



THE GEOGRAPHY OF LONGING: TRANSNATIONALISM AND HISTORICAL MEMORY IN SHUBHANGI SWARUP'S LATITUDES OF LONGING

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Abstract:

Shubhangi Swarup's *Latitudes of Longing* intricately explores the theme of transnationalism, depicting the intersection of geography, identity, and historical memory. The novel weaves together multiple narratives set in different geographical spaces—India, Nepal, Bangladesh, and the Andaman Islands where characters grapple with the legacies of colonialism, migration, and the search for belonging. Through these interwoven stories, Swarup highlights how personal and collective histories transcend national borders, reflecting the complexities of postcolonial identity. The concept of "longing" in the novel is not merely emotional but geographical, where individuals' desires for connection and understanding echo across the boundaries of nations and cultures. The novel's portrayal of historical memory, marked by colonial histories and cultural dislocation, shows how these pasts shape the present in a transnational world. By examining the interplay of migration, historical trauma, and emotional distance, the paper attempts to explore that the novel, *Latitudes of Longing* serves as a literary exploration of transnationalism, where memory and identity are fluid and constantly redefined in the face of global histories. The geographical settings of the novel are not just backdrops but active forces that shape the characters' lives, urging readers to reconsider the boundaries between the local and the global.

Key Words: Transnationalism, Historical Memory, Postcolonial Identity, Migration, Longing, Cultural Hybridity, Global Histories, Shubhangi Swarup, *Latitudes of Longing*.

The novel *Latitudes of Longing*, written by Shubhangi Swarup is divided into four parts, namely: 1. Islands 2. Faultline 3. Valley 4. Snow Desert. The first part, *Islands*, is about an Indian scientist, Girija Prasad and his clairvoyant wife, Chanda Devi and their life in the Andaman Island colony in the late 1940s. Their arranged marriage gradually turns out as a love story. After a year of their marriage, the couple eventually meet their maid, Rose Mary, where the plot moves to Burma.

Faultline, the second part of the novel, is set during the period 1975 in Burma and provides the background of Rose Mary, her abusive husband and the son she was forced to give up as baby. Twenty-three years later, her son, self-named Plato, is imprisoned for being a communist revolutionizer at Rangoon University. Plato gets help from his friend Thapa, to retrieve his mother from the Andaman Island so that they can meet, and she can help him out of prison.

The third part, *Valley* deals with Thapa, Plato's friend and his exploration through the streets of Thamel, Kathmandu around 1980 to smuggle drugs across the Himalaya. He interacts with Bebo, a bar dancer who is much younger than him. The final part of the novel, *Snow Desert*, is set on Ladakh, on the Tibetan Plateau. Eighty-seven-year-old Apo roams on the mountainside and he meets Ghazala, an old Kashmiri widow. The novel concludes with interaction between the Girija Prasad, who appears as a ghost and meets his grandson, Rana. Ghost of Girija Prasad completes the loop between past, present and future.

Swarup has used multiple narrative techniques to highlight how people are transformed by one another. She has used flashback, flashforward, lyricism and stream of consciousness techniques in the novel. She has included the themes of love, longing and silence in her novel.

The concept of transnationalism, refers to the idea of people, ideas, or businesses connecting across national borders, creating relationships and networks that go beyond a single country. It emphasizes maintaining ties with multiple nations, cultures, or communities. Transnationalism can involve migration, trade, or communication, where individuals or groups engage in activities or identities that span several countries, rather than just one. "A transnational perspective on migration is increasingly relevant due to the forces of globalization and their impacts on mobility. It is now easier than ever to be connected to two or more realities across national borders." (Migration and transnationalism) The novel's multifaceted approach to transnationalism is grounded in its exploration of postcolonial identity, particularly through the lens of historical memory. Characters in the novel find themselves trapped between multiple worlds: a colonial past, a nation-state that is still negotiating its postcolonial identity, and a globalized present in which borders are increasingly porous yet still deeply political.

The concept of transnationalism in the novel is not just geographic but also emotional and psychological. The characters' longing and yearning transcend borders, whether physical or emotional. The title of the novel, evokes a sense of geographical and emotional distance, suggesting the fluidity of identity in a postcolonial world shaped by migration, displacement, and longing. The notion of longing, therefore, becomes a vehicle for understanding how transnational identities are formed and transformed in the aftermath of colonialism. "Standing there, Girija Prasad felt like an ant, shuffling around tempted by the impossible" (Swarup 10).

Swarup's *Latitudes of Longing* introduces a variety of characters who move across borders, yet their stories reflect an underlying sense of geographical and emotional entrapment. Transnationalism here is not merely a reflection of physical movement between nations but a more profound exploration of how migration, colonization, and displacement affect identity.

Transnationalism further complicates the discourse on cultural identity by emphasizing the interconnectedness of global movements and exchanges. It examines how people, ideas, and cultures transcend national boundaries, leading to the formation of transnational identities. In *Sea of Poppies*, the characters' journeys from India to various parts of the world, driven by the forces of colonial trade, exemplify this transnational experience.

Ghosh's narrative illustrates how these transnational encounters challenge traditional notions of belonging and identity, as the characters navigate multiple cultural affiliations and adapt to new social contexts. (Lt. Dr. S. Ravibalan 132)

Each character's journey is marked by a search for meaning and belonging, as they grapple with their historical and cultural inheritance. "These collective stories deepen the understanding of the eternal longing suffered by the people, their ghosts, and the planet. Humans long for love, food, and freedom. Ghosts long to die again or live again, and the planet longs for eternal change across its many latitudes." (Zikmund)

The character of Girija Prasad Varma, a naturalist and anthropologist in the Andaman Islands, reflects on the complexity of colonial and postcolonial identities. The Andaman Islands, once used as a colonial penal settlement, now serve as a site of both loss and rediscovery. He observes that which emphasizes the blurred boundaries that are central to the experience of transnationalism.

The geography of the Andaman Islands symbolizes the novel's broader theme of fragmented, hybrid identities. The characters here are not merely trapped by their geographical location but by the historical memory of colonialism and its effects on their cultural, social, and emotional lives.

Swarup's portrayal of historical memory in the novel is crucial for understanding the construction of postcolonial identities. The novel demonstrates how the past, particularly the legacies of colonialism, is never fully detached from the present. "She knows of the islands as hers, undulating, fragmented and surrounded by the ocean. They bear greater truths than continents" (Swarup 103). Historical memory in the novel is fragmented, subjective, and often tied to the personal experiences of individuals and communities.

The novel's characters cannot escape the colonial history that shaped their regions, and they must continually negotiate their identities within this historical context. The legacies of colonialism are reflected in their relationships, personal choices, and emotional states, indicating how colonial history continues to impact postcolonial identity. The relationship between historical memory and identity formation is central to postcolonial theory, especially in the work of Homi K. Bhabha, who describes identity as something that is always in flux, shaped by both historical experiences and the ever-evolving present. In the postcolonial context, historical memory is reimagined, as individuals navigate the complex intersection of memory, identity, and global forces.

The novel illustrates the concept of hybridity, a central theme in postcolonial identity theory. Homi K. Bhabha's idea of hybridity, which involves the blending of cultural elements from both the colonizer and the colonized, is fundamental in understanding the characters' identities in the novel.

According to Bhabha, the concept of hybridity has been implied to neglect the inequalities in a society and the relations based on power and cultural differences. On stressing the transformative cultural, linguistic and political impacts on both the colonized and the colonizer, hybridity has been regarded as a concept that masks up or eradicates the cultural differences in a society.

In the novel *Latitudes of Longing*, Rose Mary, the maid of the couple Girija Prasad and Chanda Devi belongs to the Karen community. The Karen are the ethnic groups of Burma. They were one of the first inhabitants of the region and they resided for a period of two thousand years. They had fled from Burma due to religious and other ethnic persecutions by the government. The community settled in the middle Andaman Island and formed a village, named Webi. The settlement of this community in the islands was by the British government in order to make them work as foresters, as loggers and mahouts. They followed religious practices of Buddhism, Animism, Christianity and Islam.

The novel illustrates the concept of hybridity, a central theme in postcolonial identity theory. Homi K. Bhabha's idea of hybridity, which involves the blending of cultural elements from both the colonizer and the colonized, is fundamental in understanding the characters' identities in the novel. These characters occupy multiple locations, both physical and cultural which embody the fluidity of postcolonial identity. They are products of both their colonial past and their contemporary world, continuously negotiating their identities through the multiple forces acting upon them.

Mary, a Karen woman is a blend of Christianity and practices Buddhism. She adapts to the practices of the place she moves to and engages in the activities of those places as a struggle for survival. She involves in these practices to hide her reasons, killing of her husband and abandoning her son for years. People mistook it in the name of devotion when they noticed her.

Apo, is another character in the novel who follows different cultural and religious practices. He is eighty-one years old grandfather of an entire village that is present on the no man's land, the land in between India and Pakistan on the Karakoram ranges. Being a prominent person, he follows the teachings of Lord Buddha. "Of late, Apo has begun to spin the Buddhist prayer wheel incessantly, a spiritual practice incongruous with the juniper trees, fairies and ibexes the villagers worship" (Swarup 259-260).

Contrastively, the villagers follow a different religion which Apo also believes in it. He came to the village as a nomad after working as a soldier cook in the Indian army. "They were afraid that the buddha worshipped by nomads like me would upset their spirits. So I converted to their way" (Swarup 276). People of the village were Drakpos tribe, a lineage that was found in the Tsang region of Tibet by Tsangpa Gyare and later the lineage was followed in Ladakh and Bhutan. Apo adapts to fit among the tribal people in the village. Though he was a Buddhist, he accepts the beliefs of the Drakpos tribe.

Characters Rose Mary and Apo try to adapt within the places they moved to. On the other hand, they have a prominent role in eradicating the cultural difference among the people whom they met and stayed with.

These characters, who occupy multiple locations, both physical and cultural, embodies the fluidity of postcolonial identity. They are products of both their colonial past and their contemporary world, continuously negotiating their identities through the multiple forces acting upon them.

Through the novel's depiction of love, migration, and historical memory, Swarup shows how cultural hybridity can be both a source of tension and transformation. The characters experience cultural dislocation but also find ways to build new forms of belonging, despite the fragmentation they face. The novel suggests that postcolonial identity is not fixed or static but is shaped by the constant negotiation between cultures, histories, and geographical locations.

In the novel, *Latitudes of Longing*, Shubhangi Swarup uses the lens of transnationalism to explore the fluidity of postcolonial identity and the ways in which historical memory shapes contemporary subjectivities. The novel's portrayal of characters navigating colonial legacies, migration, and cultural hybridity offers a powerful commentary on the complexities of belonging in a postcolonial world. "Cultural hybridity refers to the process through which cultures interact and blend, leading to the creation of new, hybrid forms of identity and expression. The concept, widely discussed by theorists like Homi K. Bhabha emphasizes that cultural identities are not fixed but rather dynamic and fluid." (Lt. Dr. S. Ravibalan 132)

Through its multifaceted narrative, the novel underscores the interconnectedness of personal and global histories, where borders both physical and emotional, are constantly being redefined. The geography of longing, as explored in the novel, is not just a matter of physical space but a reflection of the internal, emotional, and cultural spaces that shape postcolonial identities.

Through its multifaceted narrative, the novel underscores the interconnectedness of personal and global histories, where borders both physical and emotional, are constantly being redefined. The geography of longing, as explored in the novel, is not just a matter of physical space but a reflection of the internal, emotional, and cultural spaces that shape postcolonial identities. The novel touches on collective memory, personal histories, and how the past shapes the present. Future Scope of study could explore how the characters' recollections and narratives construct a history of the region, emphasizing the role of memory in coping with loss and trauma. A historical lens could examine how personal stories intertwine with national or regional histories and the ways in which history is recorded and remembered.

Moreover the historical and ongoing conflict of Kashmir in the novel offers a fertile ground for exploring the effects of violence, displacement, and trauma on individuals and communities. A trauma studies approach could analyze the psychological and emotional impacts of living in a conflict zone and how these experiences are transmitted across generations.

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