Le Simplegadi ISSN 1824-5226

Vol. XXIV-No. 26 November 2026 DOI: 10.17456/SIMPLE-266

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 3.0

Carmen Concilio

Shubhangi Swarup's *Latitudes of Longing*: An Intensive, Multisensorial Narrative of the Anthropocene

Abstract I: Il romanzo di Shubhangi Swarup *Latitudini del desiderio* (tr. it. 2021) può essere letto accanto al saggio di Donna Haraway *Chthulucene. Sopravvivere su un pianeta infetto* (tr. it. 2019), poiché entrambi immaginano forme di parentela con il mondo naturale. Il romanzo di Swarup mette inoltre in scena un coinvolgimento immersivo e multisensoriale con il mondo più-che-umano, in sintonia con le riflessioni teoriche di Báyò Akómoláfé in *Queste terre selvagge oltre lo steccato* (tr. it. 2023). Attraversando paesaggi che si estendono dalle Isole Andamane nel Golfo del Bengala (Ghosh 2019, 2025) alle vette glaciali del Karakorum, il romanzo traccia un viaggio verso nord lungo linee di faglia violentemente attive, ponendo in primo piano esperienze sensoriali telluriche, qui esaminate attraverso la prospettiva ecocritica delle scienze umane ambientali.

Abstract II: Shubhangi Swarup's *Latitudes of Longing* (2018) can be read alongside Donna Haraway's *Staying with the Trouble* (2016), as both envision forms of kinship with the natural world. Swarup's novel also stages an immersive, multisensory engagement with the more-than-human, resonating with Báyò Akómoláfé's theoretical reflections in *These Wilds Beyond Our Fences* (2017). Spanning landscapes from the Andaman Islands in the Bay of Bengal (Ghosh 2019, 2025) to the glacial peaks of the Karakoram, the novel traces a northward journey along violently active fault lines, foregrounding telluric sensory experiences that are examined here through the ecocritical framework of the environmental humanities.

Keywords: Non-human agency, earthquakes, fault lines, islands, glaciers.

Canonical literature certainly offers the possibility of re-reading and re-interpreting the classics from an ecocritical perspective as an eco-active practice of literary criticism, even though texts from the past were not meant as harbingers of an ecological message. Conversely, in the twenty-first century a new 'genre' has appeared, namely, the literature of climate change, or 'cli-fi'; more generally, eco-literature has established itself as a relevant and salient genre, and the authors who engage in it might be considered environmental activists by staging and performing a public challenge that may influence society and produce social change[1]: "acts of cultural representation can wield significant power" (Clark 2019: 2).

[1] Cf. Banga (2025: 191-205).

Latitudes of Longing (2018) by Shubhangi Swarup is an environmental novel, not necessarily connected with, or denouncing, climate change, but rather practising deep ecology in an in-tensive and immersive manner. On the one hand, it might be considered a realist novel, in the wake of what John Thieme calls "Anthropocene realism", because of the fullness and richness of material details about everyday life, "realistic minutiae" (2025: 4); on the other hand, it might be considered a magical-realist novel owing to the presence of pro-active ghosts that are sensed by a few shaman-like characters. In spite of all this, the novel is neither descriptive nor representational; it is rather intense or even eco-logically intensive. It certainly shares "engagement with present and future catastrophes"; it does not favour "escapist readings", and through the medium of storytelling it "fosters and augments climate literacy" (Thieme 2025: 1). This novel might be ascribed to "encyclopaedic realism", a category in which for instance Thieme places Richard Powers' *The Overstory*, because of its scientific discourse.

First of all, the novel has a very precise and complex architectural and narratological structure as it is composed of four connected chapters or individual stories that remind us of pearls in a necklace – perhaps the earrings made of a string of pearls looped around the earlobe several times and featured in one of the stories might well represent its structural pattern. One minor character in each story becomes the protagonist of the next one till the end, when the very first protagonist appears once again in the last story whose conclusion is an incident – a bleating lamb in the snow – that recalls the corresponding opening incident – the ghost of a bleating goat – thus giving the novel closure and a consistent looping pattern. The linear journey from South to North – through the four stories – is given geological consistency because the characters re-trace the fault line where the Sunda plate meets the Indo-Australian and the Eurasian plate too in a chain of stories that geologically connects the Andamans to the Karakoram:

> The volcanic islands of Indonesia and the Andaman Sea are a continuation of the Himalayas […] mountain peaks arising from the ocean floor (Swarup 2018: 41).

> The Andaman Islands are part of a subduction zone, like Indonesia to the south east of Burma, Nepal, the Himalayas and the Karakorams to the north. It is here that the Indian plate is sinking under the Asian plate (Swarup 2018: 107).

Botany and geology aside, the first protagonist of the chapter entitled "Islands" is a scientist, Girija Prasad Varma, a botanist with "a doctorate in the English names of plants" (Swarup 2018: 8), who lives immersed in and entangled with more-than-humans, in the company of his wife, Chanda Devi. In this case, it would be useful to resort to the term adopted by Banu Subramaniam, 'embranglements', to define the relationship between the various characters and natureculture:

> I came to adopt the term embranglements (the state of being embroiled or mired in something). I find this older term more useful for discussions of colonialism. While terms like *entangled, intertwined*, and *implicated* imply the interconnections of worlds, *embranglements* also imply tension within – shaking, wavering, confusing (2024: 7).

Since earthquakes and fault lines cause vibrations, tensions, and waves through which the characters connect to the Earth, the ecosystem, and the surrounding environment, the term embranglements seems most appropriate to define the human-vs-non-human relations in this in-tensive ecological novel. Evidence of this is the heightened sensitivity experienced by Chanda Devi during the earthquake of 1954: "I knew something was wrong. I could feel tension rise from the ground as I stood in the garden" (Swarup 2018: 87).

The incipit of the novel is already an example of this in-tensiveness. The tension is provided by the clash between silence and sound: "Silence on a tropical island is the relentless sound of water" (3). The soundscape evoked through an oxymoron and a synesthesia is also a realistic description of the Andaman Islands' ecosystem of sounds. The chain of entangled matter continues: "The waves, like the sound of your breathing, never leave you" (3). The second sentence is a truism that binds the breathing of the ocean to human breathing, both a sound and a rhythm that characterise the outside world of nature and the inside of a human's lungs. This is also the basis of Murray Schafer's famous theory of soundscape:

> The ocean of our ancestors is reproduced in the watery womb of our mother and is chemically related to it. Ocean and Mother. In the dark liquid of ocean the relentless masses of water pushed past the first sonar ear. As the ear of the fetus turns in its amniotic fluid, it too is tuned to the lap and gurgle of water (1994: 15).

The characters in the novel are "earwitnesses" who practise "clairaudience", as Schafer would put it; they are attuned to nature's sounds, particularly Girija Prasad's wife, who sees and hears ghosts.

This is the proof that there is no distinction between outside and inside, that life is made up of embranglements and natureculture, thus rejecting these binaries (Subramaniam 2024: 6). The sound of the breathing of the ocean is the sound of life itself, the breath of the world, embracing and enveloping the individual and also coming from inside the body. Thus, the body of the earth and ocean forms a continuum with the body of the human being:

> For a fortnight now, the gurgle and thunder of clouds has drowned out the waves. Rains drum on the roof and skid over the edge, losing themselves in splashes. Simmer, whip, thrum and slip. The sun is dead, they tell you (3).

In the above passage, the soundscape becomes more complex and tempestuous, uniting sky and earth. The clouds are noisy and their language is full of onomatopoeic terms: "gurgle" and "thunder" express actions that are both human and non-human. These sounds silence the waves with a verb that again can be used for both human and non-human agents: "drowned out". The water coming from the sky, noisily, silences the water of the waves. The water from the sky, that is, the rains, in the plural, beats on the roof as a person might beat a drum, then splashes in an onomatopoeic fall to the ground. Like the verb "drum", the verbs "simmer", "whip", and "thrum" imply a beating sound, intense, rhythmic, repeated, insistent. "To slip" and "to skid" both imply the fluid movement typical of water, but the sound also mimics the action. Finally, the rains and the clouds speak their own language to say that

the sun is dead, as if it were a person. In this case nature's agency is characterised by sound, words, language, and action. In a later episode, when the two characters contemplate the ocean from a high peak on the island, they hear the "crashing of water", which is a realistic expression describing the violent nature of the waves beating against the coast of the island, but they return in the next line to thinking of the sound as that of the "waves breathing" (41).

When the downpour stops, the protagonist asks himself "Who left the room?", thus confusing the "who" and the "what", the human and the non-human agency. A similar confusion or continuum becomes manifest when his wife, Chanda Devi, asks him: "Can you hear it? Hear what? The goat bleating outside" (4). The wife explains that she hears the ghost of a goat on the roof of the house, a goat complaining about having been killed, butchered, deep-fried, and eaten up. This is how the two protagonists are earwitnesses and practise clairaudience (Schafer 1994: 4). Moreover, their dialogue induces Girija Prasad to become vegetarian. Thus, the next morning his wife prepares a vegetarian breakfast for him and asks him how he likes it: "How are they? She asks him again. Who? He asks disoriented. The parathas. Perfect" (5). Once again, disoriented by his wife's questions, Girija Prasad confuses the "what" and the "who"; his wife is able to see and hear ghosts, invisible presences to him, who create a continuum between the visible and invisible worlds, the living and the dead, and material and immaterial beings. This exchange about breakfast is one of many answers to Donna Haraway's questions: "to whom one is actually responsible. Who lives and who dies, and how, in this kinship rather than in that one?" (Haraway 2016: 2). Making kin with nature and with the more-than-human is Haraway's injunction, one that this novel seems to put into practice in every single line, thus granting the reader full immersion in the reality of the Andaman Islands, indeed a very peculiar geological ecosystem.

One more instance of the intense continuum between humans and non-humans is the way in which water and dampness characterise and interfere with human emotions rather than with the material world. Dampness accentuates desires, while dreams are flooded, and rain is conducive to fantasies. Moreover, during the monsoons the rains "flooded deep into their beings" (10). The association of "damp" and "desire", "flood" and "dreams", "rain" and "fantasies", and "monsoons" and "flooded beings" is surprising because it blends humans and non-humans, weather conditions and psychology, and combines humidity with temperaments and moods. Monsoons are also considered guests, as if they were people: "the guest has arrived. It has begun to rain" (121); and Girija Prasad melts in the pouring rain: "Bamboo-straight drops of rain connect heaven and earth, with him standing in between" (121). Here, in a single sentence the metaphor drawn from the vegetal world, the world of water, sky, and earth, meteorology and human beings are all touching each other in a chain of continuous and contiguous porosities.

Chanda Devi – a gold medallist in mathematics – is a prominent character who creates a bridge between the science of Girija Prasad and knowledge that is based on kinship with the more-than-humans and the habitat they live in. Their union is defined as a bond between "the man who studied trees and the woman who spoke to them" (8):

> Chanda Devi, the clairvoyant one. She feels for ghosts and enjoys the laconic company of trees. She can sense them, his unexpressed cravings. But she knows he is

> better off giving up flesh. The kingdom of flesh is as ephemeral as it is unreliable, especially when compared to the kingdom of plants […] If she could have had it her way, she would have married a tree (5, 7).

Apart from being able to foresee the future, particularly someone's death, and apart from sensing and seeing ghosts all around, to the point of choosing never to show her naked body, Chanda Devi can talk to trees:

> Chanda Devi didn't openly claim, or even secretly confide to Girija Prasad, that she could talk to trees. She just did. On their walks together, she would often stand next to one, at times laughing, at times surprised or maintaining a solemn gaze. He was intrigued. The possibility of a botanist communicating with a tree was as thrilling as the possibility of a priest chatting with God (108).

In order to talk to the trees, Girija Prasad must resort to his wife's mediation and translation. Thus, through her, he receives guidance on his forestry projects and theses:

> The banyan considered his actions and knowledge largely sensible, but shot down his dream of introducing teak, a foreign species, to the islands. Teak was the most profitable timber in the world. […] But the banyan prophesized that teak would prove vulnerable to fungi the local flora had grown immune to (108).

The passage quoted above is an example of a narrative that abandons the realist mode and approaches the magical realist one, where a suspension of disbelief is required to accept that trees might talk to human beings who are capable of understanding them[2]. The banyan tree is the one that allowed Buddha to attain enlightenment; it is a sacred tree connected with spirituality, divinity, sanctity, and transcendent meditation. Thus, the previous simile comparing a "botanist talking to trees" to a "priest chatting with god" reinforces this implied reference to Buddhism. Moreover, the banyan tree, an autochthonous species, underlines the wisdom of indigenous knowledge (IK). As Subramaniam reminds us, banyan trees and ghosts belong to the Hindu tradition and to the vivid imagery created by Indian myths:

> The banyan tree, with its expansive aerial roots, symbolizes all three gods of the Hindu trinity – Vishnu, the bark; Brahma, the roots; and Shiva, the branches. Our childhood was enraptured with the stories of Vikram and Vetaal: King Vikramaditya and the ghost spirit Vetaal, who lived in a peepal tree at the edge of a crematorium. In these stories, the ghostly spirit would continually outwit the king in clever and conniving plots (2024: 30).

[2] "'Magical realism' is a mode originally associated with novels that engage conflicting 'modern' and 'traditional' belief systems or religions in colonial and postcolonial contexts. It also commonly features the breakdown or destabilisation of the Western strict human/animal distinction", Clark (2019: 101).

Teak, conversely, is a timber typical of other regions, and Girija Prasad's extractivist project, with the aim of creating a cash crop, is doomed to fail. At one point, he orders four hundred teak saplings from Burma; five years later, he notices that "a fungus that had remained undiscovered until then" (Swarup 2018: 109) had been the cause of the death of all the plants. In this case, the scientific experiment fails in the face of vegetal intelligence, a form of indigenous knowledge (IK) that Chanda Devi shares with trees, because she is "kindred to them".

Despite his scientific expertise, Girija Prasad's mistakes are somehow unforgivable. When Girija Prasad first arrived in the Sundarbans, he brought with him eight elephants from Bihar. In Port Blair, "they had to be lifted on to the land by a crane as the jetty wasn't sturdy enough. Hovering over the harbour, the crane gave way and the first elephant plunged into the inky blue depths. There was nothing Girija Prasad could do to rescue the drowning elephant" (37).

The "face" of the elephant will remain imprinted on Girija Prasad's mind as well as the "fearful eyes" of a crocodile who had half-eaten one of his co-workers. As a way to balance the relationship between man as intruder and the non-human, Girija Prasad had nurtured in a fatherly manner a single rose among a bunch he had acquired and had it shipped to Port Blair to welcome his wife. Once on the island, Chanda Devi acknowledges his care, certain, after looking at "Girija Prasad's worried face", that the rose survived and thrived (109); he had "nurtured the shoot into a sapling with the tenacity of Mother Nature. The roses bloomed for his sake" (109). Girija Prasad and Chanda Devi are "equals thriving in a world of unequals" (31) and therefore both share traits with the non-human:

> His attention is on his surroundings, observing perhaps the call of a bird, a shift in the winds, or an increased smell of chlorophyll. A scientist studying the environment looks very much like an animal on the alert, alive to potential predators and prey […]. She moves around in her cotton sari like leaves rustling in the breeze. She breathes as imperceptibly as a tree, sucking in all the room's air and spilling it back, fragrant. Like a bird, her gaze is intense, unblinking (32).

This double portrait is indicative of ecological intensiveness. The continuum between humans and non-humans is sustained through surprising collocations: Girija Prasad is characterised by "observing" sounds and smells as a scientist, but also resembling a very sensitive animal. Chanda Devi, too, shares lightness and breathing with the vegetal world ("leaves, tree"), while resembling a "bird". They both fit perfectly in the Andaman forests lapped by the ocean, with their typical flora and fauna.

When their first child was born, he looked like "a shrivelled, pale raisin with the skin of an aged being" (53), almost non-human in a combination of extreme youth and old age; unfortunately, he was born dead, and thus Girija Prasad decided to bury him as if he had been a flower: "He buries his son in a womb of soft, wet earth – the kind one strives to sow seeds in. He covers him with a blanket of soil. But he cannot bring himself to cover his face. What if he opens his eyes and lets out a cry, choking on the soil?" (54). The father's tears, which drench his shirt, show the intensity and tension of the moving moment, a moment

of love for everyone and everything, combining humans and non-humans in the same act. When his wife was recovering from her miscarriage, he looked at her, his eyes "as fragile as a porcelain doll with cracks running through it" (56). This portrait of Girija Prasad makes him resemble the soil after an earthquake; both cracks and earthquakes frequently recur in the novel.

After his wife's death, Girija Prasad intensifies his study of nature, till the day when he experiences an earthquake and decides to crawl naked, on all fours, into the crack that has opened in the earth:

> Steam, a spontaneous mix of humidity and mud, rises all around him. The centipedes and earthworms, masters of the netherworld, are as confused as he is. They crawl over each other, hanging on the ferns and leaves that dangle from the canopy […] He runs his fingers over the exposed layers, reading them like braille (123).

Thus, in his nakedness and in his crawling Girija Prasad becomes similar and kin to the centipedes and worms he is observing, one among many species – belonging among what Haraway calls "the chthonic ones, replete with tentacles, feelers, digits, cords, whiptails, spider legs, and very unruly hair" (2016: 2) – touching the earth with their skin, limbs, and body, trying to read the earthquakes' rewriting and reshuffling of the earth, under the spell that "Nature is a continuum. That is how it thrives" (117). Besides, the Karens, a Christian tribe that moved from Burma to the Middle Andamans, settling at Savitri Nagar, a small village-to-be, believe that a person's soul continues to live in the animal which has attacked and killed him or her:

> That is how a Karen villager came to have a shark for a brother-in-law […] That was how a farmer became the father of a centipede […] a woman who believed a certain crocodile to be her mother was devoured by it when she went to give her offerings. And that was how an old man came to have the same crocodile for his wife and daughter, and a younger man for his wife and mothers-in-law (60).

This is why Chanda Devi "had never seen a man speak to a centipede with fatherly tenderness" (62), and to her, who is "kindred" with trees, and with palms in particular, this is not a surprise. As for Girija Prasad, he feels like an ant while he is in the all-enveloping, tall jungle of the South Andamans, at Port Blair, whereas he feels "powerful and gigantic" in the Middle Andamans, where there are "baby volcanoes no higher than a foot" (59). He does not take on an exceptionalist posture, but makes kin with animal non-humans.

Showing tenderness towards the "chthonic ones" is also Báyò Akómoláfé's aim, when he goes in search of "hushes", as suggested by a wise man, Mr Gbóyèga, *Bàbá nì ye*, whom he visited in Nigeria. Akómoláfé proclaims himself a neo-material ecofeminist in the wake of Haraway and Karen Barad. Like Girija Prasad, Akómoláfé explores the cracks and the interstitial zones of our planet and the self:

> Hushes too, like cockroaches, are present, hiding in cracks, staring back out of the dark holes they often inhabit with yellow unblinking eyes, and scurrying past our

> busy lives with their hairy-scaly-tentacular kin, nary a sound made in their ghostly trafficking. They thrive best in the corners of our eyes, stealthily making their way up the wall or floating free in midair without a care in the world. There one moment, gone in the slice of a sigh. We are strangely drawn to hushes and yet simultaneously possessed by a crippling fear to actually meet them (Akómoláfé 2017: 21).

The Nigerian psychiatrist, critic, and intellectual has to meet ten hushes before accomplishing his task of finding the meaning of "home", which he intends to leave as an inheritance to his daughter, Alethea.

Girija Prasad's final choice to embrace an advancing tsunami is a way to confirm that this is home to him; throwing himself into the oceanic waters is a scientist's choice to experience through immersion rather than experimenting by observation: "For how often does a man get to peer into a thriving ocean floor minus the ocean, even though it will go undocumented?" (Swarup 2018: 124). This is a way of becoming-with the ocean: becoming part of a continuum, at one with nature, and fully embracing "Tethys: that mythic ocean" (78). Ultimately, "the water carries him away" (126)[3].

The second story/chapter, entitled "Faultline", is triggered by a letter that reaches Rose Mary, Chanda Devi and Girija Prasad's housemaid, announcing that her son is in prison in Burma. Plato, now twenty-three and a student, had been arrested by soldiers for having organised three strikes. The brutality of the militia – responsible for a *coup* – is immediately evident through casual executions. Plato's life is spared, but after a night in the ditch with the corpses of his mates, he is left with more than forty leeches hanging from his body. In this way, Plato starts experiencing proximity to non-human animals. Thus, Rose Mary starts a journey by water on board a dinghy. She travels northwards, along the fault line, pushed by "Tears, as ancient as life and as young as the rain" (138). Both the mother and the weather are in tears, sharing sadness and apprehension like sisters. For its part, the fault line with its agency exerts gravitational attraction:

> No one […] can escape its elemental pull. There is a danger of slipping into the earth's cleft. It connects Burma to the islands, like a weeping eye to every disowned teardrop. Not all pain, certainly not all longings, can be swept away by the Indian Ocean.
> 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 rubble (138).

In this reconstruction of tectonic activity, geology is blended with feelings; "weeping", "pain", and "longings" are associated with geological forces capable of "crushing" and "drifting" continents against one another. The earth, its crust, is humanised, while humans are subjected to the effects of the gaping fracture. Moreover, the fault line with its agency, earthquakes, and multiple fractures does not only change the geomorphology of the lands

[3] "Believing in elemental non/human enmeshment requires not just an imaginative leap of faith but also a desire to take a physical plunge into the stuff of which we are composed, to immerse oneself in a potentially lethal elementality, 'to wash' (*lavare*) away", Cohen & Duckert (2015: 14).

around it but also their mood, temperament, and sentiments. Burma has "aquiline edges", but experiences "despair"; its cartographic shape is compared to a "weeping eye"; therefore, it is sentient and human-like, as a person would be. The biggest fault line takes the form of the mighty Irrawaddy River, "down the spine of Burma, connecting the islands below to the Himalayas above" (138). This is exactly Rose Mary's trajectory as well as the novel's structural spine and its trajectory.

Plato has been tortured and is physically maimed, lying in stench and dirt in his solitary confinement cell. When a caretaker brings him some rice, he cannot but run away, commenting that "Even pigs smell better than this" (155). Thus, Plato realises that "the man scurried away like a mouse", while he himself feels that he has transformed into a pig: "I swear I don't know how it happened but the prisoner has turned into a pig" (155). Through these recurrent parallels between humans and animals, the novel demonstrates how captivity and state necropolitics (electrocution) create an intense intimacy between humans and animals. Thus, constant embranglements are shown between humans and more-than-humans: a "renewal of non/human ethical enmeshment" (Cohen & Duckert 2015: 6):

> He bleats like a goat and yawns like a buffalo. He roars like a tiger and hisses like a snake. He crackles like the pouring rain and flip-flops on the floor like a fish out of water. He raises himself off the floor like a flower in bloom and crashes into the walls like a caged rooster […] The junta has shown him […] Current, that's all he is. Passing through different bodies and lives (156).

Finally, just as Girija Prasad had experienced his body as a conduit of rain between the sky and the earth, Plato experiences electricity as a current, the flux of life itself. Similarly, his mother feels for animals. When Rose Mary arrives in Burma and reaches a temple where she devotes herself to praying for her son's release, she pities the caged birds of the street vendors. She buys the birds for the purpose of setting them free, even though she knows that they have been trained to fly back to the cage soon after. Once she finds herself in front of the Buddha statues, she cannot help praying for the birds and all suffering animals before praying for her own son's life: "Her attempts at praying turn into the obsessive rambling of a madwoman. Injured dogs and birds come before the safety of her son" (177). As a Karen woman, Rose Mary embodies indigenous knowledge: "So much of indigenous and local knowledges resides in the hands of marginalised peoples, especially women, who still live close to the land" (Subramaniam 2024: 72).

In order to bide her time while waiting for her son, Rose Mary tells herself a story about a turtle, who was killed by a fisherman right after she had laid eggs on the beach. The fisherman buried the remains of the turtle in his garden and a tree grew with a tall trunk and no leaves. Thus, the tree became a canoe for the fisherman and, when sailing the seas, the wooden canoe recognised her son, a little turtle swimming. The recognition was mutual and they navigated together, till the fisherman caught the little turtle in a net. Next, the boat capsized in order to set the turtle free. Once the turtle was in danger again, the wooden canoe splintered in order to dive and save his life. By hanging on one of the splinters, he reached a beach and lay there exhausted. When he woke up, he noticed he had been transformed into

a young boy and found his mother, now an elderly woman, nearby, along with a man who was his father:

> Together the three of them lived on the island for a while. After resting, they resumed their journey through the different worlds of land, water and air. One can still see them sometimes, as three waves in the sea, or three trees in a grove, or three birds flying in the sky (192).

This story tells of metamorphosis and interconnected beings and lives. The three realms of land, water, and air are not separate, and living beings can transmigrate from one to another in a fluid existence, with no distinction between inert matter (wood) and animal life (turtle); they both have a will, a strength, and an agency. Vegetal, animal, and human beings are interchangeable in the story and are all related through family bonds. Rose Mary can perceive the kinship and sacrality of things. The imagined story is a premonition of her own encounter with her son, eventually released from prison.

Plato, too, is a hypersensitive character. While experiencing an earthquake in his prison, both his body and the earth – maimed – tremble and shake: "The land, reeling from the horror of having its bones crushed and flesh charred, flings him from wall to wall […] The earthquake leaves him to mend the cracks and nurse his bruises" (176). Torture helps Plato better understand tectonics and the ineluctability of physical laws.

The same laws have allowed a drop of amber to embalm a newborn gecko. Plato finds relief in the gem in his palm. It, too, is the fruit of tectonics, of the fault line, of orogenesis, and of symbiosis:

> The resin dripped from a tree's bark at its own pace, indifferent to the speed of transformation around it […] The resin found a temporary grave in a layer of chalk-like limestone below the soil […] The water's force transformed it from an angular block to a translucent egg. Only an infant gecko remained inside (175).

The gecko finds himself in a golden prison, a precious gem; he travels from prehistory to the future as in a time capsule, intact in his infancy, precious in Plato's eyes, as his own body has also undergone a metamorphosis and is now toothless, with scorched and cascading skin. Thus, he will eventually embrace his mother, outside his prison.

The third chapter/story, entitled "Valley", has Thapa as its protagonist. He is Plato's friend. He managed to help Rose Mary reach Rangoon and he facilitated her reunion with her son. Now, he moves on northwards, to his "home", Kathmandu, the capital of Nepal in the Himalayas, situated along the Bagmati River. The city, with its old and typical architecture, looks precarious. Thapa foresees that "the calamity is a certain uncertainty, the greatest one there ever will be. It links them all […] It is not an earthquake, not a tornado, nor is it a flood – it is all of them. The calamity will swallow all life there is and spit out new specimens" (199).

Thapa is a smuggler; he buys and sells things, both legally and illegally, across borders. Once back there, nostalgia overwhelms him. He lost his family in a landslide. Now he roams

the streets, half disgusted by consumerism and tourism, half fascinated by life thriving as usual in bars, night clubs, shops, and restaurants. He befriends Bebo, a young striptease dancer. With her, he shares the little food he has, her poverty, her misery, and her dreams. Thapa hates the rain: "But they scare him, too, the rains. They breed longings like the damp breeds fungus" (213). Thapa hates the rains, for they bring back memories of the landslide and of his lost family. Once more the weather is charged with agency and is associated with affect. This place, however, is peculiar. Here, tectonic forces unleash metamorphosis after metamorphosis:

> Eventually, deep in the womb of the future, the lakes will give way to a glacier and the glacier to a sea […] Reversing all their failed attempts at evolution – from lake to sea to land to mountain (221).

Here, elemental order might be reshuffled by the temperament of the fault line and its tectonic adjustments. More than that, humans and non-humans share the precarity and intention/tension of it all:

> You peer down into the deepest depths, you can see beyond layers of soil, ice, gravel, sand, rocks and embers. You see the cracks connecting you to the earth's core. And when you do, you cease to be human. You have broken the cycle of births […].
> This land is a complete land. It has its own desert, sea, glacier, rivers, even its own unique sun and rain which it doesn't share with the rest of the world. The elements are the rulers […] The elements are human (226).

The elements that compose the landscape are human. This means that they display volition, intensity, a particular mood, and specific behaviour, but it also means that they are kin and family; they are all there is, "partners in worldmaking" (Cohen & Duckert 2015: 15). In this context, Swarup references elemental ecocriticism. In "Eleven Principles of the Elements", the introduction to *Elemental Ecocriticism* edited by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Lowell Duckert, the editors quote Empedocles:

> The cosmologist, physicist Empedocles (ca 495-435 BCE) argued that all matter consists of four elements in shifting combination: earth, air, fire, water. Held together by chains of love (*philia*), pulled apart through endemic strife (*neikos*), these primal roots (*rhizomata*) are enduring and unstill […] This disharmonious simultaneity of desire and discord includes the human without centering itself around so small a figure (2015: 2-3).

All this resonates strongly with Swarup's novel, where intense emotions (love and strife) are attributed to both humans and non-humans, and where the four elements, within and without human bodies, are all at work for a continuous, creative sympoiesis of possibilities. Both Thapa and Plato continue on their journeys through life, heading northwards to the Indian border. Thapa will visit Tibet, where he will sell his merchandise to Apo, the old

local chief. Somehow, the last story in the novel circles back to the first. But the four stories, or chapters, are looped together by moving geographically along the most active fault line in the world, the one that runs northwards from the Andaman Islands to the Himalayas and the Karakoram mountain range. This fault line is a subduction zone that causes earthquakes of great magnitude: "Subduction zones, as you may know, are intense" (311), claims Girija Prasad. And it is exactly this concept of intensity that characterises the whole novel, which is an example of intensive environmental narrative. As already said, the second story in the series sees a mother, Rose Mary – the Karen woman Girija Prasad and Chanda Devi had hired as a housemaid – travel to Rangoon, the capital of Burma, to look for her own son, who is kept in prison under the military dictatorship. The third story sees this young man, named Plato, and his friend Thapa travelling to Kathmandu and the snow deserts of Nepal.

The setting of the last story, entitled "Snow Desert", is a small village in Changthang, a plateau on the border between Ladakh and Tibet that forms a sharp incline in the Karakoram Mountains (259) – perched in the no-man's-land among the peaks contested by India and Pakistan, along the Indus Valley. The head of the village is Apo, an octogenarian chief and shaman-like figure:

> Apo, the grandfather of the entire village […] at the age of eighty-seven […] Apo knows the lay of this land like the shape of his own being […] Murmuring winds, shapeshifting sands, the pregnant silence of rocks and the sea's ghost were all he had for company. Based on vibrations, Apo can sense nature's fears and dreams, and predict the onset of earthquakes, even avalanches and floods (259, 266).

He becomes infatuated with a very old Kashmiri woman, to whom he speaks broken Hindustani. Once he reaches her home high up on the sloping peak, "Apo is a red-faced baboon, frothing from the gaps between his teeth". For her part, the old woman "speaks so softly, a breeze could fly off with her words, scattering them among the snow peaks of the Hindu Kush" (263). This double portrait of the elderly couple is similar to that of Girija Prasad and Chanda Devi in the first story. Actually, their profile is even more complex, challenging gender clichés: she smokes bidis, drinks alcohol, and has a definite moustache and beard; he wears earrings made of pearls, a necklace strung with coral and turquoise, and numerous rings (271, 275).

Both Apo and the Kashmiri woman share qualities with the non-human animals and the natural elements. Their embranglements will survive in dreams, telepathy, espionage, and occasional meetings and will culminate in a marriage. Once a Buddhist, now merely a wise man, Apo shares with the old woman, a sort of witch, his beliefs about nature, the seasons, the monsoons, fairies, and spirits. She, a Kashmiri Muslim, shares with him her own kind of indigenous knowledge, while they also tell each other their names: Ghazala Mumtaz Abdul Sheik Begum and Tashi Yeshe, called Apo.

Apo has lived various lives in various forms. He survived the impact of the biggest asteroid on earth as a worm; "in the ice ages, he was deeply attached to herd mentality as a woolly mammoth. During the great melt, he grew courage as a whale, leaving land to wade into water" (279). Thus, Apo had lived lives as a microscopic animal as well as a specimen

of megafauna, before living as a man. He now has a walnut tree as a friend, "a dear and old one. Many constellations ago, they were both albatrosses, traversing the desert when it was still an ocean […] Then the earthquakes resumed and the villagers discovered his ability to predict them" (286).

A scientist, more precisely, a geologist named Rana who comes to the mountains with the Indian Army in an attempt to demilitarise the glaciers, looks for guidance and initially finds it in the figure of Apo, who "saved all the villagers' lives during the four major earthquakes that hit this region in the past sixty years" (297). Apo can predict earthquakes; he knows that

> "the Karakorams are tilting […] They are rising up and pushing the Himalayas down. All the mountains in the world have a new king – Kechu. It is just us humans who refuse to accept it."
> "Do you mean K2?" asks Rana.
> "When I say Kechu, I mean Kechu," Apo replies, confused. It is the highest peak in the Karakorams and stands at the edge of the Baltoro glacier.
> Rana is spellbound. In one breath, Apo has summarized an outcome he has been struggling to express, in spite of the evidence.
> "But how can it be?" he asks Apo.
> "When human bloodshed seeps into the cracks of the land, the earth's scabs and wounds cannot heal […] They can only fester. Your violence and your wars are like gangrene to the earth's flesh. You possess gadgets that can take you to the moon, yet you are blind to the mountains and rivers in front of you. You have hacked Hindustan into a hundred islands with our borders, mutinies and wars. It is crumbling into the ocean. The Kechu is rising because the Himalayas are sinking." The scientist has tears in his eyes. Rana comes across as a defeated man. One who has known the truth all along yet lacks the courage to accept it (298).

In the passage quoted above, orogenesis and geological phenomena are described as entangled or embrangled with geopolitical ones. The partitioning of the countries bordering the mountain chains seems to be the cause of the subduction that creates earthquakes and orogeny. It is as if the earth is processing, or shaking off, anthropogenic chaos.

The second source of guidance that Rana finds manifests itself during a fall into a crevasse, where he meets the ghost of his grandfather, his Nana, who has travelled in the form of vapour from the Andamans to the mountains in his becoming-with water, in order to satisfy his scientific curiosity and his love for snow. Girija Prasad is able to discuss with Girija Rana – who is now hanging from a rope tied to his waist, head down, in a dark crevasse – how the Himalayas are growing higher, for "The pressure of the continents colliding gives them greater height" (310). Moreover, the fact that another mountain might become taller than Everest, defying the laws of isostasy, becomes possible because in the Himalayas gravity is uneven and weaker than elsewhere.

The peculiar orogenesis of this chain of mountains also determines other peculiar geophysical characteristics, as the dialogue between Rana and his Nana explains:

> "I'm researching geodetics. The axis of the trans-Himalayan ranges and the western Himalayas, especially the Karakorams, is tilting. I suspect this region is the fulcrum. It began with the Muzaffarabad earthquake in Kashmir, where we saw peaks grow by eight to ten feet. Then the Gorkha series happened, where some peaks experienced an increase or decrease of up to sixteen feet […]"
> "It is apparent that Mount Everest will not remain the world's highest mountain in the next thousand years. Based on the tilt of the axis, we can predict which one it might be. I hope it's Kanchenjunga […]"
> "But for any mountain to grow taller than the Everest, it must defy the laws of isostasy. It is impossible to maintain the equilibrium of the earth's crust in such a hypothesis."
> "The Himalayas are an exception. The pressure of the continents colliding gives them greater height."
> "Unless the gravity is weaker here" (309-310).

Another lesson Rana learns from his grandfather is that "There is no better way to study the mountains than getting down on all fours and scraping the rocks and ice for answers" (308). Once again, crawling on the earth is the best way to know its chthonic and telluric behaviour and temperament. This lesson is similar to the one learned by Akómoláfé during his encounter with the hushes, a way to learn humility and equality with all that exists, against exceptionalism and anthropocentrism:

> I kneel down a respectable distance from the abominable things […] I suddenly know what to do. My skin crawls as I consider it […] I stretch out my finger to touch the body of the first hush. It sluggishly recoils, folding into itself as it secretes droplets of a transparent viscous stuff along the length of its body. I touch the thing, and put the stuff on my tongue – squeezing my eyes as I taste the rank, disgustingly acidic thing go down my throat. While I am overwhelmed by a desire to vomit, I quickly do the same thing again – touching the second hush, causing it to recoil, taking a drop of its stuff on the tip of my finger, and touching my tongue. Don't ask why I did this. It just felt like the right thing to do (Akómoláfé 2017: 194).

In this episode as well as in the previous episode, the two male protagonists renounce oculo-centrism, the power of the knowledge derived from the gaze, and privilege a multisensory experience of the world based on touch and taste, which in turn becomes a scientific method. Crawling is also the simplest way to understand gravity.

The idea that gravity is uneven is correct, because Rana remembers a scientific article by NASA which mapped the earth's uneven gravity, highlighting the Karakorams as a case study. However, on the same topic, Girija Prasad has first-hand knowledge based on his wife's intuition and sensitivity: "I scoffed at your Nani when she accused the fluctuating gravity of burning up her dal and rice on the islands. It took me decades to realize that we lived on a fault line and that gravity was a whimsical force there" (310). Girija Prasad goes on to describe these as some of the "connections and relationships illuminating the most disconnected things" (311), thus emphasising the interconnectedness or embranglements of all things.

Subduction zones are intense, and the scientist, too, is neither a detached observer nor a disembodied mind but is immersed in nature; his mind is "embodied, embedded, enactive and extended" in the experience (Weik von Mossner 2017: 4) of a landscape, an ecosystem, and an orography: "Sometimes, I feel like the ice and winds are trying to say something through me, I am just a voice. An expression. A reflection, twinkling light-years away from its source" (311). Haraway's ideas of kinship and/or sympoiesis (2016: 5) are intensively practised in this novel; the human being speaks with the voice and the language of nature; kinship becomes both the scientific method and the narrative modality of this novel, producing a less human-(self)centric view of life, intensely sensitive to the claims of non-human eco-centred entities. As the ecologist and Indigenous scholar Robin Kimmerer claims, "Science can be a way of forming intimacy and respect with other species that is rivalled only by the observation of traditional knowledge holders. It can be a path to kinship" (Kimmerer 2013, quoted in Subramaniam 2024: 41).

The story ends with a lamb heard bleating in the snowy and stormy night. Both Ghazala and Apo, now officially married and living as a couple, go out in the tempest. Apo slips, but is prevented from falling and helped by a ghost. Sitting down, Apo has a nice chat with the ghost of Girija Prasad, who remembers when his wife, too, heard a goat in the middle of the night. Girija Prasad puts a lamb in Apo's lap, and Apo recognises it as one of his ancestors: "He has come from my tribe's sheepfold to meet my new bride" (322). Ghazala comes in and puts the lamb in a woollen cradle close to the stove. The old couple thus nurture a non-human being. Kinship is thereby reaffirmed once again, while the moon and the sun are together in the sky as a sign of partnership, possibilities, coevolution, and coexistence.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Akómoláfé, Báyò. 2017. *These Wilds Beyond Our Fences*. Berkeley: North Atlantic Books.

Banga, Harjot. 2025. Lanterne nel buio digitale. Riconquistare l'autorità e gli archivi di dissenso di Amitav Ghosh contro la cultura degli influencer. *RiCOGNIZIONI*, 12, 23: 191-205, https://ojs.unito.it/index.php/ricognizioni/article/view/11903 (consulted on 04/04/2026).

Barad, Karen. 2007. *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Clark, Timothy. 2019. *The Value of Ecocriticism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Cohen, Jeffrey J. & Lowell Duckert eds. 2015. *Elemental Ecocriticism: Thinking with Earth, Air, Water, and Fire*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Ghosh, Amitav. 2019. *Gun Island*. London: John Murray Press.

Ghosh, Amitav. 2025. *Wild Fictions*. London: John Murray Press.

Haraway, Donna. 2016. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Kimmerer, Robin Wall. 2013. *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants.* Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions.

Schafer, R. Murray. 1994. *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World*. Rochester: Destiny Books.

Subramaniam, Banu. 2024. *Botany of Empire: Plants, Worlds and the Scientific Legacies of Colonialism*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.
Swarup, Shubhangi. 2018. *Latitudes of Longing*. Noida: HarperCollins India.
Thieme, John. 2025. *Anthropocene Realism: Fiction in the Age of Climate Change*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.
Weik von Mossner, Alexa. 2017. *Affective Ecologies: Empathy, Emotion, and Environmental Narrative*. Columbus: The Ohio State University Press.

Carmen Concilio, Full Professor of English and Postcolonial Literature, is the recipient of the 2021 Canada-Italy Innovation Award. She is a former president of the Italian Association for the Study of Literatures in English (AISCLI). She is the author of monographs and articles on Anglophone postcolonial studies and environmental humanities, migration, diaspora, and digital humanities. Her translations into Italian include works by J. M. Coetzee, I. Vladislavić, Nino Ricci, and other Canadian authors.
carmen.concilio@unito.it