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Writing the 'Terrestrial': Shubhangi Swarup's *Latitudes of Longing* and the Postcolonial Environment

ABSTRACT Human exploitation and development of the planet has jeopardized the existence of other species in the form of climate change, rising temperature, and loss of habitats. These problems not only urge for a reassessment of human claims of the planet but also raise the issue of how one must write the environment into literature to render it the form of power that it has attained in the age of the Anthropocene. This contribution focuses on Indian English writer Shubhangi Swarup's debut novel *Latitudes of Longing*, which constructs natural environment as an active force and unifies human and non-human entities to reorient the relationship between humans and environment. Her experimental style interconnecting four different stories challenges the anthropocentric leaning of fiction to privilege the agency of the planet. This paper borrows from Bruno Latour's concept of the 'terrestrial' to examine how Swarup's novel envisions a relationship between the human and non-human forces.

KEYWORDS climate fiction, environmental agency, *Latitudes of Longing*, non-human, Shubhangi Swarup

Indian English writer Shubhangi Swarup's debut novel *Latitudes of Longing* (2018) weaves four interconnected stories across borders and terrains to write the postcolonial environment. In a novel that stretches from the Andaman Islands to Burma (Myanmar), Nepal, and a fictional village that is claimed by both India and Pakistan, Swarup narrates a tale which not only privileges indigenous knowledge systems of clairvoyants and villagers in their relationship to the environment but also depicts how the planet operates as an active and agential force in writing the history of the many species that have inhabited the earth. Swarup's novel uses the natural environment as a structural and narrative device and articulates

Yadav, Kanak. 2025. "Writing the 'Terrestrial': Shubhangi Swarup's *Latitudes of Longing* and the Postcolonial Environment." In *Science, Culture, and Postcolonial Narratives*, edited by Anton Kirchhofer and Karsten Levihn-Kutzler, 209–224. Anglophone Postcolonial Studies 2. Heidelberg: Heidelberg University Publishing. DOI: https://doi.org/10.17885/heiup.1126.c23365

the agency of the unknowable, unconquerable ways of the environment by writing about the shared pasts and futures between Earth and its diverse inhabitants. Swarup's depiction of the non-human forces of the environment aligns with French philosopher Bruno Latour's conception of the 'terrestrial,' which is a category directed as much to politicize the impact of the Anthropocene as it is to identify associations between diverse beings occupying the planet. This contribution seeks to examine how *Latitudes of Longing* destabilizes human-centric understanding of the planet and moves towards the 'terrestrial,' both linguistically and thematically, by drawing connections between humans and non-human forces, flora and fauna, land and sea, and mountains and islands. In doing so, Swarup's novel offers a unique narrative mode which problematizes how agency is understood and also reimagines the relationship between humans and their environment.

The issue of environmental degradation, human/animal migration, and the planet's sustainability has acquired a sense of immediacy in present times due to the detrimental impact of climate change. The apocalyptic nature of the environmental crisis has also resulted in a crisis of representation in terms of its literary and cultural depiction. The problem of how to write the agency of the Anthropocene—wherein the term refers to our "current geological epoch" and humankind's deterministic role in shaping the planet and its future (Crutzen 2006, 16)—has become a debatable issue today. This is because of the changing reality of climate change and the agential role that the planet plays which is often overlooked in comprehending the relationship shared between humans and the natural environment.

While there is unanimous agreement that the ecological crisis confronting the world is primarily man-made, the agency of the natural world has become a crucial subject of inquiry. In this regard, historian Dipesh Chakrabarty claims that the history of the Anthropocene requires a fundamental shift in the way human agency and "geological agency" (Chakrabarty 2009, 208) are perceived in relation to the planet. He argues in favour of a critical historiography that surpasses disciplinary distinctions like "human and natural histories" (207) in order to truly grasp the wide impact of ecological changes affecting the planet:

> The task of placing, historically, the crisis of climate change thus requires us to bring together intellectual formations that are somewhat in tension with each other: the planetary and the global; deep and recorded histories; species thinking and critiques of capital. (Chakrabarty 2009, 213)

Chakrabarty, therefore, proposes thinking of human beings in terms of "species" and identifying the interlinks between economic, global, socio-political and planetary concerns instead of viewing them as exclusive to each other. In a similar light, philosopher Bruno Latour argues that writing the agency of the planet requires a shift in human conception of agency beyond subject–object dualism to how the agency is distributed "as far and in as differentiated a way as possible" (Latour 2014, 15). Both Chakrabarty and Latour urge for reconsidering the way in which agency is understood in essentially human-centric terms. While Chakrabarty argues for the viewing of human beings as "species," Latour foregrounds the active role which non-human environments and different organisms play in determining the destiny of the planet. It is, therefore, incumbent upon us to recognize the modes through which the planet asserts itself. Both thinkers decentre anthropocentric understanding of the environment, which has not only focalized on the human subject but also failed to take into account the agential role that other species continue to play in the planetary realm.

In the task of writing the natural world's agency, Shubhangi Swarup's debut novel follows a unique mode of narration that does not discriminate between the agency of humans and that of the environment. Instead, the novel's multi-story structure, which is divided into four parts, categorized as "Islands," "Faultline," "Valley," and "Snow Desert," narrates different stories set in different temporalities that are connected in their common aim of writing the environment as an active force in the literary text. The novel intertwines tectonic movements, human lives, and animal and plant histories to challenge the dominance of anthropocentric perception of the planet while also envisioning an alternative mode of writing fiction that is narrated from a multitemporal, multispecies, geological perspective.

Realism and the Environment

Many literary works have dwelled upon the subject of the environment and the need to coexist with it, preserving and maintaining its equilibrium. In the canon of Indian English writing itself, writers have explored the complicated relationship between humans and the natural world. From Ruskin Bond's writing, wherein natural environment serves as a poetic inspiration, to Amitav Ghosh questioning the human–animal conflict in how the territory of the Sundarbans is occupied in *The Hungry Tide* (2004), myriad aspects of belonging and contestations with the natural world have been explored in fiction. In this context, Amitav Ghosh's nonfictional

account *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (2016) interrogates the limits of the realist novel in writing about climate change by arguing how the form functioned by "the banishing of the improbable and the insertion of the everyday" (Ghosh 2016, 23). He questions how the writing of catastrophic situation remained reserved for what he terms "generic outhouses," like the realms of "gothic," "fantasy," and "science fiction" (32). Notwithstanding the generic hierarchy on which Ghosh premises his argument, as the genres of "science fiction" and "fantasy" are not "outhouses," to be viewed as less "literary" than realist fiction, his critique of the realist novel's ignorance of the ecological issue is also unconvincing. The variety of literary texts that converge realist elements, scientific knowledge, myths, folklore, and dystopian future to incorporate the agency of the ecosystem counter Ghosh's one-dimensional critique of realism.

While the emergence of the nineteenth-century realist novel centred around the human subject, its individualism, and the bourgeois household, it would be erroneous to claim that the genre itself has not engaged with the environmental question. For example, contemporary fiction from the northeastern states in India significantly contribute in juxtaposing human lives and the natural world. Easterine Kire's folkloric novel about Nagaland, *When the River Sleeps* (2014), merges reality with fantastical elements to depict Villie's unified existence with the forest, which he considers to be his wife (Kire 2014, Chap. 2). Similarly, Mamang Dai's *The Black Hill* (2014), while recreating the nineteenth-century history of the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh and their encounter with the white colonizer, constructs non-human environment as a potent force whose ways need to be abided with:

> He saw the river glinting and turning like a giant snake as far and wide as the eye could see. As he stared at it the river changed shape. Now it was like the trunk of a giant silver tree, spreading its shining arms and limbs across the body of the earth. It had crashed into the earth from the mountains, and now it wanted to hold the earth in a vast embrace. (Dai 2014, Chap. 1)

Such an evocative, poetic description of the river originating and bending like a serpent emphasizes its all-consuming power, which is visualized as a giant living being and symbolizes the supremacy of the environment. Moreover, Dai's extraordinary, affective use of language guides the reader into recognizing the larger-than-life influence of the physical environment in moulding the lives of humans. The latest text to manifestly connect the environmental question with other socio-political concerns like the global restructuring of the world on account of the mass

displacement of people and the refugee crisis is Amitav Ghosh's novel *Gun Island* (2019). Ghosh engages Bengali folklore about the gun merchant and the snake goddess, Manasa Devi, to explore the topical issue of climate change and its damaging impact on the planet. Ghosh follows from his earlier argument in *The Great Derangement* of incorporating "improbable" events into realist fiction and uses "outlandish coincidences and chance meetings" to establish connections within the novel (Clark 2019). These instances, forming part of diverse Indian English novels, demonstrate the varied techniques through which writers establish how the natural world comes into interaction with humankind. From exploring legends and folklore to lyrical sentences and 'improbable' occurrences emphasizing the omnipotence of the environment, literature writes the environment not merely as a background setting but as a powerful force in itself. Many contemporary works of fiction do not merely portray the beauteous visual of the natural world, or else the activistic concern for environmental degradation, but the non-human environment itself as an agent capable of affecting change.

In the trajectory of literature and the environment, Swarup's *Latitudes of Longing* is distinctive and unprecedented, as it does not even render structural and narrative control to human characters. While many works have explored the interstices between man and the environment, such as Indra Sinha's *Animal's People* (2007) and Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* (2004), the focalization of Swarup's novel is not through human characters but, rather, geographical. Judith Rahn, in her reading of Swarup's novel, argues that "by focusing on the physical materiality of the land first and the human lives second, the narration sets the scene for an investigation of our world which does not situate the human centre-stage" (2021, 242). Whether it is the narrative mode or the temporal vastness of the novel, the human characters, plants, animals, mountains, sea, and islands all come together to tell the story of the planet and its unknowability. Swarup's construction of the Earth's agency is also not anthropomorphized but experimentally narrated.

As the novel traverses the Andaman Islands, Myanmar, a valley in Kathmandu, and a disputed village in the Karakoram mountainous region, it accords agency to the non-human elements through its linguistic style and thematic structure, which create a planetary sense of time and space, acknowledging Earth's agency as a far greater force than humankind may ever comprehend. For instance, the novel opens with the sentence: "Silence on a tropical island is the relentless sound of water" (Swarup 2018, 3). It describes the sound of predawn as "a larval silence," "a deliberate pause, reflection filled with hope and anxiety. Hidden amongst

the cluck and hiss, the croak and chatter outside the window, are songs of the extinct" (83). Such lyrical sentences with their onomatopoeic effect account for the silent ways in which the non-human entities communicate. These accounts are endowed with significance because they are represented as part of the planet's mode of communication rather than obliquely signifying human emotions.

Similarly, a sentiment reiterated often in the book is how the formation of the continents and their movements is too vast a phenomenon for human beings to even imagine. When the narrator connects Plato's struggle for survival in prison with the battle against extinction that threatens different species, it elaborates on the incomprehensible ways in which the planet was formed: "If the evolution of life was guided by survival, the movement of continents was guided by an imagination that no life form would be capable of comprehending" (Swarup 2018, 175). Such an understanding that knowing the planet in absolute terms is impossible guides the novel into applying experimental methods to explore how human lives are entangled with other living beings occupying the planet. Taylor Poulos argues in their review of the book how the "unifying theme of the book is desire and how fault lines separate each character from what they want" (Poulos 2020). In this regard, the title of the book, *Latitudes of Longing*, also ties human desire, conceived in sexual, political, and spatial terms, with the different landforms that segregate the four parts of the book: Islands, Faultline, Valley, and Snow Desert. Hence, it is not only the subject of environmental agency that makes Swarup's novel stand out but also the structural format of her book that privileges planetary agency by showing interrelations between human life, animal and plant life, and the formation of Earth and its various landforms.

Towards the Terrestrial

Since the language, scope, and thematic structure of *Latitudes of Longing* focuses on interconnectedness, it aligns with what French philosopher Bruno Latour has termed "terrestrial," which implies that all beings are "earthbound" and linked in the way they occupy the planet (Latour 2018, chap. 18). Swarup's interest also lies in establishing these links between species such that the novelistic world is not centred around human subjects. On the contrary, humans form part of the geological structure that the novel follows. The entire novel is involved in portraying the entanglements between different species, timelines, and landforms to decentre the human and move towards the 'terrestrial.'

In his book *Down to Earth* (2018), Latour argues how the contrary pulls of the "local" and the "global" have kept humans from identifying the impact of climate change. This is because the question gets reductively positioned as a choice between traditional living and modern development. In contemporary times, globalization is touted as the way forward, conveniently associated with progress and modernity, while local attachments are perceived as "nostalgia for 'archaic'" (Latour 2018, Chap. 4). Issues of environmental damage have been camouflaged and dismissed due to the prevalence of such a false binary. Therefore, Latour contends in favour of a third position, namely, 'the terrestrial,' which aims to not only overcome the polarization of the former two categories but also enable human interaction with their actions and with non-human beings so as to lead to an effective counter-politics.

Latour identifies the 'terrestrial' as a political category that responds to climate change and human impact on the environment. As he puts it,

> We are at last clearly in a situation of war, but it is a phony war, at once declared and latent. Some people see it everywhere; others ignore it entirely.
>
> Dramatizing somewhat extravagantly, let us call it a conflict between modern humans who believe they are alone in the Holocene, in flight toward the Global or in exodus toward the Local, and the terrestrials who know they are in the Anthropocene and who seek to cohabit with other terrestrials under the authority of a power that as yet lacks any political institution.
>
> And that war, at once civic and moral, divides each of us from within. (Latour 2018, Chap. 18)

Terrestrial, as implicit from the reference, becomes a category for not just the recognition of environmental change and how to address it but also human dependence on other beings for their own survival. As humans tussle between the two poles, called the 'local' and the 'global,' they fail to realize that the urgent need is to reorient politics towards environmental concerns. The 'terrestrial' as a concept is Latour's way of bringing together the human with other non-human beings for "*engendering* terrestrials," wherein the connections between beings are not conceptualized in terms of their utilitarian value but based on their "dependency" on each other (Latour 2018, Chap. 18, emphasis in original).

The politics of Swarup's novel aligns with the idea of the 'terrestrial,' since the novel disregards polarized understanding of the planet in terms of binaries like human vs non-human and human agency vs Earth's agency. Instead, it foregrounds the planetary, in terms of its structural organization

and narrative voice, which make a deliberate attempt to subvert human centrality in literature. Both structurally and thematically, the scope of *Latitudes of Longing* is 'terrestrial,' since it privileges the planetary over the human self. It interconnects supernatural and earthly elements, human and non-human forces, indigenous and scientific knowledge systems to make planetary claims that transcend manmade borders and divide. In terms of the novel's plot structure, it underlines the planetary by establishing connections between beings across space and time. The novel includes mischievous ghosts from another era meddling with Chanda Devi's household, depicts a peepul tree and a padauk growing in "coital position" (Swarup 2018, 9), a palm tree that flowers once a year and dies soon after, telepathically communicating to Chanda Devi of her own impending death after her daughter's birth (64), and dreams that can foretell, provide comfort, and connect the unknown past and future with the material present. Apart from its thematic structure, the novel is also geographical in terms of its language, which entangles human knowledge and desire in geological metaphors. Chanda Devi, the clairvoyant wife of scientist Girija Prasad, has already visualized "the rivers of blood that will drain out of her body one day" (6). Similarly, the sexual tension between the couple is illustrated through geographical terminology: "Continents apart in their beliefs, god was the precarious isthmus connecting them" (12). In correlating blood flow with river, human beliefs and ideologies with continents and land masses, Swarup's novel invents a non-human-centric mode of writing which also anthropomorphizes the terrestrial.

Right from the start of the novel, Swarup connects seemingly disjointed terrains. In the first part of the novel itself, which sketches the challenging life in the Andaman Islands, Swarup puts forth the idea of the supercontinent Pangaea through the character of Indian scientist Girija Prasad. As Prasad dreams about Pangaea, from which the seven continents are believed to have formed, the narrative acquires a distinct tone which is not of passive description but that of an active moment of creation.

> The belly of Latin America slept comfortably in the groove of West Africa. The jigsaw fit so perfectly, Pangaea came alive. What seemed like bits and pieces breaking off and floating in the daytime now felt like a living being. He was ecstatic to see her stretch her arms wide, from Alaska to the Russian Far East, to see her lift her head and stand on her toes, poles apart. Pangaea, blooming with the grace of a ballerina. He was aroused. But when the downpour suddenly ended, it woke him up. Left to ruminate on half a dream, he wondered why the continents had drifted apart in the first place. Water swept into the cracks, a trickle turned into a stream, streams turned into rivers, And then there was no turning back. (Swarup 2018, 11)

Apart from anthropomorphizing the formation of the planet and the oceans and continents that form it, the above reference also feminizes Pangaea by perceiving it in terms of a female body. In conceiving Pangaea in anthropomorphic terms, as part of a dream sequence of the researcher, Girija Prasad, Swarup writes its agency while also connecting the entire world into an *a priori* origin. Ironically, Prasad, an academic, attains answers to his inquiring questions not through a rational study but through the shifting consciousness of a dream. This dream is not only symbolic politically, in terms of denoting an interconnected world that otherwise stands divided by borders—both physical and ideological—but it is also significant for imaginatively consummating the relationship between the human with the unknowable element of the natural world. Girija Prasad's intellectual pursuits, about comprehending and articulating the formation of Planet Earth, attain climax in the visuals of this dream sequence. In sexualizing their relationship, Swarup forges a union between the human subject and the earth (s)he inhabits.

The structural organization of the novel, which is based on geological divisions, also establishes association between otherwise disconnected tales, since the novel connects the journey of different subjects to convey their intertwined lives. To explicate: the first part, "Islands," chronicles the life of the Varmas in the Andaman Islands as Girija Prasad engages in scientific research and his wife, Chanda Devi's indigenous, "otherworldly," knowledge subverts his rational approaches. The next section, "Faultline," takes the reader on the journey of their domestic help, Mary in conflict-ridden Burma as she struggles to reconnect with her estranged son, Plato, who is serving time as a political prisoner. This is followed by the third part of the novel, entitled "Valley," which depicts the lonely life of Plato's friend, Thapa, as he lives in Kathmandu, having lost family members to earthquakes. The last section, "Snow Desert," focuses on the life of Tashi Yeshe, a.k.a. Apo, a grandfather figure, who originally belonged to a nomadic tribe from the Changthang region but moved to the unnamed village in the Karakoram region on account of the changes brought about by environmental shifts. His existence in a disputed village subverts man-made borders, since the village oscillates between belonging to India and Pakistan, claimed and reclaimed by each of the nation-states in an endless battle. Such interlinked storytelling, which blurs the distinction between plot and subplot, parallels Swarup's political project of writing the environment from a shared, multi-species perspective. The novel does not distinguish between 'major' and 'minor' events or characters, since a seemingly minor character like Mary, in the first section, gains her own story in the second part of the novel. It also does not separate the human from other,

non-human, beings and their attachments to the planet. Swarup's experimental narrative technique also challenges the structuralist understanding of the text and the centrality of characters, since figures that are introduced tangentially achieve their own story over the course of the book, thereby emerging into significance.

Swarup's experimental, magical realist novel foregrounds connections between human and non-human forces by moving back and forth in time and space and blurring the line between the living and the dead, the real and the supernatural. For instance, the house occupied by Girija Prasad and Chanda Devi is simultaneously occupied by the ghosts of soldiers from the colonial time period, and Chanda Devi has the uncanny ability of communicating with them: "Chanda Devi, the clairvoyant one. She feels for ghosts and enjoys the laconic company of trees" (Swarup 2018, 5). Although such a description might place the novel into the realm of the fantastic, Swarup identifies Devi's gift for premonition as part of an indigenous knowledge system. Chanda Devi's "divine prowess" captivates the locals, as she appears "far more learned" to them than her academic husband, Girija Prasad (30). She gets contacted by the Forest Department when an elephant goes wild and becomes uncontrollable. She predicts a crocodile attack and saves her husband from being devoured by the reptile. The novel argues about environmental problems and the functioning of the planet by privileging the environment itself in the form of Chanda Devi's local knowledge(s) that seek(s) to bridge the gap between human comprehension and the vast unknown.

Interestingly, Swarup rejects the label of 'magical realism' in categorizing her fiction and argues that such a perception merely showcases human withdrawal from the environment. As she states:

> If we see stories around nature as being something magical, then it highlights how disconnected we have become from nature, to see it as magical instead of real. The seeming magic in my novel is inspired by natural history and real details that I chanced upon in my research. (Swarup 2019)

Swarup's choice to deploy 'magical realist' narrative techniques and yet distance herself from the categorization seems like a strategic move to resist labels and the reductionism that follows. Although her justification to not relegate questions about the environment in the territory of the magical and the fantastical provides a political angle to her decision, it seems her rejection of the term is not only based on her environmental politics but also an attempt to underline her writerly privilege. In a famous interview, Colombian writer Gabriel García Márquez declared that his use

of "surrealism comes from the reality of Latin America" (Márquez 1973). While critics read Márquez's works as 'surrealist' and 'magical realist,' he foregrounded how his literature was rooted in the reality of his continent. Swarup's rejection of the phrase echoes Márquez's writerly position, where he distanced himself from the terms within which critics were attempting to contain his literary production. Swarup's reservations also originate from a deep-seated awareness of the political connotations of reductive labels. While she portrays humans, animals, ghosts, and non-human elements of the environment occupying the same time and space, she resists naming such an experimental technique in favour of affirming the reality of environmental change and the requirement of an effective literary politics that could tell such a story. Her disapproval is not merely a sign of artistic withdrawal from academic engagements but reveals the limitations in the critical vocabulary which disallows agency to non-human forms of being and requires them to be slotted under the umbrella term of 'magical realism' in order to rationalize and make sense of them.

Swarup forms attachments between humans and other species in writing the agency of the natural environment, and her method also resonates with theoretical writings over the environmental question. Feminist thinker Donna Haraway has proposed making kin as a method to address the issue of climate. According to her, making kin aims to go beyond "ancestry or genealogy" to form attachments as "earthlings" (Haraway 2015, 161–62). Haraway's sense of kinship is not conceptualized in terms of human lineage but as an alternative trajectory that forms bonds between species on account of their sense of belonging to the planet Earth. This call for establishing kinship between humans and other species appears allied with Bruno Latour's conception of a "system of engendering" (Latour 2018, Chap. 18). While Haraway argues for "multispecies assemblages" (Haraway 2015, 160), Latour contends for working upon a "system of engendering" (2018, Chap. 18) that focuses upon the entanglements within which varied species find themselves. Both the thinkers, under different nomenclatures, make a case for moving beyond anthropomorphism and searching for connections between the human subject and other beings.

Latitudes of Longing visualizes attachments between the human and non-human and makes an attempt to narrativize the incomprehensibility of the planet and its formation. While Part 1 featured Chanda Devi communicating with trees, ghosts, and mortals, Part 2 of the book shows interconnected lives between humans and other living beings. For instance, the novel narrativizes student activist Plato's trapped existence in a cellular jail in Burma by drawing parallels between his predicament and that of other species. When he is imprisoned, he dreams of himself as "a fly caught in

tree sap" only to be awakened to the struggle for life between a cockroach and a mantis, as the latter devours the former (Swarup 2018, 168–69). Such parallels not only point to the power struggle for survival in which every creature, including humans, is involved but also become an ecological response to the political climate in postcolonial Burma. This becomes apparent in a vision from the future when Plato has escaped from the jail and encounters a fossilized gecko caught in a piece of amber, which makes him contemplate over his own personal and political situation:

> He confronts his preoccupation with death when he holds a piece of amber in his quivering palm. Embalmed within the resin is a gecko, immune to decomposition. When the Burman had kicked his mother, her womb could have hardened, the amniotic fluid drained out and petrified into a fossil himself, all before he could open his eyes. (Swarup 2018, 170)

The comparison between the human and the lizard signifies multiple aspects of Plato's being: his death-wish, his desire to reunite with his mother, and his abjection as a revolutionary leader struggling for a peaceful nation-state. This association between the human and the non-human, the living and the dead also connects different temporalities, as the million-years-old gecko continues to thrive in the present age by being fossilized and preserved in amber. The amber serves a metaphor for the connected nature of the past, present, and future; and, in contemplating the gecko's sense of belonging to the Earth and its formation over the years, the human self also encounters its own sense of creatureliness.

Between the Ecological and the Political

Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee, in his influential book *Postcolonial Environments*, argues how the concept of the "non-human" has enabled the intellectual to politicize the environment without dissociating it from the sociological. In his words, "they ensure that it is no longer possible to see 'nature' or 'environment' as something that exists out there, outside the realm of the human or the social" (2010, 147). This sentiment seems to guide Swarup's novel as well, since she debates crucial changes taking over the environment while also not ignoring their impact on human lives. For instance, Swarup's imagining of human relationships with the planet and its ecosystem also comments upon nature's wrath and destruction. Such an understanding is overtly present in the first part of the story, in terms of how unhabitable the Andaman Islands are, where humans must bend to

the ways of the environment in order to survive. However, the other three stories forming part of the novel juxtapose ecological factors with the lives of environmental and political refugees and show how the ecological issue is associated with the socio-political question. Swarup politicizes the environment by raising the question of natural disasters and the physical and emotional turmoil that they cause in the individual. Yet she also deploys environmental disasters to provide narrative resolution to the characters by connecting human life and death with the geological. In this regard, Gaana Jayagopalan rightly argues that the "connection of disasters of individual lives, vis-à-vis calamities rooted in the geology of the space-times, is central to the novel's negotiation of the past, present, and future" (2021, 171). The novel connects humans and their personal loss, grief, and its memory with the transcendental power of the earth, water, and mountains to underline the inevitability of creation and destruction, life and death.

The conflict between the agency of the human and the non-human is aesthetically resolved in the novel by synthesizing human selves with their environment in the moment of death. In a romanticized, lyrical narration, Swarup provides a closure to the abject characters sketched in the novel when they foresee their impending deaths. When the researcher, Girija Prasad, now an ageing, lonely man, walks into the tsunami aware that he cannot escape it in any manner, he accepts his death and union with the natural world. As he contemplates, "For how often does a man get to peer into a thriving ocean floor minus the ocean, even though it will go undocumented?" (Swarup 2018, 124). Ironically, he deciphers the mysteries of the world in an eventual embrace that annihilates his corporeal self. While such a trajectory seems to connect the human with non-human elements only by means of obliterating the 'human' identity of the former, other strains of the novel anthropomorphize the non-human to reconnect human with the environment.

In the third part of the novel, the narrative twins the flooding river, Bagmati, with the poverty-stricken teenaged girl Bebo, also named Bagmati, to reconcile Thapa with the natural forces that took away his family. In Thapa's depiction of the legend associated with Bagmati, he thinks of it as "a kind river" (Swarup 2018, 228). His fantastic retelling of the river as a goddess who sends her daughter to the Earth parallels his own relationship as a father figure to the teenaged Bagmati, who showed up at his doorstep one random day:

> The goddess of rain felt remorse, for the cloud that had burst with sudden excitement, causing the landslide, was one of her devotees. To make amends, she sent down her daughter, a river, from heaven. (Swarup 2018, 227)

The folkloric story Thapa narrates seems modelled on his own life-journey, since he too lost his entire family to an earthquake which destroyed "the whole village" (Swarup 2018, 246). The companionship of the girl, Bagmati, seems to then indicate the workings of higher powers in affirming life instead of death. It is in the continuation of his life that Thapa's unity with the environment is imagined, since the presence of the girl metaphorically stands for the river. In Thapa's scenario, Swarup addresses the political issue of the precarious lives of environmental refugees and their abjection by upholding the sustainment of life. Towards the end of the section, the narrator articulates this sentiment in the following words: "Thapa understood that the end of his story did not lie in death, for even death forsakes those who live in despair" (246).

The final story of the novel politicizes concern for the environment by dwelling upon the life of Apo, a "soldier-cook" in the Indian army whose life narrative is a telling reminder of borders and their futility (Swarup 2018, 281). Having witnessed the "Chinese invasion" (260) of the Changthang region, to which he originally belonged, and the endless war between India and Pakistan over the village he migrated to, Apo's tale critiques the tenuousness of "invisible political borders" (266). Through Apo's character, Swarup ponders the meaninglessness of man-made boundaries, especially when the non-human environment commands the ultimate supremacy: "'The mountains are the truth,' Apo says. 'They are remnants of truth behind all creation. Precariously balanced, threatening to crumble'" (284). Apo's aphoristic wisdom questions human intervention on the planet while emphasizing indigenous knowledge systems. In upholding the ecological, Swarup takes a political stand while also not ignoring the overlaps between the socio-political and the environmental.

Conclusion

Latitudes of Longing reimagines the way in which the environment can be narrated in fiction. Its disjointed yet interwoven method of narration becomes a unique way to explore the different terrains forming the planet and their shared present, past, and future. When the character of Apo articulates in the novel, "'ocean, sea, ice, snow mist [...] they are different states of being'" (2018, 299), it serves as a reminder of Swarup's political endeavour of showing the entanglement between different landforms, beings, and time periods. From the drifting of the continents to the formation of islands and their similarities with mountains, the novel adopts geological vocabulary not only to connect the human with the non-human

but also as a structural device. Swarup adopts an experimental, non-linear narrative with interconnected storytelling such that the movement of the narrative itself parallels changing topographies. From granting linguistic agency to the natural world, to visualizing attachments between humans and other species not as antithetical but interpenetrative, Swarup's novel recognizes environmental issues and human impact on them. Furthermore, in juxtaposing ecological concerns with socio-political issues, the novel's engagement with the environment is not a product of apolitical, romanticized idealism but is rooted in material realities of human impact on the planet. Swarup politicizes the ecology of postcolonial territories and assigns an agential, 'terrestrial' role to the environment with its desire to establish connections and its linguistic and formal structure, which underline the sovereignty of the planetary. In addition, the novel foregrounds planetary reimagining by offering an aesthetic resolution to the political battles launched by humankind on themselves and other beings. The political prisoner, the scientist, the clairvoyant, and the refugee all forge a unique primordial relationship with the non-human environment, which is not based on an apolitical romanticization of the natural environment but on a deep-seated understanding that humans, along with their environment and other species, form part of a collective that is terrestrial in scope. In doing so, Swarup breaks the dichotomy of the natural environment and the human-centred world to show their interconnectedness across timelines and geographies.

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