

# LATITUDES OF LONGING

Shubhangi Swarup

Analysis by Francesco De Sorbo

Eco-Fiction

Shubhangi Swarup’s novel *Latitudes of Longing* (2018) consists of four interconnected novellas spanning different locations in South Asia. Her work of eco-fiction thematises the entanglement of human emotions, ecological change, and geological time through the representation of natural disasters. In the opening novella, “Islands”, Swarup’s depiction of earthquakes combines magical realism and scientific observation to challenge anthropocentric storytelling and worldviews.

Year of Publication	2018
Publication Place	Delhi
Editor	HarperCollins Publishers India
Entity	The 1941 earthquake

## GEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

### Earthquake The 1941 earthquake

REAL EVENT

Time	26 June 1941 11:52 GMT
Location	The Bay of Bengal, The Andaman and Nicobar Islands India
Coordinates	11.940106, 92.626213
Impacted Areas	The Andaman and Nicobar Islands
Seismic Fault	India-Burma Plate Boundary
Magnitude	8.1 Richter

Typology	<div>Tectonic Earthquake</div> <div>"the largest earthquake along the India-Burma plate boundary since the dawn of instrumental seismology and prior to the 2004 Sumatra-Andaman mega-event" (Okal 2869); Normal-faulting intraslab earthquake (Okal 2869)</div>
Anthropization Level	<div>Correctional Facilities</div> <div>"Part of the cellular jail, a large masonry structure near Port Blair, collapsed along with other masonry structures" (Ortiz and Bilham 3)</div> <div>Cities</div> <div>Port Blair (Ortiz and Bilham 3)</div>
Ecological Impacts	<div>Physical Landscape Changes</div> <div>"Islands in the passage between Little Andaman and South Andaman sank &gt;50 cm based on shoreline submergence and by &gt;1.5 m based on seafloor sounding" (Ortiz and Bilham 3)</div> <div>Soil Changes</div> <div>"Slumping, liquefaction and sand venting were recorded by eyewitnesses"(Ortiz and Bilham 3)</div>
Social Impacts	<div>War</div> <div>"The available information on the 1941 Andaman earthquake is somewhat limited because of the difficulties emanating from a war in which Andaman Island was part of eastern war theater" (Rajendran 981)</div>

Earthquake The 1941 earthquake

LITERARY EVENT

Time	1941
Location	The Andaman Islands India
Impacted Areas	The Andaman Islands
Emphasis Phase	Post-disaster (consequences)
Seismic Risk Ref.	Without reference
Seismic Fault	Burma/Andaman-Sumatra plate sliver
Typology	<div>Tectonic Earthquake</div>
Anthropization Level	<div>Houses</div> <div>Public Buildings And Sites</div> <div>Villages</div> <div>Towns</div>
Ecological Impacts	<div>Physical Landscape Changes</div> <div>Destruction Of Animal Species</div> <div>Destruction Of Plants</div>
Social Impacts	<div>Deaths</div> <div>Destruction Of Facilities</div> <div>Famine</div> <div>Depopulation</div> <div>Trauma</div>

INDIVIDUAL REACTIONS & AFFECTS

Reactions

Name	Rose Mary
Gender	Female
Reactions	<div>Immobility</div> <div>Paralysis</div> <div>Passiveness</div> <div>Astonishment</div> <div>Wonder</div>

### COLLECTIVE REACTIONS & AFFECTS

#### Affects/Reactions

Name	Colonists
Reactions	<div>Astonishment</div> <div>Immobility</div> <div>Paralysis</div> <div>Resignation</div>

Name	Settlers
Reactions	<div>Euphoria</div>

Name	The population
Reactions	<div>Trauma</div> <div>Despair</div> <div>Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder</div>

### Earthquake 1954 earthquake

REAL EVENT

Time	Apr 14, 1954 13:24:53 (UTC)
Location	The Bay of Bengal, The Andaman and Nicobar Islands India
Coordinates	9.944938, 92.859987
Impacted Areas	The Andaman Islands
Seismic Fault	India-Burma Plate Boundary
Magnitude	5.9 Richter
Typology	<div>Tectonic Earthquake</div>

"A strong magnitude 5.9 earthquake occurred in the Andaman Sea 75 km (47 mi) from India in the late afternoon of Wednesday, Apr 14, 1954 at 6.54 pm local time (GMT +5:30). The quake had a shallow depth of 35 km (22 mi)" ("Magnitude 5.0 Earthquake")

### Earthquake 1954 earthquake

LITERARY EVENT

Time	Unspecified
Location	The Andamans India
Impacted Areas	Houses, Settlements and Villages

Emphasis Phase	Disaster (phenomenal and social dynamics), Post-disaster (consequences)
Seismic Risk Ref.	Referenced
Seismic Fault	India-Burma Plate Boundary
Typology	Tectonic Earthquake
Anthropization Level	HousesSettlementsVillagesSea Coast
Ecological Impacts	Destruction Of PlantsDestruction Of Animal SpeciesPhysical Landscape ChangesSoil Changes
Social Impacts	DeathsDestruction Of FacilitiesSocial DisruptionTrauma

INDIVIDUAL REACTIONS & AFFECTS

Attitudes

Name	Girija Prasad Varma
Gender	Man
Native Place	Allahabad
Nationality	Indian
Reactions	AwarenessMitigationAcceptanceAdaptationAnxietyCompensationAwe

Name	Chanda Devi
Gender	Woman
Nationality	India
Reactions	AwarenessMitigationCaution

Reactions

Name	Girija Prasad Varma
Gender	Man
Native Place	Allahabad
Nationality	Indian
Reactions	CooperationEmpathyInterventionPanicDoubtSharing Of InformationRationality

Name	Chanda Devi
Gender	Woman
Nationality	Indian

Reactions	Intervention	Fear	Unease	Escape	Wonder	Pragmatism
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## COLLECTIVE REACTIONS & AFFECTS

### Affects/Reactions

Name	Politicians
Reactions	Intervention

Name	The population
Reactions	Trauma

### Group Attitudes

Name	Elders			
Reactions	Awareness	Mitigation	Adaptation	Awe

Name	Young People				
Reactions	Denial	Disregard	Distrust	Scepticism	Underestimation

## Earthquake 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami

REAL EVENT

Time	26 Dec. 2004 07:58:53 local time (UTC+7)
Location	Indian Ocean Indonesia
Coordinates	3.191461, 95.511632
Impacted Areas	Andaman-Nicobar Islands, but also Aceh (Indonesia), Sri Lanka, Tamil Nadu (India), Khao Lak (Thailand), etc. (12 nations in total)
Seismic Fault	India-Burma plate boundary
Magnitude	9.2-9.3 Richter

Typology	Tectonic Earthquake
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Anthropization Level	Villages
	"“Residential neighborhoods and fishing villages in coastal areas were entirely devastated, and houses were swept inland or out to sea” (Cluff 13)
	Sea Coast
	"Residential neighborhoods and fishing villages in coastal areas were entirely devastated, and houses were swept inland or out to sea. The traditional construction that had resisted shaking damage could not resist the tsunami forces and most were obliterated" (Cluff 13)

#### Agriculture Areas

“They too had lost everything; their entire village had disappeared under the sea; saltwater had invaded their fields and taken away their orchards. They could not contemplate going back, they said; the stench of death was everywhere, and the water sources had been contaminated and would not be usable for years” (Ghosh 16-17)

#### Towns

"Residential neighborhoods and fishing villages in coastal areas were entirely devastated, and houses were swept inland or out to sea. The traditional construction that had resisted shaking damage could not resist the tsunami forces and most were obliterated" (Cluff 2007: 13)

### Ecological Impacts

#### Destruction Of Plants

“They too had lost everything; their entire village had disappeared under the sea; saltwater had invaded their fields and taken away their orchards. They could not contemplate going back, they said; the stench of death was everywhere, and the water sources had been contaminated and would not be usable for years” (Ghosh 2005: 16-17)

#### Physical Landscape Changes

“Evidence of land subsidence was also observed along the other groups of islands between Little Andaman and Great Nicobar—for example, along the Trinket and Kamorta islands [...]. At Trinket Island, due to subsidence, the tsunami waves passed over the land area, giving the appearance of having split the island into two parts” (Malik et al. 556)

#### Tsunami

"The tsunami was up to 100 ft (30 m) high and killed an estimated 227,898 people in 14 countries as far west as South Africa on the other side of the Indian Ocean. The Indonesian city of Banda Aceh reported the largest number of victims, with Indonesia as a whole reporting 131,028 dead" (Goff and Dudley 189)

### Social Impacts

#### Trauma

"The study found that 4.5 y after the 2004 Asian tsunami, a considerable majority of directly and indirectly exposed victims had psychiatric morbidity. PTSD was most common diagnosis followed by depression and anxiety; and in considerable proportions of victims these were comorbid" (Kar et al. 2013: 41)

#### Deaths

#### Destruction Of Facilities

"Partially full storage tanks, bridges, and other light structures that were not anchored to their foundations were not able to resist tsunami forces" (Cluff 2007: 16)

#### Injuries

"The study found that 4.5 y after the 2004 Asian tsunami, a considerable majority of directly and indirectly exposed victims had psychiatric morbidity. PTSD was most common diagnosis followed by depression and anxiety; and in considerable proportions of victims these were comorbid" (Kar et al. 41)

## Earthquake Submarine earthquake

LITERARY EVENT

Time	Daytime [1950-2000]
Location	The Andaman Islands India
Impacted Areas	The Andamans

Emphasis Phase	Pre-disaster (causes / context), Disaster (phenomenal and social dynamics)
Seismic Risk Ref.	Referenced
Seismic Fault	Burma/Andaman-Sumatra plate sliver
Typology	Tectonic Earthquake
Anthropization Level	Sea Coast   Shelters   Facilities
Ecological Impacts	Destruction Of Plants   Physical Landscape Changes Destruction Of Animal Species
Social Impacts	Deaths   Destruction Of Facilities

## INDIVIDUAL REACTIONS & AFFECTS

### Attitudes

Name	Girija Prasad Varma
Gender	Man
Native Place	Allahabad
Nationality	Indian
Reactions	Fatalism   Awareness   Curiosity   Wonder   Fascination Acceptance   Rationality

### Reactions

Name	Girija Prasad Varma
Gender	Man
Native Place	Allahabad
Nationality	Indian
Reactions	Paralysis   Passiveness   Fatalism   Fear   Sadness   Resignation Euphoria   Rationality

## LINGUISTIC & STYLISTIC ANALYSIS

Keywords	"Earthquake" (Swarup 14) "Catastrophes" (15) "Quakes" (77) "Tremors" (78) "Crack" (82, 110) "Aftermath" (110) "Tsunami" (112) "Dust" (77, 136) "Water" (113) "Silence" (113)
Metaphors	"a conflict on the crust – the shell of its existence – leaves its entire being rattled" (77), "sheer blankness" (77) "path of a possessed elephant" (Swarup 77) "subterranean thunders" (110) "it is roof and ground at the same time" (113)

## THE 'SEISMIC POETICS' OF SHUBHANGI SWARUP'S *LATITUDES OF LONGING*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

In her debut novel *Latitudes of Longing* (2018), Indian writer Shubhangi Swarup explores the deep interconnection between human emotion, ecological change, and geological time, merging magical realism with scientific observation. Structured as four interconnected novellas set across the Andaman Islands, Myanmar, Nepal, and the Karakoram, Swarup's eco-fiction investigates the emotional and physical "fault lines" that bind people, landscapes, and histories. The novel's several protagonists, ranging from mystics and botanists to revolutionaries and smugglers, experience longing in its varied forms: for love, belonging, political freedom, and spiritual communion. Through her representation of different environments as well as natural phenomena, such as earthquakes, trees, and glaciers, all characterised as agential entities, Swarup challenges anthropocentric storytelling and offers a model of "ecological fiction" where human lives interlace with the planet's rhythms.

In the first section of her work, "Islands", Swarup portrays several geological phenomena that primarily occur in the Andaman Islands, homeplace of two main characters of the novel: Girija Prasad, a geologist, becomes increasingly absorbed in his scientific work studying the islands' unique geological formations, while his wife, Chanda Devi, experiences spiritual and emotional encounters with the island's nature and spirits, as she struggles to conceive a child. From a thematic perspective, the first section establishes the novel's central preoccupation with how geography and geology may influence human relationships and emotions. Furthermore, it sets up the broader themes that will unfold throughout the book's interconnected stories, spanning different locations and time periods.

The narrative setting further reinforces these themes. From a geophysical perspective, the Andaman Islands are part of the Andaman-Nicobar Ridge, which forms part of the outer arc ridge of the northern segment of the Sunda subduction zone. Here, the Indian plate subducts towards the east below the Burma plate, causing significant seismic activity (Rao et al. 49). The consequent seismicity of this area allows Swarup to exploit the themes of earthquake and tsunami to interweave geographical and geological knowledge with reflections on existence, trauma, and loss. In this respect the novel seems to reflect and expand the critical view of scholar Pallavi Rastogi, who, in *Postcolonial Disasters* (2020), argues how "genre fiction can narrate catastrophe seriously" (42), despite the influence of "pedagogical demands" (42). Essentially, Rastogi maintains that the sheer force and urgency of sudden disasters often overwhelms the normal storytelling process: instead of taking time to develop nuanced narratives, writers respond with quicker, more direct forms that can capture and convey the immediate impact of the catastrophic event, which "often short-circuits any evasion, or even diversion, possible through form and style" (43). Aesthetical experimentations as well as reflections on broader themes can be therefore hindered by the representation of catastrophes. On the contrary, in *Latitudes of Longing*, the disaster's "eventfulness" (42) combines with the novel's thematic, linguistic and symbolical features.



## 2. THE 1941 EARTHQUAKE

The 1941 earthquake that struck the Andaman Islands was "the largest earthquake along the India-Burma plate boundary since the dawn of instrumental seismology and prior to the 2004 Sumatra-Andaman mega-event" (Okal 2869). However, available information on the event remains limited due to the historical context in which it occurred. Indeed, the region was embroiled in warfare, as the Andamans constituted a British colonial settlement and had become part of the eastern war theatre (Rajendran 981). This context partly explains the scarcity of sources documenting the earthquake's social impacts, as geologists acknowledge that "the reporting and recording of natural phenomena assumed a low priority, and in some cases were deliberately suppressed" (Ortiz and Bilham 3). Swarup's novel offers insightful suggestions regarding the reasons behind this silence. In other words, the novel tries to overcome what in the field of *Critical Disaster Studies* have been defined as "disaster gaps" (Scott Parish 135). Disaster gaps are disrupted networks of knowledge between official discourses and the experience of the affected communities in the aftermath of such events, which, in the present case, have been to some extent silenced for historical reasons.

In *Latitudes of longing*, the 1941 tectonic earthquake is represented as a mighty force capable of cracking and splitting the surface of islands, whose astonishing reach is conveyed through apocalyptic tones within the text. This image is first recalled by the post-traumatic memories of Mary Rose, a member of the Karen Community who helped the Prasad's family and was an eyewitness to the 1941 seismic event. While travelling to Burma in the second section of the novel, Mary remembers having "seen mountains crumble into dust and seas rise higher than peaks. She has seen corals grow on trees and trees grow out of corals. She has seen noon turn into night when the earthquake hit the Andaman Islands" (Swarup 136). In her memories, the earthquake is thus recorded as an event capable of violating the very laws of nature, plunging the whole island into chaos.

Mary's utter bewilderment is counterbalanced by the harsh truths emerging in the post-disaster morphology of the islands. The violence of the earthquake has reduced the Andamans to a "speck" (43), sinking the "majority of the island" (43) toward the "seafloor" (43) while also "tilting the rest towards the oblivion" (43). This latter emphatic noun construction is not, however, inserted for mere sensational effect. Geological evidence shows that the ground underwent "slimping [...] and sandification" (Ortiz and Bilham 3), while "Islands in the passage between Little Andaman and South Andaman sank >50 cm based on shoreline submergence and by >1.5 m based on seafloor sounding" (3). Moreover, this kind of geohistorical attention is also present in Swarup's report of the damage to colonial facilities and penal structures near Port Blair, which "collapsed along with other masonry structures" (3). This latter element is then exploited by Swarup to expose the fragility of imperial power structures. In a short passage, the narrator ironically remarks how the earthquake hitting Port Blair "would mock all its colonial constructions, splitting the very island the British headquarters sat on in half" (14-15), while the headquarter bungalow "too, would come down and the machan would slip off the mountain as if it stood on a banana peel" (15).

The seismic event is also defined as "harbinger of bigger catastrophes" referring to the jointed devastating effects of WWII and the earthquake. With a specific focus on the situation after the disaster, the novel problematizes the role of political institutions in managing the crisis and their readiness in dealing with the emergency fostered by the earthquake. For instance, the governmental forces appear unwilling to help the population during the crisis, dedicating their efforts to warfare and the maintenance of their political hegemony. Indeed, no resilience plans or strategies are mentioned. The narrator points to the very opposite, even hinting at how the post-disaster condition could provide ample opportunities for the invading Japanese army to reinforce their grip on an already weak and starved population: "While the British viewed the destroyed bungalow as a pack of cards strewn across the lawns, the Japanese saw in it an opportunity" (15). In such a way, Swarup's portrayal of the 1941 earthquake in the Andaman Islands exposes how the risks of living in regions prone to seismic hazard can be enhanced by the same institutions which should mitigate the possible risks, especially when military and political reasons are put ahead of the citizens' safety. More subtly, though, *Latitudes of longing* questions whether a political imperialistic power has any real interest in the safeguarding of its subjects and its territory. This idea plainly emerges in the novel when the narrator reports that the Japanese army preferred to build *bunkers* and not, for example, hospitals, while the British were already used to mistreating the inhabitants of what was for them an effective penal

colony. The whole tragedy of this situation and the absence of any humanitarian feelings are ultimately reinforced on a linguistic level. The zone of impact of both the 1941 seism and WWII bombings is defined as a "no-man's land" (16), a wasteland in which human settlements, as well as wild natural environments, are reduced to "dust" (16).

The recurring image of dust is not only effective in representing the materiality of debris but also works on a symbolic level to connote the destiny of the forgotten victims. Indeed, the victims of what appears, in truth, a hyper-disaster, are represented as ghosts. Much similarly to dust, which invisibly occupies entire spaces, especially the overlooked and uncared ones, these ghosts infest the islands and are trapped in an obsessive repetition of their last performed occupations before they died because of the earthquake and the bombings. Quite ironically, the inhabitants of the Andamans ignore the fact that they are living in a haunted landscape, as Chanda Devi is the only character capable of perceiving ghosts. Therefore, most of the population carries on their daily business largely unaware of what both the earthquake and the war meant for the Andamans in terms of loss and how they shaped the islands. On a figurative level, the ghosts of the victims embody the unacknowledged traumatic past that continued to haunt Andaman society even during the postcolonial period. In a sense, both the ghosts and "the living" (43), that is, the survivors, experience a fragmented reality, since neither of them are capable of reconnecting with that part of their life that will lie forever "upon the seafloor" (43). Consequently, it is not only the physical geography of the Andamans that is cracked, in both its natural and urban components, but also the emotional, interior landscape of its inhabitants as well as their history and collective memory.

### 3. THE 1954 EARTHQUAKE AND ITS FICTIONAL AMPLIFICATION

Occurred in the Andaman Sea 75 km (47 mi) from India in the late afternoon of Wednesday, Apr 14, 1954 ("Magnitude 5.0 Earthquake"), this earthquake was not a major event and has received little attention from seismologists. Geological research has instead concentrated on other significant tectonic events in the region, such as those of 1881 or 2004 ("United States Geological Survey"). Nevertheless, the representation of the 1954 earthquake plays a crucial role in the events narrated in *Latitudes of Longing*. It is indeed the first geological phenomenon whose dynamics are narrated in detail. This allows Swarup to explore a broad spectrum of characters' different attitudes toward seismic risk, through an amplified version of the earthquake, which even features the representation of tsunamigenic tidal waves.

The novel dramatises different degrees of awareness to seismic risks according to the socio-cultural status of each character. For example, the scientist Girija Prasad demonstrates profound awareness, thanks to his advanced education in Natural Sciences. Moreover, Prasad is not only aware of the region's seismicity, but Prasad also appears eager to pass his knowledge to others, educating his family and the islanders on how to behave correctly during emergencies and how to avoid perils. Indeed, the text clearly states how "[h]e has never missed a chance to educate her [daughter] about the impact of the earthquake" (86), deeply convinced that "What happens every few hundred years can happen again tomorrow" (86). Quite interestingly, his acceptance of risk and his consciousness about the daily hazards present in the Andamans is shared by the older generations of Indigenous communities, who have learned to live with their tilting land. This fact suggests how both scientific and Indigenous epistemologies can sustain complementary understandings of environmental precarity. However, even though Indigenous communities of the islands have attempted to transmit their knowledge about seismic activities, their teachings, similarly to those of Prasad, have not been received effectively. The younger generations seem indeed unwilling to learn about earthquakes from either a scientific or an indigenous perspective. This is visible in the words of scorn said to Prasad's daughter, who dismiss the scientist's teachings, claiming he is "crazy" (87) to believe to the theory of plate tectonics (87), but also in the younger generation's disinterest in "their parents' stories and ancestral myths as all tales born from the imagination of fools" (77).

Another singular example of an attitude toward seismic risks is constituted by the bodily experiences of Chanda Devi. Shamanic and intuitive in her relationships with the world (Devi can communicate with trees and perceive ghosts), Chanda Devi seems also able to perceive earthquakes, as she shows in the case of the 1954 event: "I knew something was wrong. I could feel tension rise from the ground as I stood in the garden. I knew it would not be placated easily" (79). Her words reveal an embodied

seismic awareness that operates through immediate, pre-rational recognition. The fact that she knows the earthquake's arrival without logical deduction positions her body as a natural seismograph capable of registering geological stress through physical sensation. Furthermore, the animistic language choice of the word "placated" hints at a conception of seismic forces not as mechanical processes but as 'living entities', demonstrating how her intuitive capacity extends beyond human perception to include geological phenomena as part of the natural world. Nonetheless, her character also features more ordinary characteristics, such as realistic descriptions of corporeal responses to disasters, which trigger states of panic and anguish, manifested through tremors and tears, as she is "sobbing and sweating" (78) before Prasad finds her in the garden outdoors. More importantly, though, her prompt flight behavior testifies how a mindful attitude toward our surroundings can enhance an effective response, improving the chances of surviving a disaster. Indeed, Chanda Devi says she saved herself because: "I rushed up. I remember what you told me – to look out for falling trees, walls, and objects when tremors hit the island" (79).

Overall, Chanda Devi's quasi-mystical and inexplicable relation to nature echoes another important theme in the novel: the abandonment of monolithic conceptions of the planet and life upon it. *Latitudes of Longing* emphasises the interconnection and interdependency of the entire world, challenging conventional understandings of geographical boundaries. Indeed, it will be "the second largest recorded [earthquake] since the invention of the seismograph" (77) to exhibit the porous borders between water and land and destabilizes naïve geological conceptions, despite some characters' refusal to acknowledge that "the islands are mountains and all continents are islands" (87). Through this geological revelation, the novel demonstrates how catastrophic events expose the fundamental interconnectedness that underlies apparent geographical as well as conceptual separations, such as the dichotomy 'land' vs 'water'. In the upscaled version of the 1954:

[It took o]ne minute, for the ocean bed to collapse and rise like a phoenix. No one on the islands recalls how the earth moved—a minute when the ghosts of land and ocean gave in to the struggle. Under the land's pressure, the ocean slipped further down, only to spring back with twice the force. In the life of a planet, it is a rare moment when a conflict on the crust—the shell of its existence—leaves its entire being rattled. The earthquake of 1954 goes down as the second largest recorded since the invention of the seismograph. [...] The ones who survived are forever trapped in that minute, one of sheer blankness. It isn't presence of mind that has betrayed them. Nor is it a loss of memory. It is a failure of imagination. No one could have imagined that the solid ground that held the islands, the ocean, the reefs, the forests, the rivers, would be ripped apart in less than a minute. Centuries of wilderness and civilization would crumble into clouds of dust, as vulnerable as an anthill in the path of a possessed elephant. In some places, cliffs crashed into the ocean, like icebergs breaking off from the poles. [...] On the shores, boats crumpled into the water as if they were made of paper. Macaques, birds, deer, elephants, dogs united in a wave of noise. The human voice went unheard. In a minute, the ocean bed had jumped up, spewing layers of sediment, coral and sand in the air. The islands tilted by a few metres, drowning forests and farms. Rice fields, yet to be harvested, would become the future playing grounds of sea cows, dolphins, crocodiles and rays. No one would light the torch in the lighthouse on the archipelago's tip again, for the ocean had claimed its entrance. (76-77)

On a semiotic level, what was till that point conceived as simply *terra firma* has now become a new hybrid and fluid environment, after the tidal waves produced by the upheaval of the ocean basin have flooded forests and fields, transforming the islands' morphology. The strangeness of this new environment is evoked on a linguistic level, as the text is rich in figurative language challenging what the text describes as a possible 'failure in imagination'. Quite interestingly, the novel's representation of this "oceanic disaster" (Rastogi 46) heavily relies on what can be defined as 'water-imagery'. First, the text renders the idea of the ocean and land as working as a unique fluid entity, which redesigns the profile of the landscape through its wave-like movements, signalled by motion verbs like 'collapse,' 'rise' and 'jump'. Second, the tectonic origin of the quake is described as coming from the earth's 'shell', which is then compared to a mollusc, a metaphor that dissolves the boundary between geological and biological systems, positioning the earth as a living organism rather than inert matter. Third, the seaquake's disruptive force is conveyed through similes related to water, such as 'cliffs

crushed into the ocean, like icebergs breaking off from the poles' or, in a later passage, "the earthquake leaves behind a gaping crack [...] like a seasonal stream" (Swarup 82). These aquatic analogies function as tropes apt to blur ontological separations, suggesting that geological stability is itself contingent and that catastrophic transformation follows natural patterns of flow and change.

This blurring of the borders between the land and the ocean caused by the 1954 seaquake also challenges any rational attempt to make sense of the event. This aphasic shock strikes both the population and Prasad, who remain stuck in horror and are overwhelmed by the apocalyptic scenario in front of them. Differently from the animals, which are 'united in a wave of noise, the human voice went unheard'. From a textual perspective, the difficulty of processing the disaster is conveyed by the novel's preference for bestial imagery (e.g. 'phoenix' and 'possessed elephant'). This choice appears more suitable for defining some of the earthquake's more frightening aspects, such as its recurring nature and its chaotic trampling power, rather than technical aspects such as the magnitude or the fault's morphology, which are omitted. The bestial metaphors thus prioritise experiential and phenomenological representation over scientific discourse, emphasising the disaster's impact on human consciousness rather than its geological mechanics.

Accordingly, Prasad's scientific mind fails to comprehend the totality of the tragedy. He cannot even find "adjectives that can somehow alleviate the horror by articulating it" (79). As the helicopters fly over the islands "for the first time since World War II" (79), Prasad and Devi look at the destruction brought about by the earthquake: "all the phone and electricity lines are mangled" (79), "the road [...] would be damaged in so many parts that the government would be forced to start afresh" (80). However, Prasad's shock goes beyond infrastructural damages, revealing a profound ontological crisis. What appeared to be the land of men, the place in which they could indiscriminately exert their control, is now a belief soon washed away by the coming of the earthquake. In this way, the 1954 disaster exposes the illusory nature of human dominion over the natural world, collapsing the anthropocentric assumption that land exists primarily as a domain for human habitation and control. As Prasad himself darkly concludes: "everything here, including the sea, belongs to the ocean and will be claimed in due course" (88), a recognition that is uncannily foreshadowed by the image of "[b]lind, colorless, shrimp-like creatures of the deep sea, thrown out by the earthquake" (88).

#### 4. THE FICTIONALISATION OF THE 2004 EARTHQUAKE AND TSUNAMI

The 2004 undersea "mega-thrust earthquake" (Rao et al. 249), and the subsequent tsunami, which devastated the shores of India, Indonesia, Thailand and Sri Lanka, are undoubtedly among the most dramatic events in the recent history of South Asia. With a moment magnitude measured between 9.2 and 9.3, the catastrophe occurred on the 26th of December and annihilated most of the coastal environments present in the Andamans. The quake also wiped out entire urban settlements: "Residential neighborhoods and fishing villages in coastal areas were entirely devastated, and houses were swept inland or out to sea. The traditional construction that had resisted shaking damage could not resist the tsunami forces and most were obliterated" (Cluff 13).

Swarup's novel does not explicitly connect the earthquake and tsunami recounted at the end of the first section to the 2004 disasters, but such a connection can be considered plausible. Given the setting of her novel and considering the significance of the Boxing Day Tsunami for South Asian history, it appears reasonable to assume that the real catastrophe may have inspired Swarup's representation. Indeed, the scale of the event was astounding: "[t]he tsunami was up to 100 ft (30 m) high and killed an estimated 227,898 people in 14 countries as far west as South Africa on the other side of the Indian Ocean" (Goff and Dudley 189). At the same time, the prolonged effects of the disaster upon the population have been documented by medical surveys. South Asian communities experienced a lack of food, clean water, and medical assistance for several days after the catastrophe, due to the huge damage to public facilities and infrastructures (Cluff 16). In this humanitarian emergency, a large proportion of Asian tsunami victims have been exposed to unimaginable prolonged stress and pain. This caused them to suffer from long-term mental health problems, such as anxiety symptoms, depression and PTSD (Kar et al. 41).

Reading Swarup's representation of the submarine earthquake in the light of the 2004 oceanic disaster offers meaningful reflections that can deepen our understanding of the real disaster. Her work

complements the data produced by non-fictional sources by focusing specifically on the individual dimension of the tragedy. Official sources and media reports, along with survivors' testimonies, often avoid detailing, or simply cannot reconstruct the victims' deaths and their final thoughts and feelings. In contrast, Swarup's novel stages precisely this overlooked dimension of the disaster, depicting the death of Girija Prasad as he is swept away by the force of the tides. *Latitudes of Longing* thus highlights one of the most dramatic aspects of the disaster: the harrowing possibility that victims may have been forced to confront their mortality within the brief span of twenty minutes, the time it took for the waves to reach the shore from the epicentre.

In this context, the individual confrontation with mortality is not merely a secondary aspect but becomes particularly significant when considered alongside the broader atmosphere of devastation that engulfed the Andamans. For instance, world-acclaimed writer Amitav Ghosh reports in one of his journalistic accounts written in the field that death became suddenly omnipresent. The farmers he interviewed were among the most severely affected communities in the Andamans since their flooded fields could not be recovered in short periods and were therefore deprived of their means of sustenance. In their accounts, they reported that their lives seemed doomed, as "the stench of death was everywhere" (Ghosh 17). This sense of defamiliarisation brought about by the earthquake was also reinforced by the ravaged landscapes. Geologists documented that "[e]vidence of land subsidence was also observed along the other groups of islands between Little Andaman and Great Nicobar—for example, along the Trinket and Kamorta islands" (Malik *et al.* 556), with macroscopic changes that distorted survivors' perception of their homeland. For instance: "At Trinket Island, due to subsidence, the tsunami waves passed over the land area, giving the appearance of having split the island into two parts" (Malik 556).

The last seaquake represented in Swarup's novel is narrated from the point of view of the naturalist Girija Prasad, who witnesses the arrival of the tidal wave during a research expedition on the Andaman's coastal area. After the burst of what he defines as "subterranean thunders" (Swarup 110), when "the earth falls back into slumber as swiftly as it had woken" (110), Prasad suddenly sees "the bunkers fly up" (110). For him, the earthquake is then something sudden, like a thunder, but which produces clear macroscopic events and destroys constructions that were supposed to resist bombings or an assault during a war. The situation is, however, worse than what the damages to the urban landscape might reveal. As much as thunders anticipate rain, those outbursts in the earth's depth will cause Prasad's past fears to become reality: the earthquake has triggered a tsunami.

Despite his dreadful predictions, his reaction to the seismic event does not trigger an immediate response but shows instead a complex affective spectrum along different behavioural strategies. On the one hand, his geological expertise offers him a clear analysis of what is about to happen. Prasad can indeed "smell the odour of low tide from distance (111)" and infers that "based on the volume and distance of the ocean's recession [...] a tsunami should hit the beach in ten to fifteen minutes" (112). However, it is his very knowledge that plunges him into a state of shock, which he tries to shake off, thinking rationally about a plan to save his life. Prasad realizes that he is stuck with a puzzling problem: "he could either sprint back to the beach's edge, begin climbing Mount Harriet and crawl up a tree - an ideal vantage point. Or he could walk straight in" (112). While the verbs employed, such as "sprint", "climb", "crawl" and "walk" are all motion verbs, the meaning of the first three of them highlights the physical effort these actions require. However, the last, i.e. "walk", plainly exposes how Prasad's careful planning cannot be carried out, as the man is now too old to sustain the flight.

Lacking any possibility of saving his life, Prasad is forced to confront his imminent death. His thoughts turn to the loved ones he has already lost and to those he will never be able to embrace again after that day, like his grandnephew. Yet simultaneously, Prasad experiences a profound sense of wonder. Specifically, this emotional state embodies the marvel of a passionate scientist, arising from what Prasad perceives as the privilege of having front-row seats to witness the approaching tsunami:

"for how often does a man get to peer into a thriving ocean floor minus the ocean, even though it will go undocumented? This is a moment to be savoured, down to every cell and atom. Mid-ocean, the tsunami can only be experienced as an extraordinary undulation. It is on sloping beaches such as this one that it arrives in its full glory: destructive and dramatic" (112).

Along these lines, the text presents a description of the seaquake rendered through solemn tones that elicit a sublime effect of *delightful terror*. Prasad states that the terrible beauty of this event cannot be grasped mid-ocean, when no macroscopic events are visible, meaning that the sublime aspects of the ocean's fury require an observer risking his life. More plainly, though, Prasad stresses that the 'destructive and dramatic' connotations of the phenomena are provided by the presence of victims: in this case, himself. This dramatic, yet epic, dimension is also reinforced by how the quake is said to shake the entirety of the Andaman's seascape. For instance, the undersea earthquake has caused an unstoppable cascade of falling trees, which "use one another as crutches to break the fall" (111).

As the *terra firma* is wounded by the seism and begins to collapse on itself, "opened like an eggshell" (110), the oceanic environment suffers from analogous distortions, which the narrator describes as if "the ocean has withdrawn into its shell" (111). By consequence, "the force of the receding currents has created a strange universe. It has pushed an octopus, a pipefish, a tiger prawn, and a sea urchin into an inextricable embrace. Predator and prey lie hopelessly tangled" (111). Here, the reference is to the perception of the sea's recession before the arrival of the tsunami's tidal waves. On the one hand, this phenomenon has a rational explanation: the earthquake displaces massive amounts of water, which initially draws back from the coastline as the ocean floor shifts and water rushes to fill the void created by the seismic activity, before returning as the devastating tsunami waves. On the other hand, the ration explicability does not diminish the apocalyptic tone which characterises the narration. This doom-like representation is even reinforced by the portrayal of animal behaviour, which reflects the urge to express something that escapes verbal communication and human language, stressing "the truth that is about to arrive" (112). After the submarine earthquake, even language seems to plummet into crisis, becoming unable to articulate meaning in this soon-to-be-submerged world, where the plate dynamics have caused the ocean to rise so high that it has become "roof and ground at the same time" (113).

Remarkably, at the end of his life, Girija Prasad does not just appear as a passive figure caught up in the events. In a dramatic act of courage, Prasad confronts the fury of the elements and walks in the water, willing to accept this final change, with all the pains it entails. He discovers he has been preparing for this very moment for a long time, gradually recognising the change brought not solely by ageing, but by the ocean itself. Just right before his final act of 'becoming part of the ocean', his mind goes to the day he lost his wife forever, a personal catastrophe that wracked his interior landscape years before the tsunami. Suddenly, he realises how his losses have prevented him from crying ever since. Now, approaching his 'death-by-water', he feels finally free. He cries, he experiences an erection, and he laughs at the oddity of the event. While he is holding tight to the love for his deceased wife, the narrator comments how the water carries him away, along with "the islands, their civilizations, the corals, the ocean. Only silence will remain" (113).

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

Through her literary treatment of the 1941, 1954, and 2004 seismic events in the Andaman Islands, Swarup demonstrates how geological disasters function as structural elements that extend beyond conventional settings and themes used as pedagogical tools. The novel's chronological progression, from the historically neglected 1941 earthquake through the narratively expanded 1954 seaquake, to the experientially rendered 2004 tsunami, reveals how tectonic forces operate as narrative devices that shed light on human knowledge systems, colonial structures, and existential assumptions. By incorporating scientific discourse, indigenous knowledge, and phenomenological experience, Swarup constructs a narrative framework that reflects the geological instabilities it depicts, where personal trauma and social as well as environmental disruption intersect within moments of crisis and longing. Her approach to the representation of seismic phenomena challenges anthropocentric literary conventions by positioning geological processes as active elements in human experience and suggesting that terrestrial movements constitute not merely external events affecting human subjects but integral aspects of collective memory and cultural interpretation.

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