

From Pastoral to Posthuman: Reimagining Nature in Contemporary Indian Fiction of Amitav Ghosh, Shubhangi Swarup, and Sheela Tomy.

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ABSTRACT

Considering *Gun Island* by Amitav Ghosh, *Latitudes of Longing* by Shubhangi Swarup, and *Valli* by Sheela Tomy, this paper seeks to explore the evolving landscapes concerning nature in contemporary Indian fiction through an ecocritical and post-humanist study. Ecocriticism studies the relationship between literature, culture and the physical environment, analysing the representation of and status accorded to nature while presenting human behaviour, culture and perception. Posthumanism suggests that humans are not superior to or separate from nature and their environs. This paper examines the relationship between myth, memory and materiality, correlating them with human action and environmental degradation. Opinions of theorists like Timothy Morton, Rosi Braidotti, Rob Nixon, and Ursula Heise support the study of posthuman reimagining of nature, which suggests that landscapes are not passive acceptors or receptors of change; they react to the exploitative and transformative actions committed by humans. These landscapes are equal stakeholders of history, lament, and transformation.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, post-humanism, environmental degradation, exploitation, myth, materiality.

INTRODUCTION

The Oxford Dictionary defines ecocriticism as an interdisciplinary field of study that analyses how the natural world is portrayed in literature, typically in relation to modern environmental concerns. In simple words, it is the study of how authors treat the concept and subject of nature in their texts. The term “ecocriticism” was coined by William Rueckert in 1978, in his essay “Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism”. Ecocriticism is not only an interdisciplinary study of the environment, literature and human actions, but also suggests corrective ways in which the environmental degradation or harm may be addressed. Ecocriticism aims to grant “place” a position of equality with gender, race and class in literary studies. It also encompasses global environmentalism. “Human beings have, collectively, become a geophysical force capable of determining the course of climate for millions of years” (Chakrabarty 2006).

Indian literature has long embodied the romanticised idea of nature, often studied as pastoral nostalgia, depicting simple and rustic life as comfortable and idyllic. In contrast, urban life was shown as complex and driven by technology. Farming was often idealised as being superior to urban and industrial growth, promoting family farming rooted in community life, where stable relationships were valued. Indian fiction had engaged with nature to establish spiritual reverence for it. However, recent works such as *Gun Island* by Amitav Ghosh, *Latitudes of Longing* by Shubhangi Swarup, and *Valli* by Sheela Tomy have taken a

significant deviation from the established romanticised depiction of nature. It is pertinent to mention the Anthropocene era, as we understand this new and significant shift in perception and portrayal. These works show a literary response to the Anthropocene, climate disruption and present ethically charged ideas regarding ecological trauma. They emphasise the need to decolonise the environmental narratives and stress the multispecies entanglement and mythic memory, simultaneously resisting the romanticised and idealised depictions of nature in literary works. “Posthumanism isn’t posthuman. It’s posthumanist: it’s a call to rethink the human in relation to animals, machines, and the environment” (Wolfe xv). This paper will translate how the three novels challenge the traditional representation of nature in literature. The ethics of post-humanism and multispecies entanglements will be discussed alongside showcasing the ecological trauma vis-à-vis myth, memory and indigenous cosmologies. The aim is to portray the contribution of these novels towards a decolonial environmental discourse within Indian fiction. A detailed interpretative and qualitative analysis based on the texts studied from an ecocritical and posthuman perspective will be presented in the paper.

Lawrence Buell argues that nature is not a mere scenic backdrop for a literary work; it must rather be treated as an active central presence. It is the ethical responsibility of an author to engage with the environmental crisis, maintaining an eco-centric literary imagination. Rob Nixon introduced the concept of “slow violence” – the gradual, invisible harm that disproportionately affects the poor and the underprivileged in society. In his opinion, literature must become a voice for marginalised communities as well as for the ecological injustices, by engaging with not only political but also the temporal dimensions of environmental degradation. Ursula Heise advocates for eco-cosmopolitanism and explores the tension between global ecological consciousness and local ecologies, referred to as “place-based” ecologies. “Eco-cosmopolitanism seeks to balance local ecological knowledge with global environmental responsibility” (Heise 10). Timothy Morton challenges the notion of nature and human life as two separate entities, and propounds the idea of “hyperobjects” like climate change that have a far-reaching impact on the environment and ecology. Rosi Braidotti, in the book *The Posthuman*, published in 2013, talks of “affirmative ethics” reimagining subjectivity where humans are a part of a larger web of life embracing difference, interdependence and the co-existence of multiple species. This calls for literature to go beyond human-centric narratives by exploring new modes of becoming.

Amitav Ghosh’s *Gun Island* (2019) is about the journey from Kolkata to Venice undertaken by Deen Dutta, a quiet academic and rare-books dealer, that unfolds through the legend of a gun merchant, uncanny encounters like the confrontation with the snake goddess Mansa Devi, migration, and capitalism. Ghosh weaves folklore with ecological disruptions, including displacement and the impact of human activity on nature. He feels that literature has fallen short of representing the climate crisis and has wrongly portrayed nature as a sentient and ethically potent entity. Deen Dutta travels from New York to the Sundarbans and then to Venice, investigating a legend linked to a wealthy merchant and Goddess Mansa Devi, and the story unravels mass migrations of animals and humans alike, exploring the consequences of the climate crisis. The theme is particularly relevant here, as this story highlights the conflict between industry, profit, and trade, as represented by the role of the Gun Merchant and the natural world. Deen finally arrives in Venice, which is the location of the legend he was in search of, thus connecting the historical past and the present-day ecological crisis. The author suggests that the challenges of climate change and degradation

can be addressed through cooperation across species and cultures, stressing that human and animal lives are intertwined and co-dependent. *Latitudes of Longing*, the debut novel by Shubhangi Swarup, an Indian journalist and author, explores environmental changes and views nature as a living entity. The reader travels to the Andaman Islands and the Himalayas through the novel's story and witnesses people who are deeply connected to nature. There's a scientist who has a deep connection with the spirit world, and a geologist who can feel the movements of the earth. Landscapes and spirits, thus, become co-narrators of memory and transformation as the book blends science, spirituality and emotion. Sheela Tomy's *Valli* is another fascinating tale that chronicles the life and relationships of the indigenous people of Wayanad. Set in Kerala's Western Ghats, the novelist bemoans the loss of land as she portrays the tribal community grappling with anthropogenic activities like deforestation and land encroachment, resulting in displacement. The novel documents ecological trauma, environmental injustice, and indigenous ecological knowledge and resilience through oral memory, forest lore and resistance narratives.

Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island* represents the study of nature through an eco-critical lens. The journey of the protagonist in this novel highlights the relationship between myths of ancient folklore and modern problems, such as climate change, environmental degradation, ecological collapse, mass migration, and animal extinction. Nature not only becomes a living entity that is sensitive to change, but it is also the protagonist, as the ecocritical focus of the novel relates folklore with urgent environmental realities. Ghosh shows how myths carry messages about nature and human mistakes as he portrays the Bengali legend of the Gun Merchant (Bonduki Sadagar), who was cursed by the goddess Manasa. The myth is traditionally understood as a moral tale that represents nature's power and fury. By using myth in the narrative, Ghosh shows how traditional knowledge can be put to use to solve modern problems. Ghosh criticises the dismissal of the indigenous ecological knowledge by modern man. The serpent is a recurring motif in the novel, representing both danger and sacredness, voicing nature's dual role as vengeful as well as nurturing. Climate-induced migration is another pertinent theme in the novel, as people are forced to leave their homes due to floods, storms, or rising sea levels. The Sunderbans, a tidal forest region in Bengal, is a vulnerable ecosystem, where the rising sea and changing weather make life hard for people inhabiting the area- a scenario that echoes Rob Nixon's concept of slow violence- representing environmental harm that is slow, invisible and which affects the populations disproportionately, the poor being more vulnerable. Deen's own dislocation from ecological belonging is not only physical but spiritual, too.

Ghosh treats the forests, rivers, and myths in the novel with great care and respect- imbued with spirituality. The Sundarbans are like a shrine, and the goddess Manasa represents the power and justice of Nature. Ghosh uses the idea of nature as a spiritual being, which has been a part and parcel of many ancient cultures and civilisations, and the idea aligns with Lawrence Buell's notion of nature being the central, ethical presence. He challenges the modern concept and understanding, according to which nature is something that is to be used or controlled, thus critiquing the commodification of nature by humans. Ghosh's fusion of myth and ecology, where nature is animate and rational, proposes a decolonial environmental ethic. Nature has to be honoured and protected- going against the notions of Western rationalism. Throughout *Gun Island*, Ghosh focuses on Deen's journey from scepticism to faith as he encounters ecological mysteries that science fails to explain. Ghosh blends myth,

migration, and multi-species encounters to propose a more holistic worldview based on reverence and interdependence. *Gun Island* is not only a lesson but a warning that informs the reader that climate change is real and of great concern. The Great Derangement by Amitav Ghosh is a non-fiction work that echoes his lament about the failure of literature to address the catastrophic problem of climate change.

In *Latitudes of Longing*, Shubhangi Swarup challenges the human-centric view of the world as she moves beyond the very traditional portrayal of nature as a passive backdrop. She explores how nature holds memory and is a living entity that witnessed the evolution of landscapes and people; it shapes identity and responds to human actions. The Andaman Islands, the Karakoram and the Himalayas serve as the backdrop landscapes of South Asia, each with a personality of its own, which feels, responds and remembers. Her characters have a deep bonding with the land to which they belong, and their emotions reflect the landscapes around them. Girija Prasad is a scientist who studies tectonic plates and earthquakes, and for him, the earth has energy and emotions. His wife, Chanda Devi, can speak to spirits as well as sense the emotions/rhythms of the Earth, which reflects an animist worldview that considers all nature's beings as sentient. According to the author's portrayal, Science and Spirituality are interconnected and have the capacity to work together. This representation of spiritual ecology by Swarup challenges the Western notions of the separation of nature and culture. In many parts of the novel, her characters treat nature as a relative, a guide and a witness. This is especially the case in the Andaman Islands, where indigenous tribes consider nature as a part of their family or community and honour its spirits. It is in line with the ideas propounded by eco-critics who emphasise the need to learn from the indigenous people how to live in harmony with nature. Swarup's landscapes respond to human actions through silence, grief or renewal; they are not neutral. Each part of the novel carries significance because it explores a different human-nature relationship. In the Karakoram, the desert reflects inner emptiness and a sense of longing. In the Andaman Islands, the forest is a place of healing where people feel a connection. In the Himalayas, the cold mountains make the characters feel isolated and thoughtful.

Swarup's characters live with nature, listen to it, and may even suffer for it, but they don't dominate it. The forests remember pain, mountains echo sadness, and this idea connects with the theory of "slow violence", showing that the novel explores how the forests hold trauma. Swarup has written about places that have been hurt/damaged by history and carry scars of the gradual, invisible environmental degradation and colonial exploitation. She has included voices from the tribal communities who understand nature in certain/special ways, thus challenging the idea that only modern science can explain the world around us. The stories, rituals and local knowledge about nature portrayed in the novel have been significantly represented by Swarup. Swarup writes about the places that were colonised, exploited, and forgotten, for instance, the Andaman Islands were used as colonial prisons and hold the pain of exile and resistance. The story also critiques the impact of modern development, like the roads, dams and tourism, on natural ecosystems. The four interconnected stories set in different landscapes highlight the juxtaposing nature of ecosystems, like the tectonic plates that drift, echo and overlap each other, thus mirroring the complexity of ecosystems. *Latitudes of Longing* is a powerful eco-critical novel that challenges readers to rethink their relationship with the earth through spirituality, geology, and indigenous memory. Shubhangi

Swarup asks us to listen to the Earth, reflect and act responsibly by honouring its stories and legends of the past and imagining new ways of living together.

Valli by Sheela Tomy is a powerful novel set in Kerala's Wayanad region that brings to the readers the story of a tribal community residing in a biodiverse forest landscape, which becomes not only the site of cultural belonging but also suffers ecological violence. The novel documents the lives of a tribal community spanning four generations, which is deeply connected to nature. It has to witness deforestation, displacement and capitalist extraction. The lives of the community are adversely affected as the forest is slowly taken away from them. The trees and forests are home to the tribal community and sacred to them. They are memory keepers. They are the protagonists in the lives of the tribal community in Kalluvayal. Tomy's novel, *Valli*, foregrounds indigenous ecocentrism and challenges pastoral nostalgia, becoming a vital part of Indian environmental literature. The tribals believe that trees, rivers and animals have spirits. Sheela Tomy lets the tribals speak for their sacred beliefs about the forests; the river Kabani, the flora and fauna become narrative agents- speaking for themselves. The novel witnesses the gradual destruction of the forests as timber companies, land developers, and government officials exploit the forests for business and capitalist exploitation. The gradual, invisible destruction of communities and ecosystems becomes evident, which aligns with Rob Nixon's concept of slow violence.

Another significant aspect of the novel *Valli* is the role of women as communicators with nature: they gather herbs, tell stories and perform rituals which sustain ecological knowledge. The struggles of women have a particular bond/interconnectedness with the struggles of nature. The women are as vulnerable to environmental and social violence as nature. Tomy's portrayal of women characters reflects the ecofeminist ideology linking the exploitation of nature with the oppression of women. Thus, to safeguard the environment, it becomes pertinent to understand, listen to and support women, yet the novel does not idealise these women characters; it honours their resistance, strength and grief. *Valli* is a story told through many memories and voices, spanning generations like seeds passed on from one to another. The novel's structure mirrors a dense, branching forest with every grove telling a story, contributing to a collective memory. The loss of trees signifies loss of identity, culture and safety. Tomy's use of Malayalam idioms, tribal expressions, and cultural references creates a literary ecology that can be felt and comprehended by the reader. Her storytelling becomes an act of ecological preservation because many indigenous stories are lost when they are not represented in the voice of the tribals.

An eco-critical study of *Gun Island*, *Latitudes of Longing*, and *Valli* shows that literature has become a significant space for presenting nature in newer ways. As we face climate change, pollution, loss of forests and animals, ecocritical analysis in literature becomes all the more pertinent. Each of the three novels studied in this paper moves beyond pastoral nostalgia to explore nature as alive, responsive, emotional, and deeply connected to human life. Moving beyond the romantic views of nature, these stories present forests, rivers, animals, and mountains as active characters entangled with myth, pain, trauma, memories and wisdom.

The story of Deen Datta in *Gun Island* mixes old myths with modern problems, emphasising ecological exile and spiritual dislocation. Ghosh critiques the failure of modernity to represent climate change, stressing that "the great derangement" lies in the inability of literature to confront environmental catastrophe (Ghosh, *The Great Derangement* 11). Ghosh

shows how nature speaks through animals and disasters. Challenging human exceptionalism, dolphins, snakes, and spiders act as messengers in the story. Deen says, “It was as if the dolphin had chosen to appear to me, to deliver a message” (Ghosh, *Gun Island* 213). Thus, animals are not just symbols; they are messengers, guides and protectors. This multispecies involvement aligns with Rosi Braidotti’s posthuman ethics, which call for recognising nonhuman agency and interdependence.

Moreover, climate refugees in the novel, like Tipu and Rafi, show how climate change hurts, pains and devastates the underprivileged and poor the most. The Sundarbans, when threatened by rising seas and storms, become a poignant symbol of ecological vulnerability. This depiction of climate migration reflects Rob Nixon’s concept of “slow violence,” where environmental harm may be invisible at first and unfolds gradually, but devastates the poor and displaced (Nixon 2). Ghosh writes, “*They were not fleeing war or politics—they were fleeing the sea, the storms, the silence of the land*” (Ghosh 237). Although *Gun Island* is deeply concerned with climate change, it does not treat it as a scientific problem. It shows how ecological trauma affects cultures, bodies and spirits. The Sundarbans, a tidal forest region, have become a symbol of environmental vulnerability and resilience. Kanai explains, “*The Sundarbans are the frontier where commerce and the wilderness look each other directly in the eye; that’s exactly where the war between profit and Nature is fought*” (Ghosh 9).

Shubhangi Swarup’s *Latitudes of Longing* weaves together stories of longing, memory, and ecological consciousness as they cover the Andaman Islands, the Himalayas, and the Karakoram. A scientist (Girija Prasad) who studies seismological changes and a woman (Chanda Devi) who communicates with spirits present a deep bond between science and spirituality, the two sides of a lens through which the Earth is perceived. Swarup writes, “The Earth was not a rock, but a body. It had moods, memories, and desires” (Swarup 5). This geological intimacy helps in understanding land as an emotional entity with its own history. The novel shows how people connect with nature through dreams, rituals and stories. The spiritual standpoint draws from animist worldviews, where forests, rivers, and mountains are not just useful but sacred. Chanda Devi’s connection to spirits reflects indigenous cosmologies that honour nature’s sentience, presented in a poetically layered manner, just like the earth. As she says, “The forest speaks. You just have to listen” (Swarup 47). The novel teaches us to listen to nature and respect its rhythms.

In Sheela Tomy’s *Valli*, one of the characters observes, “The forest remembers everything. It does not forget the blood spilled on its soil” (Tomy 89). The tribals in the novel live in complete harmony with nature. Rituals, oral stories, and everyday practices define a profound respect for the forest as a living entity. The river Kabani, the trees, and the animals are an integral part of a shared existence in the community life. *Valli* says, “My body carries the forest. Its pain is mine” (Tomy 176). This ecofeminist perspective links environmental harm with gendered oppression. Women in *Valli* are especially close to the land. They feel a deep connection with it. But the timber mafias and land developers treat the forest as a profitable commodity, displacing its original inhabitants, leading to the erasure of indigenous voices. “They took the trees, the land, and our stories. What remained was silence” (Tomy 142).

In all three novels, nature has memory, place and voice. It is treated as a protagonist. The dolphins, snakes, forests, and mountains guide and respond to humans. They are part of the

story, not just decoration or a backdrop. The novels respect local beliefs and rituals that honour nature and its power of justice. They show that traditional knowledge is not a myth, but can teach us how to care for the Earth. All the stories also present how poor and tribal communities suffer most when nature is harmed. They lose their homes, cultures, and safe havens. More often than not, they are female characters who protect and remember nature. Their voices are strong and wise. As Chanda Devi says, “The land is not ours to own. It is ours to remember” (*Latitudes of Longing* 63). All three novels reimagine nature as an ethical force. They challenge anthropocentric views and offer posthuman, decolonial, and ecofeminist visions of the Earth.

Posthumanism criticises the focus on humans in literature, philosophy, ethics, culture and society. It challenges us to rethink our place in the world. Humans are not the masters of the universe but a part of the web of life on Earth. *Gun Island* by Amitav Ghosh embraces this shift. It moves away from anthropocentric storytelling. The role of animals in *Gun Island* is one of the most striking posthuman features in the novel. The snake that appears in Venice is not just a serpent but is linked to the myth of the Gun Merchant and the goddess Manasa. Deen says, “*The snake was not just a symbol—it was a presence, a reminder, a warning*” (Ghosh 189). These encounters suggest that animals are vital members of the ecosystem, carrying memory and meaning, aligning with Rosi Braidotti’s view that posthuman ethics must include multispecies co-existence. Myth for Ghosh is not just a fantasy but an ecological memory. The legend of the Gun Merchant became a metaphor for human estrangement from nature as he was cursed by the goddess Manasa. Deen’s transformation from doubt to belief is a powerful portrayal of Nature as a living entity in the story. Deen observes that the modern thinkers missed something highly significant when he says, “*It would seem that the intellectual titans of the Enlightenment had no inkling of what was getting under way*” (Ghosh 221). Thus, Deen’s journey is a posthuman one. He learns to listen, to feel, and to respect the world beyond human control. He starts to accept the non-human world as equally valid and significant as the human one. The legend of the Gun Merchant being central to the novel, the author makes Deen realise that the myth is a meaningful way to understand and resolve modern-day problems like climate change and migration. Deen says, “*The possibility of our deliverance lies not in the future but in the past, in a mystery beyond memory*” (Ghosh 174). He also says, “What if the myth was not just a tale, but a memory of something real—something ecological?” (Ghosh). This connects the significance of studying myth in relation to environmental history. Tipu, a young migrant, says, “The sea is rising. The land is drowning. Where do we go?” This is how Ghosh links human suffering to ecological collapse in the novel. Post-humanist literature challenges the notion of human-centrality in a text. It urges us to rethink the boundaries between the animate (living) and the inanimate (non-living), myth and matter.

In the *Latitudes of Longing*, the author writes, “The mountain did not move, it sighed. Its silence was not emptiness, but memory” (Swarup), which presents the landscapes in the novel as emotional and responsive, supporting the argument that non-human and geological forces have their own narratives. The landscapes in the novel are not inert backdrops. The interconnected stories in the novel are linked to the geologically significant deep time of the Earth. Chanda Devi says, “The spirits of the forest are not gone. They are waiting for someone who still believes” (Swarup). The novel also mentions, “Longing is not only human. The banyan tree waits for its birds. The glacier misses its river” (Swarup). Chanda Devi is a

clairvoyant who is able to connect and communicate with the more-than-human world. She talks with trees, sees the ghosts of Japanese soldiers, and calms elephants, illustrating a deep connection that transcends human-centric senses. There is even a yeti in the novel who seeks human companionship, and a turtle who transforms into a woman. This is a style that blurs the boundaries between the human and the animal world. The novel demonstrates repeatedly that humanity is not in control. Rationalism and colonial knowledge systems are criticised in the novel because they sought to categorise nature.

In *Valli*, the forest in Wayanad is shown as a living entity that carries memory. It remembers the pain and resistance of the tribal community. The inhabitants of the forest, both human (Adivasis) and non-human (animals and plants), are integral to the story, shifting the narrative perspective away from an exclusively human viewpoint. A character says, “The forest does not forget. It holds every footprint, every wound” (Tomy). The tribal people are intimately tied to the land, reflecting a pre-humanist sensibility. Oral histories, folk songs, and lore are incorporated into the narrative scheme of the novel. Women are closely connected to the land. They gather herbs, tell stories, and resist violence. Valli says, “My mother’s voice was the wind in the trees. Her stories still echo in the leaves” (Tomy). A posthuman reading views these storytelling devices as “performance ecologies” that spatially map the memory of the village and its non-human components.

Lawrence Buell, Cheryll Glotfelty, and Rob Nixon have propounded foundational ideas in ecocriticism and environmental humanities, which illustrate the posthuman dimensions of *Gun Island*, *Latitudes of Longing*, and *Valli*. Buell’s belief that “the nonhuman environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence” is integral to the novels under study. “As a literary theory, ecocriticism takes an earth-centred approach to literary studies” (Glotfelty, *Ecocriticism Reader*, p. xix). In *Latitudes of Longing*, the Earth is described as having moods. In the novel *Gun Island*, dolphins and snakes act as agents of ecological warning. In *Valli*, the forest is a sentient witness to memory and resistance. Glotfelty treats nature as a subject with ethical weight, which is reflected in *Latitudes of Longing*, where mountains, glaciers, and forests represent longing, grief, and spiritual presence. Buell has argued that nature is not decorative or symbolic; it is central to literature. “If nature is merely the backdrop against which the human drama unfolds, then the text is not environmentally oriented in any meaningful sense” (Buell, *Environmental Imagination*, p. 7). Rob Nixon’s concept of “slow violence”, the gradual, invisible harm caused by environmental degradation, is described as “A violence that occurs gradually and invisibly... a delayed destruction dispersed across time and space” (Nixon, p. 2), applies significantly and compellingly to all three texts. Nixon also opines, “The environmentalism of the poor is often rooted in memory, in the lived experience of dispossession” (Nixon, p. 17). In *Gun Island*, climate migration and ecological collapse are revealed quietly but painfully. *Valli* portrays the slow erasure of tribal life owing to deforestation and displacement. *Latitudes of Longing* mirrors how colonial and geological histories leave painful scars on landscapes and communities. Buell has mentioned, “Environmental crisis is also a crisis of the imagination... the amelioration of which depends upon finding better ways of imagining nature and humanity’s relationship to it” (Buell, p. 2).

“Postcolonial ecocriticism challenges the colonial legacy of environmental exploitation and reclaims indigenous relationships with land and animals” (Huggan and Tiffin 5). Together, these theorists help us in comprehending how the novels move beyond human-centred story narration to embrace ecological ethics, multispecies agency, and the emotional life of the

Earth itself. Their frameworks highlight the deep entanglement of nature, culture, and memory.

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