

Beyond the Developmental Narrative of Postcolonial Nation-Time: The Materialities of Water and Geological Faultlines in Shubhangi Swarup's *Latitudes of Longing*

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“A girl,” Thapa replies. “She wants me to tell her a story. I want to tell her a story too. But I don’t know how. I don’t know what makes an incident or even an event a story. For that matter what makes a story a story?” (Swarup 224)

In Shubhangi Swarup’s novel *Latitudes of Longing* (2018), from which the above epigraph is taken, stories are a means of connecting community life and sharing social and personal histories. The novel’s narrative makes visible the entangled existence of the human and the nonhuman, interweaving the very different temporal logics of geological time and human life stories. In this novel, Thapa is an earthquake survivor and a peddler of illegal goods and drugs across borders. He shares his predicament of not being able to tell stories with his long-time friend, a Burmese insurgent, Plato. Plato has spent most of his life incarcerated in Burma and India fighting totalitarian regimes and understands the tedium of uninterrupted time. Plato believes “change” is what transforms an event into a story: “Something needs to happen. Without it, a story is dead. We are dead” (225). Stories connect human misery and joy with the imagination that guides the movement of continents “that no life form would be capable of comprehending” (175). This article will read how telling stories becomes a way of discovering empathy with the “nonhuman.” As part of this special issue on ecological solidarities across post/colonial worlds, it aims to shift the view of ecological solidarity as one that looks at continuities rather than fixed concepts, such as the end of the human-made climate crisis as an apocalypse. In order to do this, the article argues for a deep connection between geological and human historical time, which, following Timothy Morton, can be called, “not only a historical age but also a geological one” where “we are no longer able to think history as exclusively human, [...] since in this period non-humans make decisive contact with humans” (5).

I argue that Swarup’s novel breaks out of the developmental narrative of nation-time to explore representative possibilities that show the interrelation of deep-time, “vast, almost unthinkable” (Morton 5), and specific historical events that shape the personal trajectories of characters and places. The following reading of

the novel will frame the interrelation of such seemingly incongruent scales of time by focusing primarily on the novel's play with the materiality of water and its geographical manifestations as oceans, rivers and glaciers. The second and more structural manifestations of this geological framework of human history is the structure of the narrative that follows an actual geological faultline and makes apparent underlying connections across the bio-region of South and Southeast Asia, otherwise fraught with political and military violence across borders. It also links them to stories which the characters tell each other. My analyses will show how these stories act as a means of discovering empathy with what is seemingly an invisible presence of the nonhuman that influences their lives.¹

Set in the diverse ecological space of India, Burma, Nepal and Ladakh – a no-man's land between India, China, and Pakistan – the novel is divided into four loosely connected chapters that each focus on different but related environments through their protagonists. The narrative begins with the newly married Girija Prasad and Chanda Devi starting out on their conjugal life in the section titled "Islands," set in the Andaman archipelago. This new beginning of conjugal dependencies coincides with the emergence of the newly independent India and Pakistan, albeit from an archipelago separated from the mainland by a sea and occurring on the edges of the map of India. Mary is taken in by the couple as a house help. Mary is from the indigenous Karen community, members of which were brought to the Andaman Islands from Burma by colonial missionaries as the indigenous tribes on the island proved to be non-compliant with British attempts to "civilise" them into a reliable workforce. Mary's past marriage with a Burman immigrant before she joins the couple connects the narrative setting of the archipelago with the neighboring East-Asian mainland where the narrative shifts next. Thapa, the wandering businessman, long displaced from his native village in the Himalayas by a sudden landslide, comes to the islands looking for Mary and informs her that her long-separated son Plato has been captured as a political insurgent by the Burmese Junta. Thapa takes Mary across the seas to Burma where she waits to meet her son in the second section of the novel named "Faultline."

The union of the mother and son across years of displacement fraught with personal and political trauma is a metaphorical epicenter for the novel's experiments with narrating synergies between the ecological, the material, and the political histories of the region. The novel emphasizes Burma's location on the faultline as a geological determinant of the country's political and social fate. Thapa, himself an exile after the landslide destroys his village, meets Bebo. Bebo, whose actual name is Bagmati, works as a dancer in local bars in Thamel, Kathmandu. Her name, which derives from the river Bagmati that runs through Kathmandu, links the plains to the glacial regions of the final

section of the novel. Thapa's turning to the Himalayan mountains in Nepal also traces the narrative arc from the oceanic archipelago to the solid glacial setting in the last section of the narrative. The novel concludes with the coming together of an elderly couple: Apo, the grandfather of a Drakpo village, and Gazala, who comes from Kashmir with her trader grandson. In this last section titled "Snow Desert," the novel connects back to Girija Prasad and Chanda Devi as we meet Girija Prasad's grandson Rana, who works as a geologist on the Indian government's military base in Siachen amidst the Himalayan glaciers. This article will explore how the narrative maps human relationships shaped by socio-political and environmental strife onto the deeper geological and surficial features that connect the Himalayan glaciers to the oceanic archipelagos.

Swarup's novel not only allows for a critical rethinking of the time frame of its narrative in relation to multi-scalar geological time but also reorients the historical reading of the colonial and postcolonial periods of Indian history. It does so by challenging the territorial imagination of the subcontinent, shifting its narrative focus from the mainland to the edges of the map of India – beginning with the Andaman archipelago separated from the mainland by several hundred kilometers of ocean. The narrative follows the trajectory of the geological faultline that connects the islands on the edge of the Indian Ocean to the glaciers in the Himalayas and runs through Burma where the Indian tectonic plate is crushing into Asia. The novel's continuous oscillation between multiple temporal scales offers a differential reading of history and geography outside of the ideological time bind of the nation-state paradigm. It also connects early postcolonial history of conflict following the Japanese occupation of the Andaman Islands during the Second World War with the current political turmoil in Siachen in Ladakh, close to the Indo-China border. Tracing narrative trajectories over such fault lines, the novel reconceptualizes regional histories as "entangled" and "enmeshed" with the material and metaphysical time of planetary "nonhuman" agencies (cf. Haraway; Isaacs).

This article argues that the novel develops the geological faultline as a thematic and structural narrative strategy. This narrative principle makes the impact of the ever-volatile faultline visible in its material, socio-political and affective associations with human existence in the region. It also shows the constant and continuous convergence of the discordant timescales of geological time with human life histories. Such creative and structural use of the geological to convey metaphysical implications of ecological and political instability in the region resolves what Mertens and Craps describe as the conundrum of writing about – or coming up with stories about – climate change in the novel form:

In human perception sight is the dominant sense, but climate change is by definition invisible. Writers who take the temporality of climate change as the central concern of their novels therefore have to find ways to represent the “seemingly unrepresentable” (Johns-Putra 274): an invisible aspect (time) of an imperceptible phenomenon (climate change) in an unimaginably large time period (the Anthropocene). (137)

Swarup’s novel makes it possible to read historical change as one that is rooted in seismic shifts, beginning in the depths of a tectonic reactive faultline in the earth’s surface. The tremors of this change are experienced in the complex emotional geographies of the human characters and the way they shape their trysts with their environment, identity, and time. Judith Rahn reads *Latitudes of Longing* as investigating “the positionality of the human and the nonhuman in literature from the Global South not as a binary, but as an interconnected system of entanglements,” following Clark and Haraway among others (236). I agree with her reading which positions the nonhuman forces “as independent agentic formations,” not relegated to a biological and geological backdrop or mere “functional ecological embellishment to a strictly human narrative” (236). In an interview with Sofia Rehman, Swarup herself mentions that “humans were incidental to the narrative” (Rehman). Her initial pitch for the novel foregrounds the geology of the faultline as the narrative axis: “A tectonic fault line is the narrative thread of my novel, and when you shift your gaze this way, a very different story emerges. One where natural history is the framework to our lives, not political borders or artificial plots” (A Mukherjee). The novel is set to follow nodes on one of the planet’s most volatile subduction zones, a geological feature that makes the region vulnerable to earthquakes and tsunamis and is symbolic of human resilience in the face of seismic changes that has seeped into the human and nonhuman ecologies of this region.

This article uses the term nonhuman borrowing from Morton’s concept of “hyperobjects,” that is “things that are massively distributed in time and space relative to humans, and which defy overview and resist understanding” (1). Morton argues that material entities inhabit specific temporal and spatial intersections that make them “real.” These entities have an impact that transcends the local and hence need to be read through their “interobjective” scope, which for Morton results in a “mesh of interconnection” (130). Morton further notes that the mesh “is an emergent property of the things that coexist and not the other way round” (130). As this interconnected mesh between hyperobjects exists prior to human cognition, any attempts to map them into narratives that make sense of hyperobjects or their origins is bound to fail. To summarize, though we recognize hyperobjects through a rational framework of cause and effect mapped onto clock time, they always already supersede such meaning-making frameworks. As Morton puts it, “[t]he more maps we make, the more

real things tear through them. Nonhuman entities emerge through our mapping, then they destroy them” (130).

The novel’s use of the materiality of water (see Krause and Attala)² and the narrative framework mapped onto the geological faultline represent this “mesh of interconnection” (Morton 130). The novel invests in making visible, through discourses of deep-time and tectonic shifts, a longer history of connected ecologies, natural disasters and climate vulnerability. The repeated references to the faultline and the geological and geographical peculiarities the novel represents are embedded in its structure and language, connecting the “multiscalar temporalities” (Merten and Craps; Wood) of the evolution of the planet to the changing vicissitudes of the characters’ lives. The narrative scope of the novel responds insightfully to Morton’s ideas of the hyperobject I have outlined above. Events that from a distance appear as sudden and abrupt, and that shift the course of characters’ lives, are invested with a temporal causality that is inconceivable in human time. The novel makes the connection between the earthquake mentioned in the first section of the novel, which tears through the archipelago, tilting it from its axis, and the tsunami that ravages its shores years after. Through this example, the novel suggests a complex interconnection between hyperobjects like the earthquake and the tsunami, which humans may try to locate within calendar time and geographical space while their interobjective connection escapes human meaning-making frameworks.

In what follows, this article will foreground the novel’s strategic departure from nation-time (Anderson) in how it opens on the Andaman Islands that are fraught with complex and layered narratives of history and geology that problematize an easy appropriation of the amphibious archipelago within the sovereign territoriality of the Indian State. This section foregrounds a separation both geographically and temporally from the standard narrative of Indian postcolonial national imagination. Following this, I will focus on the novel’s use of the materiality of water as embodying the connective tissue between history, time and memory relating the mentions of different forms of water to the way the novel maps history and time as an organic part of human entanglement with their environment. Water in its various forms mediates the texture of history in the novel and its emotional import (Krause; Oppermann). Thereafter, the article will turn to the structure of the novel and its geological framework based on the trajectory of the faultline through the narrative use of objects such as a conch shell and a fossilized gecko that anchor the multiscalar perceptions of time into objects that are emotionally relevant to characters. These objects embody the stasis and flow of the distinctive scales of time that the novel interlinks to generate human empathy and understanding for nonhuman causalities that shape human history and lives. Expanding on the argument that this geological delineation of

time and space counteracts progress-oriented postcolonial nation-time narratives and engages with the crisis of current climate emergency, the following sections will show how the novel advocates a morally charged empathetic engagement as a mode of history rather than conceptualizing a defining catastrophic event leading to extinction.

Islands: Diverging from Nation Time

The “Islands” section is the first node on the geological faultline where the novel’s narrative opens. In the context of this article, it is the first instance of Swarup’s attempt at a departure from the nation-time framework (Anderson; Mukherjee) – one that is tied to a popular perception of the Indian mainland as the “location” of the nation. Swarup’s setting helps explore a different conceptualization of geographic affinities which allows for further exploration of alternative historical frameworks via oceanic travel networks and the Second World War. The Andaman Islands have emerged as an attractive site for research on indigenous non-contacted tribes since the very early British expeditions (1771-1796) to the islands to develop them into a naval outpost and frontier site for British India. The archipelago is a critical reference point in British Indian history as it was the site of the Cellular Jail or the Kalapani³, built on convict labour. It was made infamous for the torture and incarceration of freedom fighters exiled to this prison to cut off their influence from mainland nationalist politics (Vaidik 132-156; Anderson *et al* 231-260 ; S.Sen 180, 182-83). This particular association with martyrs to the cause of national independence has been leveraged by subsequent governments to maintain a military and ideological stronghold on the islands (Vaidik 156; Anderson *et al* 62-94). The islands had accrued further associations with the major crises and conflicts of the twentieth century as they were captured by the Japanese army (1942-1945) during the Second World War breaching the British and allied stronghold on South Asia, particularly its oceanic boundaries. With the end of the war and the emergence of independent India and Pakistan, the islands saw a major influx of refugees from the newly instated nation-states (U.Sen 950-960). This severely impacted the demographic composition and the socio-economic make-up of the islands. It also led to a militant settler-colonialism imposed by the Indian State on the indigenous tribal people, who were clearly hostile to incorporation into the Indian nation, under pretext of modernizing the islands (U Sen 961-68).

In the current political setting, the islands are rapidly emerging as a crucial strategic location for the Indian naval and military stakes in the Indian Ocean region (Abraham). Abraham argues that the islands have once again become the political frontier of the nation’s sovereign territorial integrity even though they lie separated from the Indian

mainland by several kilometers of sea (2-3). Vaidik suggests that this view of the islands as integral to nationalist political ideologies overrides their significance within the pan-Asian context, with its historical cultural links with Burma, now Myanmar, through labor migrations to support British trade and settlement objectives, and the islands' brief but significant encounter with Japanese politics and culture during World War II; Vaidik thus locates the archipelago within the Indian Ocean as a historical framework (12, 35-50).

Geologists consider the Andamans to be the extensions of the submerged Arakan Yoma Mountain range of Myanmar (Sekhsaria 5). As Itty Abraham puts it, "[g]iven this physical distance (from Indian landmass), it is not unreasonable to argue that the Andamans are a Southeast Asian land that belongs to India" (2). Thus, this strategic setting of the first section of the novel opens up the novel's constant mirroring of geological upheaval in the earth's crust along this region with the extremely volatile and politically challenging social histories of communities and countries that occur on it. Commencing the narrative on the archipelago and using historical references to earthquakes and tsunamis as narrative modes that structure and shift characters' lives and motives, the novel attempts to shift the geographical reference points of standard "Indian" postcolonial time and refocus it on a different trajectory of entangled regional histories from the same period of the mid-twentieth century.

In this reading of Swarup's novel where the geological faultline is a narrative determinant, it is important to note that the locations the narrative traverses reflect on the extreme and violent processes of the region's tectonic activity: "Burma was crushed between India and Asia [...]. Faultlines ran all along it, from the edges to the heart – the biggest one in the form of the Irrawaddy down the spine of Burma, connecting islands below to the Himalayas above" (Swarup 138-139). Mirroring this geologic unrest, the Andamans and the Siachen glacier – where the narrative concludes –, are both heavily militarized border zones. Highlighting another instance of such interweaving of geology, politics and narrative, in the following I will analyze how the fluidity of the earth's crust along the subduction zone is paralleled by Swarup's use of related but different forms of water as they occur in oceans and glaciers. Water is the material of history in this novel, it records and induces changes and it shapes with slow insistence, giving material form to the complex dynamics of multiscalar time that the narrative deals in.

Water and Time: Materiality, Stories and Metaphor

Swarup introduces the Andaman and Nicobar archipelago as "breaks and pauses" on an "unbroken surface of water" (11). Water is the element of time in this novel, its materiality is diverse and has multiple

manifestations, including saltwater, mist, ice and humidity (Oppermann 22-23). As Franz Krause describes, “[s]ome scholars therefore propose studying water and materiality in terms of various forms of wetness or amphibious processes. Research into water and materiality suggests that the material world consists of open processes rather than of fixed objects, and that water’s multiple manifestations and flows actively participate in shaping human lives” (n.p.). The novel explores these “open processes” of the material world through the element of water that embodies the whole of human history. In this novel this embodiment is curiously most evident in the “ghost ocean” that is shown as hidden in plain sight. This ocean has several names in the novel, the British Jailor at the Cellular Jail on the Andaman Islands calls it Tethys and his interlocutor, the Sanskrit poet and freedom fighter imprisoned there, hails it as Kshirsagar (Swarup 78-79). This is the ocean that disappeared when the Indian tectonic plate collided with Asia, folding the earth’s crust under immense pressure and creating what is the still growing mountain range – the Himalayas. The presence of this “ghost ocean” and its reminders (fossils) surface in all locales of this novel, connecting the disparate geographies of the white sand beaches of the Andamans where Girija Prasad and his daughter collect calcified deep-sea creatures as memorabilia, to the fossil shells of sea-animals that the hill tribes collect from the glaciers to form an antidote for broken bones, “a healing womb for wounds, created from the bones of ancient creatures” (300). These fossilised sea-creatures are used to map human emotions over time, like the conch-shell from Girija Prasad and Chanda Devi on the Andaman Islands which is inherited by their daughter Devi and then their grandson Rana, who carries this shell to his research center deep in the Himalayan glaciers. In this way water and its material associations, like these sea creatures, are timekeepers in stories of human loss, resilience and change. These creatures of deep time are not only present in their physical calcified form, but their metaphysical recurrence happens in the images of “ammonites and nautilus” that intrude on Thapa’s vision:

They are sea creatures disguised, hiding in plain sight. Curled into each other, hanging on to each other’s limbs and tails for comfort. Ammonites and nautilus that look like bottle caps. Jellyfish floating like polythene bags entangled with snakes and eels that pass off as broken pipes. Sea lilies and starfish that mimic the colour of discarded bouquets. Reptiles that are visible only as textures, lying around like broken tires and bits of metal. Asleep, they look like infants. Innocent, blissful, vulnerable. (208)

This passage, describing how Thapa sees sea creatures, foregrounds the anthropogenic focus on sight and the visible, as I had indicated earlier with reference to Mertens and Craps (137). It can be read as a critique of the anthropogenic imagination that visualizes a jellyfish “like a floating polythene bag.” It is at once a critique of the plastic pollution of oceans that humans have created and are now interpreting

as a crisis of the Anthropocene, and also a sarcastic jibe at the anthropomorphic focus of the human imagination that can only apprehend the jellyfish as a floating plastic bag but is unable to access the consciousness of this sea animal. Ranjan Ghosh in *Plastic Turn* argues that “our consciousness is never without the plastic-material” (7). This is reflected in the way in which we conceive of the lives and forms of the nonhuman with equivalences and the metaphors of plastic: transparent, mass produced/procured, disposable and as garbage that needs to be processed out of sight. The passage also evokes a sense of deep empathy: “Curled into each other, hanging on to each other’s limbs and tails for comfort,” the conviviality they seek in these interspecies dependencies is juxtaposed with the “vulnerability” of their innocence.⁴ The watching human eye/I of the reader and narrator (here Thapa) is a palpable threat to their “innocence” and “blissful” state.

This passage opens into the novel’s preoccupation with making evident physical and metaphorical connections of human lives and planetary deep-time scales. Evolutionary processes have evidenced animal life over time and space, and as entangled and co-dependent. However, the anthropocentric consciousness interpreting change as progress has strategically forgotten our own genetic beginnings in these oceanic ancestors even though we constantly encounter them through the regular processes of life. Through the characters of Thapa and Plato we are made to reconsider this forgetting – which is perhaps a way to adapt to change, but also makes it impossible for the human actors to access or even recognize the expressions of nonhuman planetary consciousness even as our lives and dreams are constantly being shaped by them.

In assessing the possibilities of a postcolonial temporality that is outside of the western positivist framework, Keya Ganguly considers the various European philosophical framings that have structured postcolonial engagements with time. Ganguly discusses Johannes Fabian’s criticism of anthropological “distancing and relativizing” of a “culture under investigation” in the discipline’s efforts to privilege otherness and difference (169). This places the anthropologist or analyst at a distance from the “object of knowledge” which is located at a “distant place – further down the stream of time” (169–170). The novel critiques how a similar distancing is also operative in the act of forgetting or alienation from the memory of the oceanic agency in our everyday consciousness as we place it either in prehistory embedded in deep-time or in the future as an unimaginable climate catastrophe. In Swarup’s novel characters make apparent the continuities between what is otherwise considered distinctive about a particular ecology or environmental catastrophe, and the causal ways in which they are related to major world-wide socio-political crises. Water and water-

borne life forms make these connections between past and future visible.

Thapa seeks reassurance from Plato as they say their farewells in a haze of opium smoke, “Can you also see them?” / The ammonites and nautilus drifting out with the smoke, escaping the fire. The starfish and sea lilies crawling in the hut’s cracked corners, as if all land was a sea floor.” Plato confesses to his friend that he can see them too:

“The creatures live with us,” Plato replied. “They inhabit the cracks we live in desperate to escape.”
“Who are they?”
“Premonitions of our past ... Ghosts of our future ... They are us.” (251)

They insist on a simultaneity of the present and the so-called past. The memory of this lost ocean is materially manifested in the glacier that the narrative ultimately leads to in Siachen, completing the reverse journey of water (from glacial ice to oceans) in the narrative. Siachen is the setting of the final chapter of the novel; it is a site of international strife where the Indian military has set up a base and research facility (the Kshirsagar Glacial Complex) to devise ways of laying claim to this incredible resource of water as well as to create a strategic boundary to the neighboring countries.⁵ To the surprise of the Indian scientist Rana, the old village elder Apo can predict the seemingly impossible shifts in the earth’s topography in this region. Apo does so through metaphors embedded in stories that are repositories of the accrued environmental wisdom of the hill tribes. Apo’s granddaughter explains to the geologist Rana that “[t]here is a giant fish that lives in the frozen sea. When it moves its tail, earthquakes happen” (297). The novel continuously uses science and stories to validate each other, and in this story, the fossils embedded in the glaciers are brought to life in the image of an earthquake. Stories in this narrative function as interpreters of the nonhuman agentic forces that create fissures within the perception of a continuous linear flow of human time. The affective impact of these fissures in time can only be grasped through the imaginative and metaphorical scope of narrative and stories. The stories interpret the entangled processes of the human and nonhuman that is materially documented in and by water and other geological features and are part of the emotional texture of the novel. Characters communicate their inherited and personal experiences with the other histories of the planet they inhabit through stories that center on the fluidity and change inherent in the materiality of the earth itself, such as the “ghost ocean” transforming into the Himalayas. Tokens such as a gecko fossilised in amber, or the conch shell formed over years of geological processes, transform living matter into stone and act as snapshots of the processes of deep time, invested with human longing and belonging over generations.

The little gecko fossilized in amber functions as a narrative device approximating the scalar incomprehensibility of geological time into a historic understanding of human life. Plato received this fossilized piece of amber as a gift from a Kachin insurgent who helped him illegally cross the border between India and Burma. It was part of the Kachin rebel's heirloom and was tied up in his families' memories of the Second World War, caught between Allied and Japanese forces. In the story of the Kachin boy, the amber is as much part of a deep past as it is a reassurance for the future.

The amber on Plato's palm is his favourite, he tells him. It carries within it an infant gecko, probably a new-born. It is the only creature that belongs as much to this world as the one long ago. It makes the past ordinary and familiar, like the matted walls the geckos love to walk on. Somehow, it also makes what the future holds bearable. (171)

The fossilized gecko in the piece of amber "bore witness to the most violent events in prehistory," the collision of the tectonic plates that "pulverised, hacked, crumbled, slit and ultimately transfigured the landscape into the unimaginable" (175). It was shaped by cataclysmic forces of geological change, but it was also in a sense paused in time, the existence of the gecko trapped inside was paused almost at the moment of its birth, "tree resin must have trickled on to the gecko only moments after it hatched" (173). For Plato, it is a portal into imagining the prehistory of the land. To him it communicates the premonition of what is to come, a "future primordial" (173). Here it is useful to think through this object-image of the gecko-trapped-in-amber through Morton's characterization of hyperobjects as being "vastly distributed in time" (55), where its beginning and end is inconceivable in clock time, as the "aesthetic causal realm in which hyperobjects appear to operate is in some sense nonlocal and atemporal" (47). The gecko-trapped-in-amber here functions as a hyperobject that makes apparent the relationships between gigantic and intimate scales of time, and as Morton puts it, "such gigantic scales are involved – or rather such knotty relationships between gigantic and intimate scales – that hyperobjects cannot be thought as occupying a series of now-points 'in' time or space. They confound the social and psychic instruments we use to measure them" (47).

Though the fossil evokes the world that had formed it and is a material witness to the processes of "deep time," it is also a commodity that is deeply impacted by the war over the natural resources of the region, particularly gemstone mines (Wood 11-12). Entangling the gigantic scale of geological deep time with the intimate history of human suffering, for Plato the value of such gemstones "lies in metaphor" (Swarup 172). The novel uses metaphor as an interpretative tool that translates the geomorphic activities that create the precious stones in the depths of the earth into an affective framework to understand the changes caused by the violence inflicted

on his own body. Tortured as an insurgent against the Burmese Junta, Plato's body bears scars and internal haemorrhages, which are then correlated to violent orogenic activities and the extraction of gemstones: "purged to the surface from faultlines far below, aren't they scars and clots from the land's deepest wounds?" (172). The piece of amber, then, anchors a deep-time-oriented geological history of the region onto the physical scars on Plato's body left by the political and extractivist economies that have shaped the communal life in the region.

Thapa and Apo in this novel are storytellers and so is Girija Prasad. Apo, the story keeper of his village, believes that "[s]tories are the cure to various neuroses triggered by extremes and hardship" (294). The novel depends on the act of storytelling to generate empathy that can cut through the opaqueness of nonhuman temporal trajectories and agency that is different to the human temporalities. In this way it also speaks to this special issue's attempt at imagining ecological solidarity beyond catastrophe and destruction and in ways that read human and nonhuman entanglements historically and as propelled by instances of recognition and responsibility. I am adapting here from Lori Gruen's concept of "entangled empathy" that she describes as "ethical commitments that relations engender" (225). Gruen argues that it requires "the recognition that one is distinct yet always co-constituted by the relationships one is in while understanding fallibility and the necessary limits of understanding the experiences of another" (225). Gruen's concept of "entangled empathy" is both cognitive and affective and acknowledges the ethical commitment that such relationships create – "being in relationships always has ethical consequences" (224-225). Gruen's concept follows on from feminist theories that critique the "individualism that is central to standard approaches to moral considerability" and problems that our view of moral obligations along the markers of "equality" and "difference" can create. Instead, she advocates that we see ourselves as "inextricably entangled with other animals" (224).

To adapt Gruen's work to my analysis, I want to foreground the process of empathy as a morally charged one, one that instigates an active role of self-reflection and adjustments in one's attempt to empathize. Gruen argues that being cognizant about the similarities and differences between herself and her situation and the fellow creature she is empathizing with requires a constant movement between the first and third-person point of view. This would minimize "narcissistic projections" which are often considered as the negative impact of the self in philosophical debates on empathy (226). In the context of this novel, storytelling helps characters like Girija Prasad, Thapa and Apo mediate their personal loss by imagining the nonhuman through the affective and social registers of the human.

Thapa, who is quoted earlier in this essay as struggling to make up a story, ultimately makes up a nature fable, the story of Bagmati and her nomad husband, to appease Bebo, his intrusive neighbour. Bebo's given name is Bagmati, which is also the name of the river that runs through Thamel where they live. In Thapa's narrative, Bagmati is a demigod, the goddess of rain, and she is travelling with her husband, a nomad, to his homeland which is in the midst of glaciers: "The home of the nomad was an ocean bed once upon a time. But now all water had drained out, it is a desert" (Swarup 233). It is in this "land of frozen life" that the nomad tells Bagmati the story about the "heart of the Himalayas" which is "a grain of sand, hidden in the block of ice below their feet," lying frozen below them in the glacial depths where a "faint rhythm" runs through the glacial ice and leaps into her body. "[L]ike the ocean, Bagmati's body explodes with the heartbeats of a million sea creatures" (234). Thapa links his persistent visions of ever-present tangled sea creatures disguised within the form of everyday objects to the remnants of ocean life in the Himalayan glaciers through this narrative. The fabulist narrative mode that he uses helps him interpret and connect his visions of sea creatures to the home he lost in the mountains in a sudden landslide.⁶ Bebo follows this narration with a question: "what do they look like? [...] A million sea creatures?" (235) This hints at a crisis of belief in events and processes that are not visible to the human. But narrating the story has a redemptive effect on Thapa's relationship to the mountains. To address Bebo's crisis of imagination, Thapa reverts from nonhuman massive landmasses engaged in tectonic drift to a grain of sand: "'it is smaller than dust,' he says, 'and slippery like water'" – no one has ever held a grain of sand (235).

The narrative plays along differential scales of time as well as the different scales of matter, where the biggest and smallest components of matter that constitute the nonhuman slip outside of human cognition of reality. Imagining the "heart" of the glacier as a "grain of sand" makes it is possible to imagine an earthquake through corporeal metaphors and a familiar affective register.

"If a grain of sand is the heart," he says, a little before dawn, "is an earthquake the hearts torment?"

"I guess so," she [Bebo] replies, distracted by the sandcastles she is building on an imagined beach, much like the ones on picture postcards. Wondering how small the grain is, and how big she must be.

"What about a landslide?" he asks. The smile on his face may have diminished but it hasn't vanished. (235)

The narrative that he is coaxed into creating by the intrusion of Bebo in his life and home, becomes a metaphysical narrative of coming to terms with the nonhuman agentic forces that had shaped his life and loss. It is through the act of storytelling that he is able to empathize with what seemed inconceivable, sudden and unpredictable. Such

absorption of the “improbable” in nature within metaphors of human affective response expands the interpretative scope of the modern novel’s narrow definitions of rationalization within “realism.” A strict definition of the realist mode debars the complex and entangled realities of the planetary ecosystem to experimental readings in genres like “magic-realism” and “science-fiction” (Trexler and Johns-Putra 185-200; Amitav Ghosh 28-30). The glaciers in the novel, to borrow from Ranjan Ghosh’s conception of plastic’s materiality in *The Plastic Turn* again, have, “a complicated life of its own: the material-signifier, the materiality of the signifier, and the material as signifier come together to form their discursive formations” (6). The glaciers hold frozen time, with creatures transformed over time into fossils, preserved cautiously as evidence of multiscalar time that interjects other temporalities into our “time-blindness” (see Birth).

James Wood in *Deep Time, Dark Times*, while discussing Heidegger’s remarks on the sun and its influence on posthuman conceptualizations, contends that “[i]f philosophy itself relies on maintaining something like the ontological difference, or a gap between material and transcendental, arguably the event of the Anthropocene is that it blows this rigid distinction out of the water” (41). Thapa and his story propound a philosophy of the ocean that is not tied to physical coordinates but suffused as agency in the forms that water takes and leads the story, from shaping islands through regular tidal change and consecutive tsunamis in the section titled “Islands,” to temperamental rivers weighed down with urban garbage in “Faultline,” to the no-man’s land of glacial ice in the section “Snow Desert.” The materiality of the “ghost ocean” evolves into a philosophy of water where the divide between matter and spirit collapses. Discarded “garbage” in the quote that begins this section transforms into prehistoric sea creatures metaphorically imbuing the broken disjointed parts of human refuse with an agentic force that, as Jane Bennet would have it, “vibrates” with vitality that “runs alongside and inside humans” (viii). Human action therefore is constantly being shaped, thwarted, and propelled by non-human agentic actors that are equally responsible for contingencies of planetary political economies. The human and the nonhuman worlds are complexly enmeshed so that possibilities of political action are determined by this conjoined dynamic of being and action. Swarup’s novel deviates from possibilities of the nation-state-based temporal framework which identifies modernity as the “rationalizing imperatives of clock and calendar” (Ganguly 178) dictated by world-wide capitalism and a radical break from the precolonial understanding of “lost cultural identities” by mapping its historic timeline on a geological faultline.

Narrative Structure and the Possibility of Hope

As discussed so far, the novel perceives the flow of history through the materiality of water and its attendant socio-political dynamics. The cyclicity that is inherent in the physical manifestations of water is also the essence of time in the novel. In the following section, I will explore how this trope of cyclicity manifests not just as repetition but as regeneration. This idea of regeneration is suggested through the objects and their associations in the narrative, like the conch shell passed on by Girija Prasad to his progeny, as well as the way in which the novel's events unfold to show how the past is mirrored in the present and anticipates the future.

The novel opens with the wetness of the tropical island caught in incessant rain and we see how it has subsumed the inner life of the husband and wife, Girija Prasad and Chanda Devi. The scientific and rational Girija Prasad is flummoxed by the intuitive communion his wife has established with the trees and the non-human living world of the islands: "Girija Prasad, a keen observer and scientist of nature himself, could make no sense of it. Chanda Devi defied everything that he had learnt" (Swarup 109). The novel begins with this dialogue between knowledge and disbelief that husband and wife struggle with as they try to find an equilibrium in their relationship. Girija Prasad coaxes his wife to tell him more about how she can see beyond the present and why she can talk to plants, and he cannot. In turn, in another act of explicit storytelling, Chanda Devi tells him their own story as a way of understanding the other interconnected stories that are implicit in their existence: "We have been soulmates for several births now. But in each birth, our search for love and struggle for purpose is new" (110). This is a spiral-like pattern: in a spiral, we do not come back to the same spot of time and space conjunction, enclosing it in an infinite loop, but repeat the journey to move forward in time where the return is an echo of its former self. This is indicative of the narrative structure of the novel and is materially manifested in the spiraling patterns of the conch shell that Girija Prasad gives to his daughter Devi as she leaves the islands for schooling to the Indian mainland, and which is later carried by her son Rana to accompany him during his research on glaciers. In this sense, the conch connects the familial history of Girija Prasad, his daughter Devi and his grandson Rana with the geological history of the subcontinent. However, the conch shell, while being a sort of time-keeper for the families' transition through the years and across borders also functions like a "hyperobject" from which time "emanates" – "rather than being a continuum in which they float" (Morton 233).

For Rana, the conch shell that has travelled with his family from the Andaman Islands is a reminder of the comfort and shelter of his parents' home. However, holding the conch shell to his ear, "[i]nstead

of a dramatic sound of waves whipping the rocks,” what he hears is an overbearing hollowness” (Swarup 305). This hollowness in which he found a familial comfort echoes the image of the tsunami to which Girija Prasad had surrendered his life. The huge wave is imagined as a silent womb from within which the possibilities of new life emerge after complete destruction. The novel describes Girija Prasad’s view of the tsunami thus:

The water hits the island shelf with a pure and overwhelming silence. The universe may have come to life with a bang, but the possibilities were conceived in silence. With time, it will all vanish. The islands, their civilizations, the coral, the ocean. Only silence will remain. He straightened himself. Girija Prasad stands upright as it approaches. Up close, the curl seizes to be a mere shape. It is roof and ground at the same time. It is the ocean’s very womb, seeking new life to nurture. (125)

The novel begins with the word “silence.” “Silence on a tropical island is the relentless sound of water” (3). The incessant rains of the tropical forests on the islands are alive with a rich soundscape of water, “[s]immer, whip, thrum, and slip” (3). But Swarup, at the very outset, connects the flow of water to the silence of gestation: “Seeded in the sounds is an elemental silence. The quietness of mist and the stillness of ice” (3). The spiraling pattern can also be read as a narrative of possibility where the end and beginning collapse into the single image of the tsunami which is also the “ocean’s very womb;” a possibility of new life from the destruction of the old. The first section titled “Islands” is suggestive of the almost amphibian quality of the archipelago submersed in different forms of water and its flows. The emotions of the characters take on water-like qualities, their shared intimate spaces like the bedroom “damp with desire and flooded with incipient dreams” (3).

Very early on in the novel we are introduced to the menace of the unfathomable ocean as well as its overwhelming beauty. Girija Prasad spent most of his life on the islands trying to unravel the disappearance of the “Paleo-Tethys, a hypothesized ocean,” the “contemporary of Pangaea” (86). Girija Prasad’s quest lies in discovering this long-disappeared shape-shifting ocean. He believes in the malleability of water, and this helps in imagining the impossible. Sitting on a tropical archipelago he dreams of a tropical sunset in a landscape of snow (41-42). In his reveries, Girija Prasad “drege(s) snow from his memory and heaps it on the island he sleeps on. In his reverie, the verdant land is blinded by snowfall” (43). This blinding snowscape brims over from his dream and onto the body of his sleeping wife, giving her a sore throat and clogged nose when she wakes up beside him in the morning. This paradoxical vision of snow on the tropical landscape is mirrored by a similar vision of a tropical sunset on the snow-covered terrains of a mountain village caught in a blizzard by Apo in the final section of the novel. The repetition of this geographical paradox hints at the

geological and climatic changes that the earth has gone through over millions of years where islands were once mountain tops and fossils of sea creatures are found on the highest snow-covered peaks. It brings into focus a regenerative rhythm in the geological history of the planet that enacts continuities of life rather than catastrophic ruptures. The novel shows that characters like Apo, Girija Prasad and Chanda Devi have an intuitive understanding of human embeddedness in this prehistoric process of life on the planet.

In the final section of the novel, we meet Girija Prasad's ghost, an echo of the first section of the narrative, bringing with him the warmth of a tropical sunset to a snow-covered mountain. Confronted by the ghost of Girija Prasad, Apo, the grandfather and elder of the Drakpo village has a vision: "The ice is giving way to crystal-clear waters, and starlight to ripples of sun. Apo is surrounded by pink coral, swaying like a summer field on an ocean bed" (322). In his vision Apo is suspended in water, he follows an ammonite that flits up to the water's surface and he too emerges out of the water:

He erupts into the sky like a volcanic island coming to life. He finds himself on an igneous peak, surrounded by emerald forests and indigo seas. He turns towards her, she blushes. In the flash of a sunset, the warmth of sunrise (322).

The sunset here is a moment experienced in the first section of the novel by Girija Prasad and Chanda Devi, atop Mount Harriet: a moment of marital communion. To Girija Prasad, it seemed like an evening in the mountains, sitting on a hill-top immersed in fog disturbed only by the sound of waves that contradicted the illusion. The sunset evoked the mountains that Girija Prasad had experienced alone in his travels. He explains "snow" to his wife, Chanda Devi, who was brought up in the tropical plains. To her it seems improbable that they will ever leave the island to witness this white splendor, but it is a promise for another lifetime. "He must admit that the theory of rebirth has a lyrical appeal – it might allow him to enjoy another sunset in another land with his wife. She blushes. So does he. Girija Prasad reaches out for her hand. Chanda Devi entwines her fingers with his" (40). Witnessing the sunset is a moment of marital bliss in the life of the young and newly married couple who were adapting to their life on the islands. This scene is mirrored in the last section of the novel where we see the aged but newly married couple Apo and Gazala, adapting to each other. The vision that Apo has of a tropical sunset draws on Girija Prasad's memories. Apo, here, seems to have fused with the consciousness of Girija Prasad's ghostly presence re-experiencing his memories, but in Apo's vision the "flash of a sunset" is shot through with "the warmth of a sunrise." The scene evokes the "eternal love" implicit in elemental forces that the novel ends with, and lyrically insists on the miracle of new beginnings (325).

Chakrabarty and Biswas read the resolution of the novel's exploration of the human and nonhuman entanglements in the concept of an "undefined love" that is drawn from this image of an impossible union of the "the most ancient of lovers" – the sun and the moon (325). They draw on Donna Haraway's concept of "natureculture" that critically engages with nature and culture as dualities normalized in Western civilizations. Their reading foregrounds a multispecies ethnography that undercuts the historical bias that alienates the human from nature (Chakrabarty and Biswas 21). However, I argue that the conclusive section does more than seek a resolution in "undefined love." It aligns the principal philosophical and metaphorical concepts of time and change that the novel explores. In the fable that concludes the novel, we see a repetition of the imagery of "an ocean resting in the womb of a shell," expanding this image to approximate the cosmic ever-expanding universe (Swarup 325). The moon, a flawed presence, can only accept the love of the sun if it comes with "unconditional acceptance." The waxing and waning of the moon is described as the phases of this conjugal love. The magic hour of the twilight that can forge the union of opposites also creates the possibility of new life, ironically imagined as "emptiness is all that exists," and one that is devoid of the cosmic, tectonic and temporal entities. This emptiness then regenerates the possibility of a new and yet unnamed "you and I" (Swarup 326). The concept of "love" is rooted in acceptance of flaws and becoming attuned to the possibility of complete renewal, even if it begins with the nihilistic premise of emptiness. This "love" that translates the cosmic into human apprehensions and hope can be read as a form of empathy between the human and the nonhuman agentic forces that shape the narrative. As I have demonstrated earlier, the novel builds this kind of empathy by using stories that bind objects shaped by deep time to human lives and emotions that allow readers to access (within our limitations) the multi-scalar logic of geological time that frames and interjects our human lifetimes.

The novel uses these stories and object-metaphors to highlight the complex multiscalar temporalities that we inhabit: it takes the characters' affective and cognitive registers to make sense of various deep entanglements with personal, political and geologic histories, while also showing how a multiscalar experience of time might determine the economic present and futures of this bio-region. In doing so, the novel touches on most major socio-political crises that have shaped the region's national histories, but it performs this by reorienting the way we look at territoriality and identity in relation to "nation" as a category that determines them. The Andaman Islands in their territorial and geological make-up prove a challenge and aberration to the "united India" narrative, on a level of optics – on the map, and in the islands' ecological distinctiveness. The archipelago unspools a set of stories that follow the geological faultline that

connects places and characters, but also connects across ecozones, from the oceans to the glaciers – both the islands and the glaciers remain areas of violent military tension. The characters use stories and fables to comprehend their location in time and space in this ongoing shift that marks the geological terrain and the changes in related temporalities that the geography anchors. The narration of stories, and the process of sharing them, takes form vis-a-vis complex relationships: stories become a way of empathizing with the other. Thapa's unconventional relationship with Bebo, who has lost her childhood to poverty and abuse, and Apo, a deserted soldier who was adopted into a Drakpo village where he absorbs their stories until he is the village grandfather, are sustained through stories that communicate the environment they inhabit and what they have witnessed. All these characters see their "worlds" ending through natural and man-made disasters, landslides, war and entire eco-systems changing, and yet they also witness a relentless continuation of life that engenders new beginnings, making their stories of climate disasters regenerative rather than nihilistic. This regenerative imagination of climate catastrophes is perhaps best expressed by Swarup herself towards the beginning of the novel: "The end of one's world is another's beginning" (11).

Notes

1. The arguments in this article have developed from earlier engagement with Swarup's novel and feedback I received from audiences, colleagues and fellow speakers. In particular, I would like to thank the European NetIAS seminar series organized by the Institute of Advanced Studies, Central European Universities (2020), and Prof. Ananya Jahanara Kabir and Dr Luca Riamondi for giving me an opportunity to present an extended talk on Swarup's novel at the "Archipelagic Indias" seminar series at Kings College London in 2022 (cf. Bhattacharya 2022).

2. Originating in Hindi or Bhojpuri (the language of Bihari North Indian overseas migrants) the term *Kala pani* can be written as written either as two separate words, where *kālā* means black and *pānī* means water or as a single concept: *kalapani*. This ominous phrasing derives from Hindu traditional beliefs that crossing the sea was antithetical to Hindu culture, entailing a severance of the traveller from the holy Ganges, thereby breaking the reincarnation cycle and engendering a loss of caste. Social ostracism was levied on the individual following sanctions detailed in ancient Indian scriptures and was a singular concern for the indentured labourers crossing the Indian Ocean.

3. I approach the materiality of water as the actual physical matter of water as rain, oceans, ice, rivers and glaciers; such a new materialist reading helps access complex socio-political issues by thinking through human connections with the materiality of water in different forms, like the militarization of the Indian ocean region around Andamans, while also making evident the immediate impact to the deep-sea subduction zone on which this region lies. In doing so, I borrow from Franz Krause's work which reads the concept of "flow" into human-water relationships where the fixedness of things is rejected in favor of reading objects as "open processes" (see Krause 2021). His work synergizes with Luci Attala's focus on a new materialist reading of water and in doing so "draw[ing] attention to the liquid gossamer filaments that run through and physically join bodies and other matters, thereby foregrounding the part that water plays in shaping human lives" (3). Oppermann (2023) similarly conceives of the blue humanities as a field that rises above either/or categories, and towards a more "comprehensive and inclusive method of scholarship" (12) which induces new ways of interacting and thinking with water as well as different narrative strategies to represent the contemporary urgencies about human-water relations (4).

4. For another reading linking oceanic pollution to tentative kinship relations, see Jennifer Leetsch's article on "Oceanic Kinship and Coastal Ecologies: More-than-Human Encounters in Cristina Ali Farah's 'A Dhow Crosses the Sea'" in this special issue.

5. Andrew North argues that "[t]he struggle between India and Pakistan over the Siachen glacier has even spawned a new term: 'oropolitics' or mountaineering with a political goal" (2014).

6. Chakrabarty and Biswas (2021) have called Thapa's story an "eco-fable."

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