should talk about paradigmatic North and paradigmatic South.

Climate justice remains a priority, but it must be dealt with within a paradigm of general degrowth and alignment. Indeed, if we think in terms of species, it is difficult to maintain that humans as a whole have not plundered the ecosystems that were not only their own. Sapiens has been thriving and steadily multiplying beyond limit in the last hundred years. What is it to the ecosystem of the Sundarbans if Cortez invaded Mexico or Robert Clive fought and won at Plassey? The Sundarbans demand an immediate degrowth — following Maurizio Pallante and Serge Latouche — and a radical overhaul of the epistemological paradigm that has sustained rationalism and extractive capitalism since the early modern period. In other words, the paradigmatic North must start learning from the paradigmatic South, but it must do it without superimposing its epistemological paradigms, while the South cannot expect to follow

in the footsteps of the North. Indeed, Ghosh seems to say that the global elites must change their epistemological premises and start learning from traditional cultures. The flipside of the coin is that those who are in touch with traditional cultures have a historical duty towards modernity to stick to them and bring them to the knowledge of the wide world.

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