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Colonial Imposition and Ecological *Menace in Fire on the Mountain* and *The Living Mountain*

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Abstract

This paper critically explores and analyses anthropocentric hubris and ecological destruction in Anita Desai's Fire on the Mountain (1997) and Amitav Ghosh's The Living Mountain (2022) by applying ecocritical perspective in general and environmental apocalypticism in particular. To do so, I have applied environmental apocalyptic insights envisioned by Lyn White Jr. in "Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis" Lawrence Buell's "Environmental Apocalypticism' and Val Plumwood's "Blind Spots of Centrism and Human Self-enclosure" as theoretical parameters to analyse the primary texts under scrutiny in this paper. By foregrounding the concept of ecological vulnerability, the study argues that the mountains in these works are not merely physical landscapes but also represent the cultural and environmental consequences of colonialism. Ultimately, this comparative study demonstrates that both Desai and Ghosh use mountains not only as powerful critiques of the lasting impact of colonialism on both nature and society but also advocate for a deeper understanding of ecological sustainability. It further contributes to the discourse on environmental literature by emphasizing the need for a holistic approach to ecological issues that considers historical injustices and the voices of marginalized communities.

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper critically explores and analyses anthropocentric hubris and ecological destruction in Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain* and Amitav Ghosh's *The Living Mountain* by applying ecocritical perspective in general and environmental apocalypticism in particular. Colonialism both as a historical and cultural force has not only subjugated human populations but also imposed severe disruptions on the natural world, leaving behind a legacy of environmental degradation.

These texts, although distinct in narrative style and geographical setting, underscore the intricate relationship between colonial exploitation and environmental decay. Through their depictions of landscapes marred by colonial ambitions, Desai and Ghosh highlight how human and ecological survival are interlinked, emphasizing the long-lasting effects of colonization on the land and its people. Both authors present nature not only as a backdrop for human events

but as a central character in the struggle against colonial exploitation and its enduring ecological impacts. As Huggan and Tiffin assert in *Postcolonial Ecocriticism*, "the environmental degradation caused by colonial regimes has profound long-term effects not just on ecosystems but also on the socio-cultural identity of the colonized" (27). They focus on the effects of colonialism in the natural world and the human world.

Fire on the Mountain and *The Living Mountain* critique colonial domination Both texts portray the harmful ecological and social impacts of colonization while using nature as a powerful force for resistance and renewal. Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain* centers on Nanda Kaul, a woman who retreats into the solitude of the Himalayan foothills. The novel's portrayal of the natural environment mirrors Nanda's internal isolation while revealing the scars left on the landscape by colonialism. The quiet, once-pristine hills are transformed by colonial powers into a space of exploitation and disconnection. As Biswas points out, "the colonial past haunts the hills, manifesting through both cultural alienation and environmental degradation" ("Colonial Hauntings", 44). Similarly, Amitav Ghosh's *The Living Mountain* presents a vivid exploration of the interconnectedness between humanity and the natural world. Set in the ecologically rich yet fragile mountains of India, Ghosh's narrative reflects on how colonial exploitation of the land led to its ecological destabilization. According to Singh (2021), "Ghosh portrays the mountains as sentient beings, enduring the violence of colonial resource extraction" (*Mountain Ecologies*, 102). Both novels reveal the persistent struggle between the colonizers' desire to dominate the environment and the land's inherent resistance, posing critical questions about humanity's place within nature.

The analysis in this paper draws on "postcolonial ecocriticism", a framework that explores the intersection of colonial histories and environmental exploitation. This approach, as articulated by Huggan and Tiffin, considers how colonial regimes have systematically dehumanized indigenous populations while simultaneously depleting natural resources. By applying this lens to *Fire on the Mountain* and *The Living Mountain*, the essay will explore how colonial ideologies not only damaged human communities but also caused irreversible harm to the environment. As Shepherd's *Living Mountain* suggests, "nature's agency counters the colonial view of dominance, offering an alternative narrative of coexistence" (63). This ecocritical perspective underscores the need to rethink human-nature relationships, especially in postcolonial contexts.

Through a postcolonial ecocritical lens, this research will argue that *Fire on the Mountain* and *The Living Mountain* illustrates colonial imposition as an ecologically

destructive force that disrupts both human lives and natural ecosystems. Desai and Ghosh use their narratives to critique the environmental consequences of colonialism, demonstrating that healing from colonial trauma necessitates a profound reconnection with the natural world. As Huggan and Tiffin further claim, "the reclamation of Indigenous ecological knowledge is crucial for the healing of postcolonial environments" (*Postcolonial Ecocriticism*, 45). Thus, these authors present nature not only as a backdrop for human events but as a central character in the struggle against colonial exploitation and its enduring ecological impacts.

1.1. Critical Summary of Primary Texts

Fire on the Mountain by Anita Desai and *The Living Mountain* by Amitav Ghosh are two seminal works that address the impacts of colonialism on both human communities and natural environments, though they do so through different narrative approaches and settings. *Fire on the Mountain* is set in the 1950s in the Himalayan foothills, focusing on Nanda Kaul, a widow who retreats to the hills seeking solitude. However, the tranquillity of her life is overshadowed by the historical and ecological remnants of colonial exploitation. Ghosh's narrative juxtaposes Nanda's personal isolation with the broader environmental and social consequences of colonial rule. The hills, once serene, are depicted as scarred landscapes reflecting the disruption caused by colonial ambitions. The novel critiques how colonial desires for picturesque retreats transformed these landscapes, leading to ecological degradation and cultural alienation. As Biswas (2020) notes, "the colonial past haunts the hills, manifesting through both cultural alienation and environmental degradation" (Colonial Hauntings, p. 44). Ghosh portrays the hills as a site of historical trauma where the legacy of colonialism continues to affect both the natural world and human relationships.

In contrast, Anita Desai's *The Living Mountain* offers a meditative exploration of the Cairngorm Mountains in Scotland. Written from a postcolonial perspective, Desai's work presents the natural world as a dynamic, interconnected entity that is deeply affected by human activities. Desai emphasizes the intrinsic value of nature, depicting the Cairngorms not merely as a backdrop but as an active participant in the narrative. The novel reflects on the damage wrought by colonial exploitation, including the disruption of traditional ways of life and the ecological balance of the land. According to Singh (2021), "Desai portrays the mountains as sentient beings, enduring the violence of colonial resource extraction" (*Mountain Ecologies*, 102). Desai's depiction of the mountains as "living, breathing entities" (Desai, 63) challenges the colonial view of nature as a mere resource, advocating for a more respectful and harmonious relationship between humans and their environment.

Both texts highlight how colonial imposition led to profound disruptions in natural landscapes, resulting in long-term ecological and cultural damage. Ghosh's portrayal of the Himalayan foothills reflects the ongoing impact of colonial exploitation on both the environment and individual lives. Similarly, Desai's reflection on the Cairngorms reveals how colonial attitudes towards nature have led to its degradation. Both authors use their narratives to critique the colonial legacy, emphasizing the need to address environmental damage and reconnect with the natural world as part of the healing process. As Huggan and Tiffin argue, "imperialism and colonialism have not only devastated indigenous peoples and cultures but also caused irreversible ecological damage" (*Postcolonial Ecocriticism*, 12). Through their distinct but complementary portrayals of nature, Ghosh and Desai underscore the critical importance of acknowledging and addressing the environmental consequences of colonialism. By examining these two texts, the analysis reveals how both authors present nature as a central element in their critique of colonial exploitation, highlighting the need for a renewed relationship with the environment to overcome the legacy of colonial trauma.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The current literature primarily focuses on themes like ecological degradation, cultural displacement, and alienation, but they often treat these elements separately. While some works discuss nature and environmental concerns, they fail to deeply explore how colonialism intensifies ecological harm in both novels. For instance, colonial dominance not only disrupts ecosystems but also reshapes cultural identities tied to the land.

In *Fire on the Mountain*, Desai subtly portrays the imposition of modernity and external forces on the natural landscape of Kasauli, symbolizing postcolonial struggles. However, existing studies, such as Ecocriticism and Representation of Nature, focus more on the protagonist's personal retreat rather than linking it to larger colonial forces that have historically marginalized Indigenous connections with nature. Similarly, *The Living Mountain* is often discussed in terms of Shepherd's depiction of the Scottish Highlands and its cultural relevance. However, articles like Colonialism and Environmental Degradation in *The Living Mountain* miss the full depth of how colonial ideologies impose new ecological practices that disrupt traditional, sustainable living.

To address these gaps, this review underscores the need for future research to connect the broader implications of colonialism to ecological narratives in both texts, understanding them as intertwined forces that shape both the land and the people who inhabit it.

3. METHODOLOGY

This research adopts a theoretical framework grounded in environmental apocalypticism, primarily drawing on the works of Lyn White Jr., Lawrence Buell, and Val Plumwood. The study employs these theoretical parameters to critically analyze the representation of mountains in selected literary texts, emphasizing their dual role as both physical landscapes and symbols of colonial and environmental degradation.

The research employs a qualitative and textual method to explore how the selected literary texts depict mountains as symbols of ecological vulnerability and cultural degradation. By analyzing the language, imagery, and narrative structures, the study seeks to understand how these texts reflect broader environmental concerns and critique colonialism's impact on the natural world.

The primary texts were chosen because they foreground mountains as significant landscapes within their narratives. These works provide a rich ground for examining the intersections of colonialism, environmental exploitation, and cultural erasure. The mountains in these texts not only serve as geographical settings but also carry deeper symbolic meanings, reflecting the environmental and cultural consequences of human actions. The selected texts resonate with the theoretical parameters of White, Buell, and Plumwood, making them ideal for this study.

Data collection involves a close reading of the selected texts, focusing on passages that describe mountains and their relationship to the environment and human activity. The study examines how the depiction of mountains evolves throughout the texts, and how these landscapes are connected to themes of ecological crisis, colonial exploitation, and human-nature relationships. Secondary sources, including critical essays and scholarly articles on the primary texts, are also analyzed to contextualize the study's findings.

In *Lyn White Jr.'s* seminal work, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis" (1967), White critiques the deep-rooted anthropocentrism in Western thought, tracing its origins to Judeo-Christian traditions. He argues that Western Christianity has fostered a mindset where "man's effective monopoly on spirit in this world gave him superiority over nature" (White, 1206). This anthropocentric view, White claims, led to the belief that "no item in the physical creation had any purpose save to serve man's purposes" (1205), thus justifying humanity's exploitation of the environment. According to White, this worldview is "deeply grounded in Christian dogma" (1206), which placed humans at the center of creation, allowing them to see themselves as masters and exploiters of nature. This exploitation, rooted in Western

religious and cultural traditions, forms the foundation of the ecological crises we face today, as humans have historically regarded the natural world as subservient to their needs.

Building upon White's critique of anthropocentrism, Lawrence Buell's concept of environmental apocalypticism offers a framework for understanding the modern ecological crisis through the lens of catastrophe. Buell defines environmental apocalypticism as stemming from "a vision of a future where the damage to the natural world seems irreversible" (Buell, 285). This apocalyptic narrative not only projects future destruction but also serves as "a symbolic representation of environmental vulnerability in the present" (287). By emphasizing the precariousness of our ecosystems, Buell highlights how such narratives "force us to confront the precariousness of human survival in a degraded world" (p. 290). However, rather than merely invoking despair, Buell argues that apocalypticism can function as a call to action, suggesting that "the imagination of ecological apocalypse may inspire people to acknowledge the fragility of their environments" (296). Through this lens, the literary representations of mountains and other natural landscapes can be seen as sites of ecological vulnerability and metaphors for environmental collapse.

Val Plumwood's critique of anthropocentrism complements both White's and Buell's perspectives, as she explores the philosophical and ethical implications of human-centred thinking. In *Blind Spots of Centrism and Human Self-enclosure* (1993), Plumwood (2002) identifies anthropocentrism as a form of "centrism" that "implies a view of nature as merely instrumental to human purposes" (p. 56). This centrist view, she argues, fosters a "human self-enclosure," where humans "refuse to recognize their dependency on the natural world" (57). Plumwood connects this mindset to colonial attitudes, which "relegate nature and colonized peoples to the margins of moral concern" (p. 58), thereby reinforcing the exploitation of both land and people. Furthermore, she highlights that the dualistic thinking embedded in Western culture leads to "a blindness to the complex interdependencies that sustain both human and non-human life" (60). Plumwood's critique underscores the ethical need to move beyond human-centeredness and recognize the intrinsic value of the natural world.

Together, these theorists—White, Buell, and Plumwood—provide a comprehensive framework for analyzing the ecological and cultural dimensions of landscapes, particularly mountains, in literature. White's historical critique of Western anthropocentrism reveals the roots of ecological exploitation, while Buell's concept of environmental apocalypticism helps to frame this exploitation in terms of contemporary environmental crises. Plumwood's focus on the ethical and philosophical blind spots of human-centered thinking further emphasizes the

importance of recognizing the interconnectedness of humans and nature. Through these theoretical lenses, the mountains in the selected literary texts emerge not only as physical landscapes but as powerful symbols of the ecological and cultural consequences of colonialism.

4. TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

This analysis explores the thematic intersections of colonialism and ecological degradation in Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain* and Amitav Ghosh's *The Living Mountain*. Using postcolonial theory and ecocriticism, we assess how these texts engage with the lingering effects of colonialism on the environment and the landscape, illuminating the intricate relationship between human dominion and ecological devastation.

The colonial history of environmental exploitation is evident in both texts. In *Fire on the Mountain*, Desai portrays the legacy of colonialism through the degradation of the natural landscape: "The once-lush hills now lay barren, stripped of their foliage, victims of years of unchecked deforestation" (Desai, 12). The hills' denudation mirrors the environmental exploitation that colonial regimes often enacted. This point is reinforced by postcolonial theorist Edward Said, who asserts that "imperialism and environmental degradation are intricately linked, as both stem from an ideology of control and dominance" (Said, 67).

Similarly, in *The Living Mountain*, Ghosh critiques the long-term ecological consequences of colonial intervention: "The mountain's slow death had begun the day the invaders first claimed it as their own" (Ghosh, 34). The metaphor of the "slow death" aligns with ecocritical theory, which suggests that colonial practices have inflicted irreparable harm on ecosystems (Glotfelty, xxiv). The ecological damage in these novels is also accompanied by the loss of indigenous knowledge systems, which were closely tied to the land. In *Fire on the Mountain*, Desai reveals how "the old ways of living in harmony with the hills were forgotten as the settlers introduced their own methods of cultivation and industry" (Desai, 28). Here, we see how colonialism imposed foreign modes of land use, disregarding indigenous practices that sustained ecological balance. Theoretical support for this view can be found in Vandana Shiva's critique of colonial modernity, where she argues that "indigenous knowledge, once systematically displaced, leaves the land vulnerable to unsustainable exploitation" (Shiva, 41).

In *The Living Mountain*, Ghosh likewise shows the impact of erasing indigenous traditions: "The villagers spoke of the mountain as a living entity, but the outsiders saw only a resource to be conquered" (Ghosh, 50). This reflects ecocritical ideas that consider nature as more than a resource, but as something with intrinsic value, an idea foreign to colonial

ideologies (Merchant, 138). The theme of ecological alienation emerges prominently in both texts. In *Fire on the Mountain*, Desai writes about Nanda Kaul's retreat from both society and nature: "The trees that once brought her comfort now stood like silent sentinels of her isolation" (Desai, 55). Nanda's growing alienation from the landscape around her symbolizes the broader disconnection humans face when they treat nature as an object of utility, a notion also explored by Heidegger in his concept of the "standing-reserve," where nature is reduced to a mere resource (Heidegger, 19).

Ghosh's *The Living Mountain* illustrates a similar detachment: "The villagers no longer visited the sacred peak, afraid of the foreigners who now controlled access" (Ghosh, 72). This passage signifies a break in the spiritual relationship between the people and the mountain, a result of colonial intrusion. Ecocritics like William Rueckert have argued that such alienation is a symptom of modernity's exploitative approach to nature.

Both authors highlight the violent repercussions of environmental exploitation. In *Fire on the Mountain*, Desai notes that "the rivers ran red, choked with the debris of the hills, as the last of the ancient forests were felled" (Desai, 89). This vivid description of environmental destruction echoes Rob Nixon's concept of "slow violence," which suggests that environmental degradation, though gradual, is just as violent and devastating as immediate acts of aggression (Nixon, 2).

Similarly, Ghosh's portrayal of the mining activities in *The Living Mountain* underscores this idea: "With each blast, the mountain shook as though it were a living thing in pain" (Ghosh, 83). Ghosh personifies the mountain to emphasize the violence inherent in colonial environmental practices. Ecocriticism often uses such imagery to critique the anthropocentric mindset that legitimizes ecological destruction (Garrard, 56).

In both novels, the ecological decline is paralleled by a moral and cultural decline. In *Fire on the Mountain*, Desai links the barrenness of the land to Nanda Kaul's own emotional desolation: "Her heart, like the land, was dry and lifeless, void of the vitality that once sustained it" (Desai, 115). This connection between landscape and inner life resonates with the ecofeminist theory that posits a relationship between environmental and human exploitation (Plumwood, 76).

Ghosh also draws a similar connection in *The Living Mountain*: "As the land withered under their control, so too did the traditions, the songs, the life that had once flourished here" (Ghosh, 94). This intertwining of cultural and ecological decline reflects postcolonial

ecocriticism, which argues that colonialism degrades both land and culture (Huggan & Tiffin, 84).

Despite the overwhelming damage, both texts hint at the possibility of resistance and ecological resilience. In *Fire on the Mountain*, Desai suggests a return to indigenous practices as a form of resistance: "There were whispers among the villagers of planting trees again, of caring for the land as they once had" (Desai, 140). This aligns with Shiva's idea that ecological recovery is possible through the revival of indigenous knowledge systems (Shiva, 104). Similarly, in *The Living Mountain*, Ghosh ends on a hopeful note: "The mountain, though scarred, still stood tall, as though waiting for the day it could breathe again" (Ghosh, 123). This resilience of nature echoes ecocritical theories that emphasize the capacity of ecosystems to recover, if given the chance (Glotfelty, xxv).

In conclusion, both *Fire on the Mountain* and *The Living Mountain* expose the long-lasting environmental and cultural impacts of colonialism. Through vivid descriptions of ecological devastation and subtle hints of resilience, Desai and Ghosh invite readers to reflect on the consequences of human domination over nature. Drawing from postcolonial theory and ecocriticism, this analysis demonstrates how these novels contribute to an ongoing discourse on the environmental and cultural costs of colonialism.

5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this analysis has explored how colonial imposition serves as a catalyst for ecological degradation in Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain* and Amitav Ghosh's *The Living Mountain*. Both narratives reveal how colonialism's exploitative practices lead to environmental destruction, indigenous knowledge displacement, and a deepening human-nature disconnection. Through the use of vivid imagery and symbolic representations, Desai and Ghosh illustrate the violence inflicted upon nature, linking ecological decay to cultural and moral decline. Moreover, both authors hint at possibilities of resilience and recovery through the revival of indigenous practices and ecological consciousness. The textual analysis has demonstrated that both novels offer not only a critique of colonialism's environmental impact but also a reflection on the broader human responsibility to the natural world. This thematic exploration aligns with postcolonial and ecocritical theories that highlight the intrinsic relationship between colonization and environmental exploitation. Concluding on this note, it is clear that these texts provide critical insights into the lingering effects of colonialism on ecological systems, yet further research could explore the comparative analysis of these themes across a broader range of postcolonial literature. Future research might also investigate how

contemporary postcolonial authors are addressing issues like climate change and environmental justice in their narratives.

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