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AFFECTIVE GEOGRAPHIES AND THE ANTHROPOCENE: Reading Shubhangi Swarup's *Latitudes of Longing*

Gaana Jayagopalan♦

Abstract: This paper is a critical reading of the affective and emotional geographies imagined in the "Islands" plot-line of Shubhangi Swarup's novel *Latitudes of Longing* (2018). The paper argues that Swarup presents the case of a rethinking environmental aesthetics that conveys a deeper sense of space, time, and place. By creating an ambient poetics to negotiate human and non-human interconnect-edness, the paper demonstrates the strength of novelistic traditions and their potential to generate an idea of affect that is transcorporeal – as one not located only in the site of the human body, instead, emanating from a more nuanced interconnectedness between the human and the non-human world. Informed by 'affective ecocriticism' and Zayin Cabot's 'multiple ontologies approach' that generates 'ecologies of participation,' the paper closely reads the "Islands" section to establish how literary illustrations provide an instance to widen the horizons of environmental engagement and generate a narrative imagination that encompasses a larger ecosystem cutting across geological spacetimes in the Anthropocene. Swarup's use of fiction is critically used to generate an ecoaesthetics that leads to a more informed ethical action towards recognizing the interconnectedness of living and non-living forms that create sustainable ecologies.

Keywords: Affect Studies, Anthropocene, Ecoaesthetics, Ecocriticism, Ecological Ethic, Ecological Interconnectedness, Emotional Geographies, *Latitudes Of Longing*, Shubhangi Swarup.

♦**Dr Gaana Jayagopalan** teaches at the Department of English and Cultural Studies at Christ University, Bangalore. Her areas of research interest include Contemporary Indian Fiction, Blue Humanities, Mobility and Spatiality Studies, and Critical Pedagogy among others. Email: gaana.j@christuniversity.in.

> *The world was created by an ancient woman who weaved it all into existence. It was why everything—as small as fish scales, snakeskin and the shapes on a butterfly's wing, and as gigantic as a chain of mountains and the path of rivers—fit a pattern. If humans considered something in nature anomalous or aberrational, it was because they lacked the vision to recognize the pattern.*
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> Shubhangi Swarup, *Latitudes of Longing*, 254

1. Introduction

My intention in this paper is to demonstrate the potential of exploring emotion, affect, and geology illustrated in narrative fiction that generates an eco-aesthetic ethical engagement with sustainability discourses and the UN's Sustainabile Development Goals (SDGs). How do we make sense of space, place, and time when encountered with the pasts of our geological spacetimes? What are the exponential complexities of being and the self that are enabled in the representational intersection of emotion, affect and geological spacetimes? What does it mean to ethically engage with affect and the narrative imagination in the Anthropocene today towards realising ecological ethical actions? These are some of the questions that Shubhangi Swarup's *Latitudes of Longing* (2018) answers in its novelistic form.

In a world increasingly characterized by climate emergency, environmental aesthetics functions as a crucial outlet to comprehend this emergency through narratives, and move towards an ethical and committed environmental justice. In fact, the UN's SDGs for 2030 visualize a more inclusive world of habitation where development indices are more easily mapped and evaluated from an economic development viewpoint. However, a more informed outcome of such evaluation is to not merely enable economic development but to also create ethical societies, most often made possible by the Humanities (Nandhikkara 3). Therefore, the paper foregrounds the significance of environmental art and the role of ecological aesthetics leading to ethical environmental action, especially relating to the two SDGs – Life Below Water (SDG 14) and Life on Land (SDG15). Both these SDGs posit action that conserves water and land resources as an urgent exercise to be necessitated by humanity at large. A far more significant call that precedes such action is an environmental ethical action. Such an

ethically informed environmental action can be forged only when the interconnectedness of human and non-human world is recognised and upheld. One such mode of enabling this recognition in order to develop and see through the SDGs is also to generate a narrative imagination that captures such ethical action in an aesthete form like fiction. A sustainable use of resources also presupposes an ethical engagement with the ecology. An aesthetic imperative of the environment leads to an ethical imperative in one's engagement with creating a sustainable society.[1]

This paper, therefore, aims to critically evaluate Swarup's use of fiction as generating an environmental aesthetics that leads to a more informed ethical action in recognizing the interconnectedness of living and non-living forms that make up our ecology. The paper delineates Swarup's use of what Timothy Morton (2007) terms as 'ambient poetics' which is "a materialist way of reading texts with a view to how they encode the literal space of their inscription—if there is such a thing—the spaces between the words, margins of the page, the physical and the social environment of the reader" (3). Drawing from this, the paper outlines the human embeddedness in the matrices of ecological interconnections between the living and non-living world, both within the narrative world and the reader's physical world outside.

I begin with an overview of the novel, and a critical summary of the novel's "Islands" section. Following this, I demonstrate the nature of human agency vis-à-vis ecologies of participation as imagined by Swarup for the reader. By foregrounding an all-encompassing interconnection of human and non-human space-times in the novel, I argue that the human embeddedness in the ecology generates for its characters (and by extension, for its readers) an affective geography as a conceivable ethical engagement with the environment. The novel is positioned as an illustration of the potential in narrative worlds to create and direct a move towards more ethically informed sustainable societies.

[1] Significant work on environmental philosophy has established that an aesthetic engagement with environment enables ethical action. See Hargrove (1979), Schneider-Mayerson (2018), and Carlson (2018) for instance.

2. Central Argument and Conceptual Frameworks

In their fascinating work *Affective Ecocriticism*, Kyle Bladow and Jennifer Ladino propose that affect, as a bodily state, is a result of the environment, narratives, and bodies in a confluence with nonhuman and inanimate bodies. They further explicate: "Affect theory disrupts both notions of embodied selfhood and static notions of environment, encouraging us to trace the trajectories of transcorporeal encounters that are intricate and dynamic" (8).

Extrapolating this line of thought and locating affect at the centre of investigation here, I argue that Swarup's plotline "Islands," and by extension, the novel, is a negotiation of the trans-corporeality of affect across geological time—one that dismantles the human body as the site producing affect—instead, positioning it in the human and non-human intermediaries of emotional geographies spanning the lengths of geological fault lines. This enables, I argue, a creation of an ecology of participation of human and non-human actors, across spaces and geological time.

The conceptual framework of Zayin Cabot's 'participatory raft' as a mode of inaugurating a multiple ontologies approach is used here to clarify the ecology of participation observable in Swarup's narrative. Positioned around facing the planetary predicament together and arguing for a novel philosophical praxis that necessitates thinking of ontologies as multiplicities (although seemingly contradictory), Cabot proposes that a participatory turn in engaging with ontology "less as truths and more as starting points" is a more informed philosophical position to hold vis-à-vis agency (5). He conceptualizes this paradigm of "ecologizing philosophy" (9): "A participatory event feels its relative past as effect and physicality. The same event feels its relative future as telos and mentality. Somewhere in between effect and telos lies an event's contemporary moment, felt as an affective emotional field" (7).

This assertion of a new ontology of participative agency that necessitates the proliferation of multiple ontologies (and the creation of an affective paradigm in the in-between) functions as the conceptual prism to read Swarup's lyrical engagement with the transcorporeality of affect in "Islands." This mode potentiates the creation of new stories of our other-than-modern lives alongside our (post)human ones – of our shared pasts and for our shared futures.

Owain Jones (2017), writing about the significance of emotions to geography and emotional geography, presents the following framework:

> Emotions are systemic and interact constantly with our conscious and unconscious selves, memories and environment; they enframe the rational and not vice versa. So who we are and what we do at any moment is a production of the stunningly complex interplay between these processes. These emotional spatialities of becoming, the transactions of body(ies), space(s), mind(s), feeling(s) in the unfolding of life-in-the-now, are the very stuff of life we should be concerned with when trying to understand how people make sense of / practice the world (205-206).

This reflection is central to the organizing 'logic' that informs the plot-line in "Islands," and by extension, the novel's entirety. Each part of the novel is a spatialized narration that represents the affective sequences as being cartographically charted into our bodies and minds, forever kindling the emotional geographies of the transcorporeal across geological space-times. Swarup's characters demonstrate through the four parts of the novel that human life is inexplicably determined by the geological and non-human objects, events, memories that make us all what Jones calls "vast repositories of past emotional-spatial experiences" (206), making the human and non-human interconnectedness deeper and more emphatic.

3. Overview of *Latitudes of Longing*

Swarup's work is an assemblage of diverse geographical spaces encompassing within itself diverse geological temporalities. Although progressive in terms of plotline, the disparate narrative (dis)connections hinder any attempt to provide an overarching summative rendering of the novel. However, an attempt to condense the novel's pathways is made in this section.

Different geographies ranging from the islands to the hills, plains, valleys and the snow-clad mountain ranges of the Indian sub-continent characterize the novel. These spaces are knit together through the same subduction zone: the zone where the continental plates cleave. In telling stories of people, places, events, memories, and ghosts across geoscapes, this interconnectedness makes the movement from the individual to the community far sharper and

meaningful. The work's lyrical-aesthetic positions it as one that does not merely engage in environmental content alone, but as one that creates an 'environmental form' with an ecological imagination (Morton 3). The characters' recognition and acknowledgement of an affective geography also enables an ecosophical affect in the reader, rendered through its ambient poetics. This leads to an ethical action towards one's own engagements with the ecology.

The novel opens with "Islands" set in the Andaman Islands, which chronicles the compounded human and non-human world through the characters of Girija Prasad, a botanist, and his wife Chanda Devi, a clairvoyant who can talk to ghosts, plants and animals alike. The couple negotiates an extremely enlightening experience of being in the mountains and on the islands around the sea, an ecology resulting from geological phenomena dating back to several million years ago. What the life forms do to Girija Prasad and Chanda Devi makes up for the section "Islands" in the novel. The section closes with Girija Prasad walking into the Andaman Sea that has receded just before a tsunami hits the Andaman coast—the ripples of which are felt all across the subduction zone. It is this subduction affect that mobilizes the inherent geological interconnectedness, and also provides the novel a deep sense of geological and environmental aesthetic conviction. "Islands" is the epicentre of the novel and the other sections can be read as their seismic waves.

The pathway of the Andaman Islands in the Indian Plate intersecting with the Burmese plate is carried forward in the section "Faultline." The narrator says "Once a proud continent, Burma was crushed between India and Asia. India pushed it to the north with its drift, Asia squeezed it to the east in defiance. A weeping eye was all that was left of the face, buried under the rubble" (Swarup 138). Here, Mary, Girija Prasad's house-help in the islands, wishes to be reunited with her son Plato, arrested by the Myanmar police for participating in a revolution. "Faultline" maps the reunion of the mother and son while also charting for the reader the remnants of the continental drift, the connections between the islands and the fault lines invisible to the naked eye. Plato escapes to India with the help of his Nepali friend, Thapa, whom we meet in the next section. Plato and Thapa both manoeuvre the dregs of earlier geological

times including ammonites and a gecko fossilized in resin that become significant symbols of interconnectedness in the novel.

In "Valley" we meet Thapa in Kathmandu, yet another significant geography held between the Indian Plate and the Eurasian Plate. The section narrates the journey of Thapa who sees premonitions of the future including his family buried in the rubbles of the earthquake that strikes Kathmandu, and also recognizes the past in the contemporary. Thapa's journey into the Mishmi village in search of the Mishmi Chief's photo frame held on by the chief's granddaughter closes this section.

In "Snow Desert" we meet Apo, a septuagenarian who falls in love with Ghazala, the grandmother of a Kashmiri trader in the no-man's land between India and Pakistan, in the Karakoram Range. In this section, we also see the now-dead Girija Prasad visit his scientist-grandson Rana in his visions, as the latter waits to be rescued from one of the crevasses, hanging upside down in the glacial complex of Kshirsagar, an extremely tenuous topography in the Karakoram range, yet another fault system in the Himalayan region. This 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.

Highlighting the interconnectedness of life across time-spaces is central to the novel. That the form of the novel is used to narrativize the interconnectedness of life-forms across fault lines and to firmly position this narrative in the Anthropocene is its biggest strength.[2] I argue that the novel form enables this movement by locating different disasters as connected by their geographies—a tsunami in Andaman, a political insurgency in Myanmar, an earthquake in Nepal, and the no man's land in the Karakoram range. Although dealing with environment and ecology, the novel is not about a nature-loving discourse. Swarup's novel foregrounds planetary precarity in generating emotional

[2]Fiction about the environment, ecology and climate often occupy the realm of science fiction. Climate fiction as a genre that foregrounds the anthropocentric worldview and offers critiques is a growing necessity to expand our literary imagination to realist representations of the ecology. Read Amitav Ghosh's take on the same in his *The Great Derangement* (2016) for more.

geographies panning across space and time, thus, also enabling an aesthetically developed, non-realist mode of fictional approach to the Anthropocene.

Scaffolding the cultural contexts of imperialism, authoritarianism, and nationalism as political frames, the novel functions as a strong case to bring the aesthetics of the earth back to focus in its narrativization, while also highlighting the interconnected geology of human lives, and traversing paths of non-human agents. The interconnectedness, drawing from the Pangaea, reverberates in the faraway drifted parts that make up the whole—the effect of the tsunami that consumes Girija Prasad is felt by his house-help, Mary, as far away as in Myanmar. The novel functions as a leap of faith, of seeing individual disasters waddling through an integrated spacetime, weaving the past and the future into the present.

4. Positioning *Latitudes of Longing* and the Plotline "Islands"

The plot-line "Islands" foregrounds the subjective position of an individual in disaster, gradually moving to a representation of an interconnected ecology *through* disasters. The community here is an extended ecological world of human and non-human actors. In doing so, "Islands" narrativizes the transcorporeal affect enabled in the recognition of the human—non-human interconnectedness.

The novel mimics geological fault lines. Establishing the interconnectedness of species through tropes of closure, preservation, fossilization, "Islands" exceeds the boundaries of the novel form in relaying catastrophe as a narrative frame to cover human experience. Informed by approaches in geocriticism, which provides frames to understand the poetic attempts to comprehend the world, "Islands" renders the geographical as textual, foregrounding spatiality and temporality. In sharp contrast to nature's presence often in the narrative background of literary imaginations, Swarup's narrative in "Islands" makes nature prominent, emplacing the human in geological time, in the presence of non-human elements. This includes islands created as remnants of a continental drift, drawing along with it fossilized remains from a different space and time. As the narrative develops networks between fossils and the contemporary, it significantly renders the human-nature binary largely untenable.

Swarup's work shows how spaces and their self-contained sense of geology defeats the highly permeable human and non-human interconnectedness across space and time. Chanda Devi in "Islands" is a significant character who establishes this point. She tells her husband that she can talk to plants because "Plants are the most sensitive spirits in the web of creation. They bind the earth to water and air, and the bind the different worlds together. They make life possible. Which is why they can see, feel and hear more than their forms, especially humans" (109). Here, we are introduced to a couple in the oceanic world, fully conscious that the world they inhabit is not an impassive ecology, but a constantly shifting and intricately webbed one, literally and metaphorically. This sets up the reader to imagine a layered ecology, interwoven by the presence of objects, events, and things, belonging to, and carried forward across different geological space times.

As the Andaman was marketed for free land, Swarup fictionalizes an enterprising pastor from Burma seeking to innovate his Christian beliefs, far away from the Church's gaze (60). We learn that he propagated tenets that mirrored the environment around. He declared: "Thy soul doth not perish" when someone passed away being killed or eaten by an animal. He would further add "it liveth on in the devourer" (60). The narrator observes the interlinked new mode of engagement with the non-human world that the pastor introduces to the villagers:

> That is how a Karen villager came to have a shark for a brother-in-law. It was also how malevolent creatures became benevolent ones … By feeding them relatives, they would turn into relatives. That was how a farmer became the father of a centipede. The community's faith in the pastor didn't waver even after a woman believed a certain crocodile to be her mother was devoured by it when she went to give her offerings. (60)

Swarup brings to the reader the possibility of thought in the Anthropocene as enabled by different perspectives in different (non-human) bodies, too. This explains myths and their significance for cultures quite emphatically.[3] In effect, a participative ecology of multiple ontologies is creatively imagined for us here.

[3]I have argued elsewhere (Jayagopalan) about the significance of myth, folktales, and stories to cultures, especially in engaging with an

The presence of the non-human in "Islands" is significant in the creation of this interconnected community and in pointing to the limiting of 'modern', 'scientific knowledge'. Fossils, ghosts of humans and animals, all propel the narrative. Sifting through imperial knowledge constructions held on the bedrock of 'rationality' vis-à-vis clairvoyant characters, Swarup's narrative creates human and non-human ontologies as existing across sections of geological time and space simultaneously. What does it mean for one to feel and touch an ammonite or a fossilized gecko? What happens to a human encounter of a sea-lily in the highest mountain range in the world, so far removed from the sea? These questions become significant pivots around which Swarup's narrative weaves an expansive and intricately held matrix connecting life and non-life forms across space and time.

At the very outset, Swarup sets up for the reader a clear disjunct in two characters held in opposite ends of the spectrum: Girija Prasad and Chanda Devi. Girija Prasad learns that every island is "part of a greater geological pattern that connects all the lands and oceans of the world" (10), with the presence of a living plant in the Andaman Islands, otherwise found only in its fossilized form in Madagascar and Central Africa. His dreams show him that the continents were thinking-dreaming masses that broke off and floated away from the perfectly fitting jigsaw called the Pangea. Girija Prasad's early sentiments are a mirror of the colonial visitor Lord Goodenough whose European impulse leads to naming everything in the island. Girija Prasad, in the same spirit of European modernity, as an Oxford graduate, is in the island to study the trees and assess the possible success of teak cultivation.

On the other hand, Chanda Devi is the kind of woman whose presence is nearly deified as a god-person. She frames the conventional disdain towards female infants in patriarchal families with a gender-neutral, non-human world as worthy of attracting the goddess' curse. She dismisses a woman in the Islands, who wishes for her daughter-in-law to give birth to a son, thus: "You can think of the answer in your next life when you are born an earthworm. All earthworms are eunuchs. Male, female, it makes no difference

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ecological thought in the everyday dimensions of human and non-human life.

to their lives. That's why the goddess makes all those who torture women earthworms in their next life" (46). This serves as an extremely productive use of a counter discourse that is more coercive than any other, since on that night, the mother-in-law cooks, serves all her granddaughters, and seeks their forgiveness, especially after finding a shrivelled earthworm on her slippers while returning from visiting Chanda Devi.

In another instance, the Forest department turns to her to pacify an elephant in musth that has caused havoc by killing two mahouts. Chanda Devi's engagement with the elephant is also a significant moment of participation in her agency:

> 'I only speak to free spirits,' Chanda Devi announces before unshackling the elephant, frightening officials further. She spends the afternoon stroking her trunk and belly, feeding her bananas and giving her buckets of water to drink. On her way out, she tells them that the first mahout has been drunk on country liquor and that the second one had stubbed a beedi on the elephant's foot. 'If there is a next time, your shackles won't be able to stop her' (47).

Here, the scientist and clairvoyant are tipped in the power scales, with people seeking her out far more to pacify souls. Girija Prasad, nonetheless, learns to "turn a blind eye to his wife's eccentric behaviour" (48).

However, a transition is noted in him as his wife leads him to acknowledge her superior ability to illuminate natural phenomena devoid of the laws of science. He learns much later that his inability to see, sense, and talk to ghosts was because he was limited by the scientific laws that conditioned his understanding of the natural world. Reminiscing about his wife's abilities, he tells his grandson: "In the Andaman Islands, the force of the Indian plate being pushed under a heavier landmass increased the situational gravity. This in turn pulled all forms of dense energy, including ghosts, to it. Subduction zones, as you may know, are intense" (311). This acknowledgement of ghosts as bringing intense energy to the islands is not whimsical or eccentric for Girija Prasad anymore; it is a significant learning curve that opens to include the non-human in the scheme of things.

5. Transcorporeal Affect and Ecological Interconnectedness

The extent of the non-human world generating a corporeal and affective response in Chanda Devi also positions her as a significant spoke in the interconnected wheel of the human and non-human world. For instance, when Girija Prasad dreams of snow in the tropical islands of the Andaman, as snow covering everything in the island and altering its life, Swarup splices the different geological zones into human existence. The narrator says that in Girija Prasad's reverie, "this verdant land is blinded by snowfall … Girija Prasad proceeds to cover his sleeping wife with snow. Her skin turns pink bursting into gooseflesh" (43-44). Chanda Devi who wakes up with a sore throat and her nose clogged, remarks with her clairvoyant ability to see the dream of Girija Prasad "The next time you dream of snow … dream of a blanket too" (44).

This instance is not merely a reaction of the non-human on the body of Chanda Devi, manifesting in the form of a corporeal sign of a sore throat. It is Chanda Devi's position in an expanded ecology where dreams change the ontology of her being that needs emphasis here. The presence of a snow-filled landscape in a dream cuts across real space and time, to manifest as an affect, as a corporeal sign in Chanda Devi, prominently positioning her ontology as inherently multiple. Reminiscent of Felix Guattari's ecologies of assemblages, Chanda Devi's interaction with an expanded web of ecological relations is to be noted here: Chanda Devi's corporeal self is situated as one of the sites where the ecology transposes to affect the human.[4]

In a similar vein, when asked how she was born, Girija Prasad also recounts an imaginary creation-story for his curious daughter. He relates how her parents came across an empty bottle on an evening in a beach with a note that read "Please put all the ingredients of your dreams in this bottle and shake vigorously" (44). Girija Prasad says: "Using a prism, I trapped sunlight in the bottle. I

[4] Independently developed by Felix Guattari, assemblages of ecology encourage a view that integrates the natural world with philosophy. Presenting what can be termed an 'ecological wisdom', this line of thought emphasises the need to understand the interconnected existence of the human and the non-human world. See Guattari's *The Three Ecologies* (2008) for more.

closed it with a cork and shook it vigorously for hours. Then your mother opened it. She took a deep breath and exhaled into the bottle. That was your first breath" (44). The narrator then continues:

> For the ingredients, Girija Prasad will concoct a fantastical list to arrest her wandering imagination: golden sands from the dunes of Rajasthan and white sands from Havelock Island; shreds from the swiftlet's nest and petals of a fuchsia pink rose; a piece of bark from the oldest padauk tree on the islands; ash blessed by the riverbank baba; a crocodile's tooth, an elephant's eyelash; and drops of the monsoon mingled with Himalayan snow (44).

This exchange is followed by a physiological and affective manifestation of this pulsating story, revealed in the environment around: "The effort she puts into digesting the story will be palpable. He will sense his daughter's thoughts rush all over the place, tossing in the tide's foam, sinking into the uneven sands, wandering lost among the rocks that mark the beginning of the jungle" (45).

Devi, Girija Prasad's daughter, is brought up in the island away from the mainland, following Chanda Devi's demise after childbirth. Devi's world is encapsulated by everything on the island, but her father decides to send her into a more promising world of curiosity that will satiate a young scientist like Devi away from the islands. Devi's life on the mainland, however, changes her life and is at odds with the worldviews she had inhabited on the island. The terracentrism (Mukherjee) and the endless sight of land, hardly punctuated by riverines and lakes, unsettles a littoral like Devi. Her dormitory at school is deeply territorialized by material objects of memory including photographs, toys, and cards. But she carries no such treasures since her father believed that "such baggage weighs the soul down" (Swarup 103). She is mostly seen to be uncouth and hostile, and was nicknamed 'Red Indian'. Her physical distance from the island never tore her away from it. Impervious to disciplining, she recreates the islands in her moments of pain and punishment: The narrator observes: "She clutches on to the shell her father had gifted her, a naturally polished conch. It fills her being with the distant sound of waves, transforming the mountains into the highest and mightiest of them. Denuded branches resemble driftwood, and every tear carries within it the salt of the ocean" (105). Little Devi's world is

characterized by the ocean presenting itself both as material and affectively moving memories.

It is useful to invoke Jones' observation about thinking through emotions, memory and materiality here. Jones suggests that the manner of representation to recollect and map past emotional and spatial experiences must transcend theory and evidence-based analysis. He frames this through the following questions:

> Can we recollect past emotion-spatial experiences for the purposes of some attempt at representation? Can we go back to the past terrains and past encounters which are mapped inside us and which colour our present in ways we cannot easily feel or say? One way of trying to do this is to turn to 'other' forms of writing, to devote our efforts to description and narrative rather than the treadmill of theory, evidence and analysis (206).

Jones' argument for the need of narrative to capture these pasts that are spliced onto the self is a significant line of thought in order to engage in ecologies of participation. Consider this from Swarup's novel: Girija Prasad takes Chanda Devi, who is recuperating from a miscarriage, to a place locally known as The Path of Eternal Rain—a winding trail held in the bosom of an intricate canopy with no sunlight passing through. The path is characterized by sounds of birds and rustling leaves, but also the sound of apparent gentle raindrops, with no rainfall along the pathway or anywhere else in the island. Chanda Devi asks Girija Prasad: "Tell me this is an illusion too … Tell me that the movement of lands and continents leaves behind memories of raindrops, even when the rains themselves have moved on" (63). Intrigued, Girija Prasad is encouraged to ruminate on an interesting thought: rains turning into fossils that can be heard and not be seen (63). But, he offers a more scientific and realistic response to Devi's inquisitive thought. He says, "I am sorry to disappoint you … The answer lies not in continental shifts, but the opposite. Something humble and ordinary. The sound you mistake for gentle rain is the sound of a thousand caterpillars eating and defecating at the same time, tiny drops of excrement falling on the laves below" (63). While Devi's interpretation ties itself to a narrative imagination that generates a human and non-human connect in the ecologies of participation, Prasad's rational logic reorganizes the world more in the present.

In another illuminating instance, Girija Prasad shows a particular variety of withering palm in the forest and explains that the tree expends all its energy in creating numerous seeds, and reproduces only once, after which it begins to wither. Chanda Devi's conversation with the withering tree frames the all-encompassing participative ecology we inhabit. The narrator observes:

> The ethereal being was withering away, yet Chanda Devi couldn't sense pain or sadness when she stroked its bark. The tree responded to her concern. It spoke to her.
> 'Do you know why you speak to trees?'
> Chanda Devi didn't.
> 'Do you know why you sought me out in my final moments?'
> 'No.'
> 'We are the same. You are one of us.'
> 'And him?'
> 'He isn't. But you have loved him in many lives. Some spirits bridge the gap between worlds through love. It keeps us all together' (65).

Therefore, Chanda Devi's clairvoyance, her ability to speak to non-human world sets her apart from Girija Prasad, trained in seeing the world through the eyes of scientific laws. The palm tree, the reader would learn much later, mirrors Chanda Devi's own withering after she gives birth—first a miscarriage, and then a birth that also brings upon her death. This realization dawns on Girija Prasad after several years and he remarks: "As a human being, I cannot look beyond life and death. But as a botanist, I see how limiting individual life cycles can be to our understanding. Nature is a continuum. That is how it thrives" (117).

When Mary, the caretaker, leaves for Burma, Girija Prasad is alone in his residence in the islands. A man who no longer sees the need for the culture of clothing and modesty and appreciates tribal wisdom, indulges more in his art of sketching and attempts to sketch Chanda Devi. The narrator observes:

> Each portrait is a discovery. It is a fossil, retrieved from the gravel of memories and preoccupations. All creation, he is tempted to extrapolate, is a form of self-discovery. The face that he searches for cannot be extricated from the canvas of natural history. Born from an imagination that predates life's splintering into animals, plants, and fungi, she is inchoate. She

> belongs to a time when life could commune with all its possible forms, because all life was one (115).

The emotional geography of memory that Girija Prasad recreates as art is triangulated by dimensions of memory (both his and the ecology's), image, and feeling. The interlinking of geographies of memory and the memories of geographies plays through the section framing the transcorporeal agential subjects that Swarup creates. His gift to his daughter's wedding is a painting of Chanda Devi as he imagines her to have appeared if she were alive. We learn: "The paper was especially produced for this occasion. It is a mix of Andaman padauk, rose petals and saffron. Chanda Devi loved talking to plants. He hopes that they will whisper his thoughts back to her" (119). This looping of humans with the non-human world, across space and time is the transcorporeal ecology of participation that Swarup frames in her narrative. It is this recognition in its aesthetic construction of a novel that also propels an ethical action on the part of the reading community.

6. Conclusion: Ecoaesthetics and Ecological Ethical Action

Girija Prasad's exploration of the islands with a foretelling of a tsunami, presented with all its tell-tale signs, leaves him with two options: to sprint across and perch himself on a vantage point, away from the danger and witness the spectacle aerially, or to walk into the now visible ocean bed that would otherwise be inaccessible, because "For how often does a man get to peer into a thriving ocean floor minus the ocean, even though it will go undocumented?" (124). The narrator continues: "This is a moment to be savoured, down to every cell and atom. Mid-ocean, the tsunami can only be experienced as an extraordinary undulation. It is on sloping beaches such as this one that it arrives in its full glory: destructive and dramatic" (124).

Swarup's novel characterizes the human no longer as the centre of the calamity, but merely as a transit station that holds several million years of interconnectedness to different life forms. This final act of Girija Prasad participating, visualizing and being in the eye of the tsunami, as it were, offers full circle for a 'scientist' who recognizes the multiple ontologies enabled in the acknowledgement of participative ecologies. The narrative illustrates the ecological potential of communicating with people, places, objects,

and things one assumes to have known, misconceived, and as an attempt to come into each other's worlds.

"Islands" lays out the sedimented pathways of movement, evolution, and transition stretching across many human and non-human forms. The language of the plot-line is thus a language of mobility in abstraction. Swarup, through her writing, foregrounds the manner in which human life is essentially a result of ecologies of participation in which humans are travellers across multiple ontological borders of space and time. Girija Prasad, a trained naturalist, is at once all that his modern materialist notions of the natural world cannot hold in its epistemological sense. Cabot urges:

> Can we let go of our strongly ethnocentric modernities for a moment in order to allow others to speak for themselves? If we move toward this more open stance, we might just find that our long-cherished assumptions about nature and reality are also made up. … It allows new avenues of experience and dialogue (15).

Therefore, through Chanda Devi, Girija Prasad is able to transition into someone who recognizes the epistemological colonialism of the West in engaging with the non-human world. Girija Prasad tells his grandson "Son, I learnt more from observing my wife that I learnt from science journals. Just like I learnt about mountains by studying the islands. If you reflect upon it, you will see connections and relationships illuminating the most disconnected things" (Swarup 310). Chanda Devi and Girija Prasad's traversal represent for the reader a narrative imagination, moving beyond the social processes of life, towards a realm beyond rational thought capable of churning the cognitive and unconscious processes of our engagement with spacetime.

Transcending the anthropocentric unit of geological time, Swarup's novel is a fierce iteration of a literary imagination that considers non-human and non-living geological entities as conscious agents instrumental in generating and shaping affect. By locating affect not merely in human bodies, but as also generated through non-human 'lifeless' actants, Swarup urges us embodied readers to tenaciously search for traces of interconnectedness in objects and events across geological space and time, altering the affect's presence in the corporeal to the transcorporeal. This ecological discourse generates an ecological conscience, compelling the reader to consider ecoaesthetics as morally considerable.

Ecology in such an engagement enables a participative ethic that dismantles a seemingly singular utilitarian consideration of the ecology. Drawing from the UN's SDG of 'Life under Water' and 'Life on Land,' eco-fiction with such an earth-ethic creates an ecological action enhanced by its ecoaesthetics, that surpasses merely its social and economic dimensions of development.

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