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Shubhangi Swarup's *Latitudes of Longing*: Rethinking Human and More-than-Human Relationality as Planetary♣

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Abstract

Contemporary debates on the climate crisis and the Anthropocene increasingly distinguish the 'planet' from the 'globe' as a means to understand and address the interconnected ecological, political, and humanitarian crises of the twenty-first century. This planetary perspective emphasises Earth as a shared ecological system, shaped by profound human–more-than-human interdependencies across deep spatial and temporal dimensions. Contemporary fiction actively engages planetary imaginaries, offering critical frameworks for examining ecological trajectories and envisioning alternative futures. Yet few studies explore how South Asian fiction contributes to this discourse through narratives rooted in regional ecologies and cultural cosmologies. Shubhangi Swarup's novel Latitudes of Longing (2018) exemplifies this literary potential. Through close readings informed by Amy Elias and Christian Moraru's theorisation of planetarity: a term used as an alternative or critique of globalization or related ideas like the 'globe', this paper aims to show how the novel articulates a planetary consciousness by foregrounding Earth system materiality, geological deep time, and multispecies entanglements, thereby challenging anthropocentric assumptions. Ultimately, the study concludes that the novel's narrative strategies reveal the limits of global frameworks for addressing the present crisis and underscore the need to reconceptualise the planet epistemologically and ontologically.
Keywords: Anthropocene, Climate Change, Latitudes of Longing, Planetarity, Shubhangi Swarup

Introduction

In his seminal article published in Nature, Paul J. Crutzen argues that the current environmental crisis—including climate change, global warming, extreme weather events, and shifting rainfall patterns—results from the growing human influence on the environment. He introduces the term Anthropocene to describe this era, characterising it as a "human-dominated epoch, supplementing the Holocene—the warm period of the past 10-12 millennia" (23). By naming the Anthropocene as a distinct geological epoch shaped by human agency, Crutzen signals a radical rupture from the Holocene, the long-standing period of environmental stability that has supported human civilisation. This shift from the relative stability of the Holocene to the volatility of the Anthropocene compels a fundamental rethinking of history, politics, and, as this study proposes, literary form.

As a literary genre, the novel has long been defined by its capacity to imagine the human condition on a larger scale than ever before, increasingly moving beyond national and regional boundaries in response to the interconnected realities of the information age. With its broad plots, complex character networks, and sweeping temporal and spatial dimensions, the novel has become a key medium for worldmaking. In the context of the Anthropocene, literary

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narratives are now called upon to reimagine history and futurity within what Joseph Keith terms "far different and far vaster geographic frames of understanding", identified as planetary (Keith 268). The planetary, distinct from the globe of globalisation, represents an effort to imagine or understand the planet as a shared ecology that is not reducible to the "economic and geopolitical mappings and rationalization of globalization" (Keith 271). This framework echoes recent work by Amy Elias and Christian Moraru, who view the planetary as an ethical and relational response to the homogenising imperatives of globalisation.

While planetary theory has been increasingly influential in contemporary criticism, few studies examine how South Asian fiction contributes to this discourse by grounding planetary consciousness in regional ecologies and cosmologies. This paper addresses the gap by examining how Shubhangi Swarup's debut fiction, *Latitudes of Longing* (2018), articulates a planetary consciousness through geological deep time, multispecies entanglements, and Indigenous cosmologies, thereby challenging globalisation's "globe" and proposing an ethical, relational model of planetarity. By demonstrating this narrative potential, the novel underscores why, amidst contemporary crises including climate change, global violence, and mass displacement, it is necessary to reconceptualise the 'planet' epistemologically and ontologically.

Theoretical Framework: From Globe to Planet

The concept of planetarity, articulated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in *Death of a Discipline* (2003), marks an epistemic rupture from the calculable and commodified vision of the globe associated with globalisation. Instead, it calls for ethically reimagining the world as a planet—plural, entangled, and resistant to managerial logic. As Spivak writes, "Today it is planetarity that we are called to imagine—to displace this historical alibi, again and again"(81). This shift urges us to see the planet not as a unified surface for extraction and exchange, but as a site of layered histories, relationalities, and responsibilities. Building their theoretical framework around the concept of planetarity, Amy Elias and Christian Moraru define this moment as the "planetary turn", calling it "Our moment. A way of being and a way of measuring time, space, and culture in the human sciences and on the planet at large" (Elias and Moraru vii). Arguing against the homogenising and totalising tendencies of the global, they argue that "planetary field's most significant counter to the global—understood primarily as a financially, economically, and technologically homogenizing force— is its relationality model and return to ethics" (Elias and Moraru xvii). Thus, planetarity signifies a new form of interconnectedness among people, across boundaries and categories of cultural expression. This relationality extends beyond human interaction to encompass the nonhuman, organic, and inorganic, informed by an ecocritical perspective.

This paper mobilises that framework to read Shubhangi Swarup's *Latitudes of Longing* as a planetary novel. Swarup's novel participates in this planetary discourse through a distinctive mode of worlding: a literary act of assembling fragmented geographies, temporalities, and life forms into a coherent ecological consciousness. The novel rejects linear narrative form, instead organising its plot around tectonic movement and geological transformation, thereby repositioning the Earth not as a backdrop but as a central agent in the story. Swarup foregrounds the material force of planetary systems—fault lines, seismic shifts, and geological deep time—demonstrating how these forces both shape and are shaped by the Anthropocene. Through this dynamic interaction, the narrative cultivates entanglements between human and more-than-human worlds, challenging anthropocentric assumptions.

Alter/Native Narrative Form and Epistemological Views *Latitudes of Longing*

Shubhangi Swarup's debut novel, *Latitudes of Longing* (2018), stands out as one of the first Indian novels to significantly engage with environmental transformation through an

experimental narrative form. Rather than relying on a linear or unified plot, Swarup weaves the novel together using a tectonically active fault line that runs through the Indian subcontinent. This geological feature functions not only as a spatial connector but as the novel's structuring metaphor. Divided into four sections— "Islands," "Faultlines," "Valleys," and "Snow Desert"—the narrative spans diverse ecologies and terrains. In an interview with the YouTube channel *Books on Toast*, Swarup explains that she framed each section around a distinct natural landscape along tectonic faultlines. These shifting geological zones structure the novel's temporal and spatial logic and serve as metaphors for deep connectivity and rupture across human and non-human experiences (Shubhangi Swarup). This focus on faultlines not only connects the characters across different regions but also invokes the centrality of the Earth itself, positioning it as a binding force that shapes and informs their individual stories.

The novel reimagines planetary history through the mythopoetic figure of Pangaea, the supercontinent whose breakup shaped the Earth. Swarup tells this transformation as a dreamlike fable of a grain of sand lying "hidden from the sun, hidden from air", that imagines basking on the highest peak. Its dream stirs movement: the grain leaps, each jump carrying it higher, until its small, persistent ascent "changed the face of the earth" and "different lands were created" (Swarup 233). Here, deep time, understood as geological time stretching far beyond the human scale, emerges as a conceptual frame that connects fragmented landscapes and subjectivities. The narrative suggests that despite geopolitical and cultural differences, the regions of the Andaman Islands, Burma, Nepal, and the Karakoram Mountains share a common geological ancestry. Girija Prasad reflects on this unity through poetic speculation: "Perhaps Pangaea dreamt of being a million islands. Perhaps the million islands now dreamt of being one"(Swarup 11). The novel thus positions the Earth not as a passive backdrop but as a vital force that shapes, and is shaped by, human and more-than-human life. The novel constitutes a broader assemblage of human and non-human: people, culture and ethnicity, space and time, history and politics, as described on the back cover:

The story sweeps through worlds and times that are inhabited by: a scientist who studies trees and a clairvoyant who talks to them; Lord Goodenough who travels around the furthest reaches of the Raj, giving names to nameless places; a geologist working towards ending futile wars over a glacier; octogenarian lovers; a superstitious dictator and a mother struggling to get her revolutionary son released; a yeti who seeks human companionship; a turtle who turns first into a boat and then a woman; and the ghost of an evaporated ocean as restless as the continents. Binding them all together is a vision of life as vast as continents.(Swarup n.p.)

The novel constructs a holistic picture of our planet that not only records but actively registers a number of stories, thereby revealing the complex dwelling of humanity on the planet. At its core, the novel follows interconnected lives seeking intimacy and connection while challenging social norms, showing how human exploitation of the Earth under colonial legacies crosses boundaries as Swarup brings together English, Burmese, Indian, and Nepalese voices. Swarup's deliberate structural choice to utilise a geological feature as the narrative backbone underscores the central theme of the deep, often unseen relationship between humanity and the natural world. Spivak experienced this perspective on a plane journey between Baghdad, Beirut, Haifa, Tripoli, Turkey, and Romania. She observes, "I am making a clandestine entry into 'Europe'. Yet the land looks the same—hilly sand. I know the cartographic markers because of the TV in the arm of my seat…The view of the Earth from the window brings this home to me" (Spivak 93). Her reflection reveals that the idea of 'home' exceeds the limits of socio-political boundaries mapped onto the Earth's surface.

The first section of *Latitudes of Longing* narrates the story of two unequal couples and their individual quests to understand the meaning of life. Girija Prasad, a scientist appointed by the Government of India to establish the National Forestry Service, arrives in the Andaman Islands to pursue a deeper ambition: to "document the past in all its vastness, tracing its roots from the

ever-vanishing present to the unrecorded history" (Swarup 95). Both the Andaman Islands and his wife, Chanda Devi, challenge and transform his earlier beliefs, many of which he acquired during his doctoral fellowship in Europe.

Upon arriving in the Andamans, Girija Prasad believes that "no man is an island", only to later realise that "no island is an island either" (Swarup 10). A few yards from his home, he discovers a plant species previously found only in Madagascar and Central Africa. This discovery leads him to conclude that the Andaman Islands form part of a larger geological pattern—remnants of the supercontinent Pangaea, which once connected all the Earth's lands and oceans. He reflects that Pangaea was "a single entity that splintered into all the pieces of land that exist", which might be the possible explanation for the plant near his house, as "the Indian subcontinent broke off from Africa and rammed into Asia…an impossible jigsaw" (Swarup 10). Through this deep time perspective, the novel suggests that Earth's present topography has evolved over millions of years. Swarup positions the islands not as separate entities but as temporary features within a larger, interconnected hydrosphere and lithosphere.

On the other hand, Chanda Devi amazes Girija Prasad with her peculiar ability to talk to trees. Girija Prasad enquires, "Why can you talk to plants?" Chanda Devi responds, "Plants are the most sensitive spirits in the web of creation… which is why they can see, feel, and hear more than other forms, especially humans" (Swarup 109). Although trained as a keen scientific observer, Girija Prasad finds her insight difficult to comprehend. The Andaman Islands have experienced the rapid depletion of their Indigenous population and ecosystems, including rich geological and biological diversity. This decline, compressed within a relatively short historical timeframe, stems largely from the violent legacies of European colonialism and the extractive systems of global capitalism. Swarup's narrative positions human history as a fleeting layer in contrast to the vast scale of geological deep time, presenting colonial and capitalist interventions as temporally shallow yet deeply damaging. As Girija Prasad later discovers:

> The Andaman Islands are part of a subduction zone, like Indonesia to the southeast and Burma, Nepal, the Himalayas and the Karakoram to the north. It is here that the Indian plate is sinking under the Asian plate. It is probably why the islands are the most haunted place Chanda Devi had visited"(Swarup 107).

This statement reflects a geologically grounded understanding of human and nonhuman entanglements, in which historical violence becomes sedimented within the Earth's own movements. Kyle Whyte contends that colonialism and capitalism laid the groundwork for the very industrial systems driving climate change, and that Indigenous vulnerability today is an "intensification of colonially-induced environmental changes" (154). By showing how planetary forces like gravity, tectonics, and erosion shape daily life, such as Chanda Devi worrying about burning dal because "the islands are so unpredictable. The gravity keeps shifting" (Swarup 110). By foregrounding such moments, Swarup materialises the more-than-human world as a co-agent in history. Girija Prasad crystallises this insight in his speculative paper, "Fluctuation in Gravitational Pull in Subduction Zones: A Speculation", which argues that even seemingly invisible forces like gravity emerge from deep planetary processes unfolding on geological timescales. This insistence on planetary agency aligns with Gayatri Spivak's call to imagine planetarity from the "precapitalist cultures of the planet" (Spivak 101). Spivak urges readers to displace the managerial gaze of globalisation with ways of knowing rooted in relational, place-based worlds. Swarup answers that call by challenging colonial epistemologies of space and time through Indigenous and mythic worldviews.

The revolutionary Punjabi poet in Port Blair embodies this counter-epistemology. After British forces imprison him in the Cellular Jail, he forgets his past as a colonial soldier and turns to Sanskrit to build an alternative cosmology. "To accept the Silurian and Ordovician periods, is to accept the Empire's authority…who governs time?" (Swarup 79). This gesture aligns with Whyte's call to decolonise the Anthropocene by resisting settler-imposed logics of time and

space that ignore Indigenous epistemologies (Whyte 156). By rejecting the Eurocentric temporal frameworks imposed on settler colonies, the poet turns to Hindu cosmology and imagines Kshirsagar, "a geography unlike any found in the Eastern and Western scriptures"(Swarup 79). This vision embraces cyclical, fluid temporalities that exceed human-centred measures and imperial chronologies. By staging this refusal, Swarup anticipates the novel's broader critique of anthropocentrism and offers a planetary history that moves with tidal rhythms rather than imperial clocks.

Spivak notes that the coloniser's "desire to name" new territories works to "overwrite the globe" (Spivak 72). Swarup shows this erasure at work when she observes that islands "made the perfect canvas for practicing the art of nomenclature" (Swarup 16). Lord Goodenough imposes alien names— "Marmaladeganj, Baconabad, and Crumpetpur"—on coastal sites and dubs a six-fingered Andamanese community the "Divine Nangas" because of their bodies, severing place from Indigenous meaning. Swarup exposes this arbitrary exercise of power as a violent detachment from land and culture. Later, Rana, Girija Prasad's grandson working on the Line of Control, rejects names like Siachen, "the Place of Wild Roses", because they are not "patriotic enough to justify spending half the nation's defence budget" (Swarup 303). In response, the Indian state rebrands the glaciers the "Kshirsagar Glacial Complex", appropriating the poet's cosmic ocean because it offers "enough mythology to sustain the vast nomenclature associated with patriotic endeavours" (Swarup 303), and as an Ode to the poet, Rana dedicated his geodetic research paper titled "In Search of Sagar Meru" to the mythical core of Kshirsagar. By undoing colonial and nationalist naming regimes alike, Swarup resists the homogenising logic of the globe and foregrounds Indigenous and alternative ontologies of place. Swarup notes, "Five years after Lord Goodenough's visit to the Andamans, an earthquake would mock all its colonial constructions, splitting the very island the British headquarters sat on in half" (Swarup 16).

Throughout the narrative, the forces of the planet mock the building blocks of human civilisation while simultaneously reminding us of our place within this vast web of interconnections. Swarup's narrative offers an alternative understanding of our relationship with Earth: one that treats the planet not as a passive stage but as an active, relational home shared by human and more-than-human beings across deep time.

Indigenous Cosmologies and Multispecies Entanglements

Swarup extends human–more-than-human interconnectedness beyond the narrow temporal, spatial, and rational horizons of the anthropos. Swarup names this multispecies entanglement "hour of the wedding". As she writes, "In different folklore, depending upon the tellers' longitude, latitude, dreams, dispositions and eating patterns, different creatures are forced to tie the knot—foxes, snails, monkeys, ravens, leopards, hyenas, bears, the devil too at times" (Swarup 21). The image works as a microcosm of the novel's method. By privileging folklore's fluidity over linear plotting, Swarup shows how culture, ecology, memory, and imagination braid together to produce plural truths. There is no single master narrative, only stories shaped by "longitude, latitude, dreams, disposition, and eating patterns".

In the work *Post Multicultural Writers as Neo-Cosmopolitan Mediators*, Sneja Gunew argues that indigenous and marginalised groups are seen as "mediating figures that facilitate new relations between national culture and global or, in the more felicitous term suggested by Spivak, Gilroy and Cheah, the planetary" (Gunew 5). Mary, Plato, Thapa, and Apo exemplify this mediation. Mary has worked as a maid to Girija Prasad and Chanda Devi for over two decades, carrying the pain of leaving her son, Plato, behind in Burma. When the Junta arrests Plato, she resolves to return and free him. On many occasions, Plato and Mary navigate between two cultures: their native heritage and the imposition of the new culture. Critics Melba Sabu and Meghna Mudaliar call her a "mother-earth figure who sustains life with one hand and

destroys detrimental elements with the other" (Sabu and Mudaliar 103). The clearest instance is her killing of her Burman husband. After their marriage, he stopped working, drank heavily, and became violent. One day, he demanded food; she refused because the house was in disarray. He began to beat and kick her. When he struck her waist, she pleaded, she pleaded, "don't kick your child" (Swarup 162). He responded with fury, calling her a "whore" and questioning the child's paternity. To stop the next blow, she seized a rice pounder and slit his jugular vein. The episode suggests that Mary, and by extension, the Karen community, pursues peace but is driven to violence in self-defence when subjected to manipulation and brutality by those in power.

After the killing of the Burman, a pastor rescues Mary and takes her to the Andamans. He teaches her that "the islands, they made no distinction between ants, centipedes, snakes and humans. They engaged them all in primal struggle for survival" (Swarup 161). Mary internalises this ecocentric ethic. When her husband brings home a giant turtle, she butchers it slowly to keep the meat fresh, feeding the animal while cutting off one leg a day. She stops when she sees tears on the turtle's face. The moment mirrors her own suffering and affirms her belief that all beings possess spirit. Later, a centipede bites her; her mother insists only "ungodly creatures" bite. Mary asks, "What about humans? What happens when they bite?" Her mother replies, "They don't. Not if they believe in Christ" (Swarup 146). Mary rejects this binary: "The venomous snake, the bone-crushing crocodiles, and the strangling creepers, were they not creatures of god too?" (Swarup 146). Multiple turbulences of human history have shaped Mary's opinion. However, she has in-depth faith in the working of Mother Nature and the interconnectedness of the living and the non-living spirits. This is why Mary and many other migrants like her fail to be decisive when faced with conflicting ideas.

In the case of Mary's son Plato, this confusion is apparent between his early childhood and what he later makes of himself. His memories refuse an anthropocentric divide: "The jungle was a place where tigers, crocodiles, Nagas—serpent dragons—and Nat spirits ruled. It was where he belonged… Earthquakes, whirlpools, cyclones were all their doing" (Swarup 130–31). Even under torture, he merges with the forest and its creatures, "bleating like a goat… roaring like a tiger… hissing like a snake" (Swarup 156), never seeing himself as "other" or a species apart. This vision embodies what Amy Elias and Christian Moraru call a "multicentric and pluralizing… structure of relatedness" shaped by an eco-logic (xxiii). Reading *Latitudes of Longing* through this planetary eco-logic clarifies how Swarup's migrants—Mary, Plato, and others—embody precisely this relational mesh. Their stories and folktales resist linear, centralised narration and instead foreground a pluriversal field of agencies in which humans, animals, spirits, and geologic forces co-form one another.

At the novel's close, Swarup offers another alternative mode of planetary living through Apo, a migrant from Nepal who wanders the Karakoram "snow desert". The Drakpos, the nomadic group he joins, believed to descend from Alexander's army, live in a region described as "no-man's land", trapped between the Tiber and the Indus. The Drakpos have a unique spiritual relationship with nature, as they worship juniper trees, fairies, and ibexes. The ibex is carved after being hunted so its spirit can live on. Every natural element, from rocks to the sky, is believed to have a spirit. "They are all spirit" says Apo, and Drakpos believes in the religion of the spirit (Swarup 276). The Drakpos have a deep connection to the land, which is exemplified in the fact that "based on vibrations, Apo can sense nature's fears and dreams, and predict the onset of earthquakes, even avalanches and floods" (Swarup 266). The land is integral to their lives, as essential as breath. Apo emphasises the material force of the earth and the interconnectedness of humanity with nature: "the mountains are the truth", Apo says. "They are the remnants of the truth behind all creation" (Swarup 284), signifying the role of mountains in shaping the living conditions of the people.

The nomads believe in the concept of rebirth. Human life is considered a "chore" compared to other potential lives. Objects collected by the nomad, like bones and shells, are considered "family" belonging to a timeless world. Swarup writes that rocks of salt, shells, and other objects are "family… they are the sun and moons of their own existence" (Swarup 234). The nomads believe in the cyclic nature of time and existence. Apo's old incarnation, Tashi Yashe, has "enjoyed previous lives here, in the snow desert. As the landscape transformed, so did he". He has lived through several transformations: humbled as an "earthworm" surviving mass extinction, bonded to herd life as a "woolly mammoth" during the ice ages, and courageous as a "whale" moving into the ocean during the great melt. (Swarup 279). These cycles reinforce a cosmology where time and being flow through species and elements.

Thinking from the perspective of nomads and indigenous tribes paves the way for an alternative understanding of our relationship with the planet and our perception of space and time. By placing Apo and the Drakpos at the narrative's end, Swarup crystallises her methodological challenge to the homogenising "globe". She stages planetarity as a situated, relational ontology that honours Indigenous and nomadic epistemologies, cyclical time, and multispecies kinship.

Conclusion

Latitudes of Longing shows us that a South Asian novel can imagine the planet not as a system to be managed or measured, but as a living, breathing world of relationships among people, animals, spirits, and the Earth itself. The novel's four-part structure enacts what Amy Elias and Christian Moraru describe as an eco-logic: a plural and multicentric mode of thought that resists singular truths and opens space for new ethical relationships. In Swarup's narrative, planetary processes such as shifting gravity, earthquakes, and colliding plates do not remain in the background. They actively shape and co-author the shared histories of humans, animals, minerals, and spirits alike. Taken together, the novel advances two key interventions. First, it reconceptualises the planet epistemologically by insisting that knowledge must emerge from entanglement: from folktales, earth's tectonic vibrations, dreams, and nonhuman voices as much as from maps and science. Second, it reconceptualises the planet ontologically by placing humans within, not above, a network of agencies that stretch across rock, ocean, flora, fauna, and spirit.

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