

De-stabilising Gender and Nation: Thematic Analysis of Shubhangi Swaroop's *Latitudes of Longing*

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Latitudes of Longing is a debut novel by Bombay based journalist and author, Shubhangi Swaroop. The work is critically acclaimed. It was longlisted for Dublin Literary Award 2020 and was the finalist of JCB Literary Prize. It is also a winner of Tata Live Best First Book Award. The work also won for Shubhangi Charles Pick Fellowship for Creative Writing at UEA. It has been acknowledged for its lyrical merit and precise description of different landscapes by sparse book-reviews here and there, however, a thorough critical study of her complete novel is not taken up by any scholar so far.

Present paper undertakes the critical and thematic analysis of *Latitudes of Longing*.

Latitudes of Longing can be read as a discourse on love that challenges the strict gender divisions and explores the new contours of sexuality. It also destabilizes any fixed notion of nation. Woven into four loosely related narratives, it tells the story of different couples who challenge prescribed social norms and yet their love reaches the divine height in the sense of being eternal. In fact, the novel reflects upon the relationship of gender and nation and explores the ways they are related. In effect, when gender categories break free of prescribed roles, national boundaries also go blurred. As a result, one embarks upon the journey towards the universal, divine realm.

"Divine" has a particular meaning in Hindu spiritual philosophy and in the consciousness of majority of Indians. One can reach the divine by attaining *Moksha* which connotes to the liberation from the constraints of this world and is the ultimate goal of Hindu life. There are different paths to attain *Moksha*. Vedanta, the most ancient Indian philosophy, refers to the concept of *Purusharthas* that help one reaching the state of *Moksha*. *Dharma*, *Artha*, *Kama* are three endeavours that each human being must involve into and celebrate to achieve *Moksha* (Gavin 11-13). *Kama*, which connotes to the worldly desires, is also given importance thus and as a result, it must be enjoyed and pursued but within the purview of *dharma*. If celebrated so, it takes one to the divine realm of *Moksha*.

Shubhangi's philosophy as apparent in *Latitudes of Longing* supports this idea of *Moksha* through the healthy celebration of *Kama*. Sexuality is celebrated by Shubhangi in a positive spirit and ultimately leads one beyond the constraints and politics of present world.

The novel is divided into four parts which are entitled as "Islands", "Faultline", "Valley" and "Snow Desert". These four parts are also a division of work into four different territories that are rich in sensuous details. "Islands" traverses the journey into Andman islands, gives the lively details of life lived there and describe the seasons in the place and ocean's living presence that dominates every aspect of life lived there. Indian Ocean actually designs the philosophical perspective of the area and its tsunamis and waves etch the stories and destinies of families living there. "Faultline" takes the readers to the neighbouring country of Burma. While geographically whole landscape apparently

changes from water contained lands to a country surrounded by high spirals of Budha temples; strong link between the places is established as Shubhangi scientifically explores the phenomenon of tectonic displacements in the oceanic lands that gives rise to mountains and establishes strong link between different lands. Burma is just only a part of ocean then, howsoever extended and aloof it might appear. In the same way, "Valley" in the country of Nepal and high snow filled Karakoram mountains in no man's land between India and Pakistan as described in the unit "Snow Desert" are interrelated. While charting different territories, the novel also charts a link between all these different landscapes and subtly challenges the notion of boundaries.

The change from oceanic land to mountains is just a game of evolution in nature and human beings make just a small, miniscule unit in this vast planet whose destiny is inevitably linked with the transformations in the physical environment of the Earth. Such changes in the form of earth quacks, floods and snow avalanches can be so sudden and drastic that they can change the fate of entire human race and that too as a matter of few seconds. There is one thing, however, that remains unchanged even after such drastic changes. That one thing is love, as Shubhangi describes it:

"A new world is conceived, entirely different from this one. And in this new world, there are no stars, satellites, planets, constellations and celestial dust to litter space. Devoid of tectonics, evolutions and all other inexorable transitions, emptiness is all that exists. An emptiness outside the reach of this expanding universe and the relentless grip of time. And within it, the possibility of you and I." (325-326)

Thus, after all the physical changes that go hand in hand with the normal routine in nature, entire Earth may get transform into something new, but still there would stay a possibility of love, of "you and I".

Challenging Gender

Gender connotes to the social categorization of behaviour of different sexes. Such categorization has been rigorously debated in feminist discourse to expose the inherent politics of discrimination which marks the essential core of patriarchal systems. Sedgwick explains that gender is the "dichotomized social production and reproduction of male and female identities and behaviors" (Sedgwick 27). Gender is reproduced through daily acts in social life through "performativity" (Judith Butler).

Scientific research has already debunked the idea of strict division of gender as human beings are found to contain the mixture of hormones related to male as well as female. Gender, thus, must produce a continuum rather than strict division of male and females. Gender divisions were not only politically designed to maintain the patriarchal system but the system so produced also strengthened the gender divisions, thereby pressurizing males and females to adjust to the given code. The task of feminist discourse is to challenge and debunk such vicious circle.

Latitudes of Longing portrays unconventional sexual relationships between man and woman who over cross the norms established by fixed gender divisions. In the first part of the book, "Islands", there is a story of newly married couple from UP who comes to settle down in their new life after marriage at Andman Islands. Relationships change both the individuals and lead them beyond their individual egos. This is the central idea of Shubhangi that runs through all the parts of the book. Here, Girija Prasad is a man who believes in scientific approach towards life. He is a man of facts and can't think

beyond the apparent logic behind things. His wife presents a stark contrast with her deeply spiritual and intuitive outlook towards life. Chanda Devi can see ghosts, can talk to trees, flowers and can calm down agitated elephants and can control other animals. Chanda Devi is, however, a gold medallist in mathematics and Sanskrit and occupies the place of dignity at par with her husband in the realm of intellect. If Girija Prasad Verma is respected for his research acumen, Chanda Devi is much in demand for her super-human wisdom. Both partners are thus equal in every respect and they challenge the fixed gender roles as well. While Girija shares his opinions in the field of cookery which, traditionally, in patriarchal societies, is thought of a sphere exclusively belonging to females; Chanda Devi is vocal enough to share her firm observations in intellectual discourse with her husband, which also is a challenge to patriarchal norm that fixes meek and submissive behavior for females. The couple, thus, inevitably inspires interest and curiosity among fellow friends for being different:

When they eat, does she serve him before she sits down, or are they brazen enough to serve themselves? Who decides the menu?... What about the curtains they recently put up? Who decided their pattern and why were they put up?.... Born of generations interlocked in the missionary, it seems impossible to imagine sex among equals. (31)

When couple has given up traditional forms of behaviour, they are left to invent the new forms to fill in the lacunae:

Since he doesn't make demands, she has learned to read his desires by his actions. When he looks at the horizon with vacant eyes, he yearns for tea. If he is famished, his belly emits cub-like growls (32).

The couple is not completely radical, however, as partners show impact of social upbringing as well. Girija is not free to cry to the content of his heart when his first born dies because to shed tears is something not suitable for men: "Girija Prasad, like all respectable men, isn't supposed to cry – in public or in private" (58). However, eventually, it is their love for each other that helps the couple to rise beyond mere societal expectations. At the demand of their love, Chanda Devi doesn't shy away from going into the deep waters for swimming and coming out in her wet saree – a gesture which is unimaginable for other feminine friends of her. Despite being very different in their individual perceptions and understanding about the world, they could learn to appreciate each other's differences and to trust them. By the advent of time, Chanda Devi starts understanding the logic of her husband, while Girija Prasad becomes tolerant of her spiritual discourse and even starts somewhat believing in it. Love, thus, changes the outlook of both the partners towards life.

Eventually Chanda Devi dies while giving birth to their daughter. She, however, lives in Girija's memory for his life-time as a continuous source of interest for him. When he ultimately learns about the fact of difference in gravitational force at different points in Earth, it comes as a surprise because his wife had much before talked of it by pointing to the difference in time it takes for her tea and potatoes to boil. Many such epiphanies keep confronting Girija. He, at last, contentedly submits to the forces of nature that are beyond the understanding mere human potential and happily gives himself off to the waves of Tsumani that hit the Indian Ocean. Love changed him forever.

Second part of the book, "Faultlines" discusses the story of Mary and her Burmese husband. Shubhangi takes in a different route here to portray the relationship of this couple. Both are uneducated and as such, an easy prey for patriarchal politics. While

they love each other to the core of their hearts, these two innocent partners fail to realise the game that double headed monster of poverty and patriarchy plays over their lives and lands them into horrible tragedy. Girija Prasad and Chanda Devi's life, in contrast, is marked by contentment: "Only when one experiences a moment in its entirety...only when one encounters all the moment's possibilities with contentment, only then is one left with no reason to pray". (74) In comparison, Mary and her Burmese husband live unfulfilled, troubled life. And it takes a life time for Mary to re-conciliate with her son, Plato. Shubhangi thus describes Mary's situation: "No one could understand the depths of her pain, least of all the profound sense of betrayal she carried. (139)

Right from the starting, Mary's sense of identity is marred by gender problematic. She was a talented girl at a young age who aspired to make life by catching big fish in sea. But being a girl, she was not allowed to : "As promising as her skills were, Rose Mary could only fish on the shore. The deep sea of bigger catches was male territory". (146). She was a girl of nature. She had sympathy with "venomous snakes", "bone-crushing crocodiles" and "strangling creepers". She defends them in the name of god: "Were they not creatures of god too?... A god whose worshippers had the freedom to bite and hurt without guilt" (146). She was strong willed as well and runs away from her house to marry Burman when her parents refused.

Life after marriage, however, was shaped more by poverty and gender than love. Her husband goes to work as labour under Japanese army who had occupied the Andaman islands at that time. Being a labour, regular beating and mistreatment was his lot. As he took the role of husband, he naturally caught up the available role models and started taking pride in beating his wife:

"Rifraff like Rose Mary's husband were picked up and beaten to the rhythm of imperial slogans... He stopped working and started drinking at home instead. One night, he demanded catfish for dinner. When he didn't find nappi-pickle-on the plate, he beat Rose Mary." (151)

Mary was not in a very different position. She could only read his physical assaults as manly and normal:

"She was stunned. That men beat women was not a surprise to her. The worth of a man, her grandmother would often say, was judged by his ability to hunt, build a roof and beat his wife. Sooner or later, Rose Mary was prepared for a slap or a kick. What shocked her was his strength. Where did it come from, she wondered, in this listless man who spent his days inebriated?" (151)

While discussing the episode with her friend, Mary wonders about the naked people who occupy the tribal area in island. She wonders if they too beat their wives and her friend replies categorically: "They don't. Beating a woman is a sign of civilization, like wearing clothes" (152).

Her, Shubhangi has reflected upon the horrible nexus between race, class and gender. As Mayer points out, sexual violence against women is often increased in nations that face imperial dominance. He writes that "men control fertility and reproduction. When the nation is faced with internal and external pressures, it polices and employs coercive means to control sexuality. These means can often be seen, as well, as racist" (22). Mary Burmese husbands faces racial discrimination under Japanese army and Mary comes out as a very easily available outlet for his frustrations. It is significant to note that while beating Mary, he calls her whore even when he had full faith in Mary's loyalty towards him. Both Mary and her Burmese husband come to naturally adopt the ways designed

for them by patriarchal system even when there was no inherent logic for them to act in such manners. Research has pointed out that States that strive to win imperial dominations through the idea of nationalism put particular focus on the purity of women. The idea of pure nation is defended on the grounds of purity of women. As Mayer points out, “women are encouraged by religious and national leaders to have more children in the name of nationalism. Women who have abortions are figured as “moral enemies of the state” — but reproduction is celebrated only if it is consummated with men of that nation” (22). Mary’s husband could naturally find no better word than “whore” to make her an easy prey for misplaced aggression. It is interesting to note how Burman’s hatred to Japanese translates into his aggression towards his wife. It is important for her husband to have the sexual control over his wife to feel powerful. As is pointed by the research, nationalist men’s power is expressed by such sexual control over wives. Mayer writes that “a politics of celibacy and a politics of sexual potency have both provided nationalist Indian men with a feeling of power by emphasizing sexual control of Indian women”.(252) This explains Mary and her husband to be mere puppets at the hands of ideological nexus between patriarchy and nationalism.

Amrita Chhachhi also strengthens this argument about the nexus between patriarchy and nationalism as she shows in her research how Hindu nationalist “propaganda is full of the fall from greatness in the past, challenge of foreign domination today, the need to prove strength, courage and manliness. What better way to prove manliness than by showing that women are under your control?” (575).

While her husband carried on his manner of beating Mary, Mary kept tolerating him until the last fateful day when he tried to kick the pregnant belly of Mary and the later responded by forcefully exploding the nearby pan in his head. The inevitable happens and her husband bleeds to death. Mary is then left to give birth to her baby, all alone, thereby facing obvious hardships. However, when her son grows up in a distant land and Mary goes to meet him finally, she fears that he will not understand the fact that “His father was not a monster. Nor is she a murderer” (165). Both had, in fact, loved each other as much as Girija and Chanda Devi had in the first part of the novel. It was the matter of only circumstances and ideologies that carved different territories for them. At last, however, love did emerge as a victor and Mary and Plato are reconciled to the dead Burman.

Third section of the book, “Valley” narrates the love of a couple that challenge the limitations of age. Mid-aged, drug peddler Thapa, thus, marries the teenager stripper in the valley of Nepal. In the last section, “Snow Deserts” it is the love affair of two octogenarians that is reflected upon. Gazala and Apo finally marry despite their ages and even religions. Here too there is an inevitable impact of social values and patriarchal ideology over partners that creates different sort of hindrances in the path of maturation of their love, but in due course, love wins. Apo flaunts his economic status not only by wearing pearl jewellery but also boasting about the price money that he can give to buy his love lady Gazala: “I want to marry that woman. Her family cannot reject a bride price of three yaks and seven sheep. That is fit for a Persian empress, not an old hag’. He pauses, before adding, ‘Dont tell her I called her old hag’ (243). But these are only social formalities for Apo whose love is strong enough even to rise above the divisions created by religion. He thus tells her, “You are old Gazala.... At our age, it is best to sit still. Heaven is not what the Quran tells you. It is a sunset in this very orchard, in the company of trees as ancient as us...” (244).

Life keeps on evolving for all the characters, thus, who are lead by their different longings. Finally they reach the eternal realm of love in the embrace of beloved. The territories they navigate to reach their destinies, however, pass through many social-alleyes and patriarchal-gallows which they completely break free of.

Challenging Nation

Nation is a flexible, political entity, rather than any fixed notion. It is important to highlight the difference between state and nation as many times they are wrongly conceived as one and the same thing. While state refers to the fixed political and geographical boundary, nation is an ideology. In this sense, nation is related to gender and sexuality as they too are ideological formations. It can also be said that nation is to state as gender is to sex. These terms have a complex relationship to each other and nation, gender and sexuality can sometimes cater to the same ideological base. Mayer points out that "nation, gender and sexuality are always in the process of becoming, because they evolve continuously," (Mayer 19). So the meaning they assume is not only political, but is also in the state of constant flux. It must also be noted that nation gives voice and strength to state. A nation "is a soul, a spiritual principle" (Renan, 19), and a "moral consciousness" (Renan, 20). The idea of nation unites people under one state, at the same time, it can also act as the voice of one particular dominant group that suppresses the marginal groups within the state. Etienne Balibar calls it "fictive ethnicity" (1). So, it is important to critically read the ideology of nation and to explore how much beneficial the particular ideology of nation is to people at large.

Shubhangi Swaroop's novel completely debunks the idea of nation. Her novel is mainly set on the Indian land but also traces the territory of Burma, Nepal and 'no-man's land' between India and Pakistan. Her purpose is to debunk the idea of nation as she depicts the similarity of life lives across all the lands. For Shubhangi, Earth is a complete whole and supreme entity which can thwart all human endeavours towards stable meanings, whether they pertain to the political realm in the form of ideas of nationalism, or scientific realm in the form of various theories like human evolution, or personal relationships. Human being is presented as a very minor object in front of vast cosmos against whose power he is entirely helpless. Cosmic forces in the form of floods, avalanches, tsunamis, earthquakes change human destinies and shatter all the meanings human beings try to impose. And yet, all remain united in somewhat metaphysical realm by the all powerful force of love.

Shubhangi presents the whole planet as a unified whole which, later on, gets divided into various territories because of the forces of will. She puts this in the fictitious form:

"In the beginning all land was an ocean floor, hidden from the sun, hidden from air. Then one day, a grain of sand had a dream. In it, it was basking under the sun at the highest place on earth. That single dream of the smallest thing, it changed the face of the earth. The grain leaped up. With each leap, it reached higher and higher and different lands were created". (233)

Nature can have its force of will and it has been given a life of its own. Nature carves its own destiny which ultimately turns all the struggles for survival of common humanity into penchant mockery. Nature keeps playing its games. It changes from one form to another. Oceans become mountains and mountains turn into deserts. Girija Prasad observes from his scientific acumen that "Perhaps Pangaea dreamt of being a million

islands. Perhaps the million islands now dreamt of being one" (11). One earthquake permanently changes the contours of land and with that all the meaning system that human beings put at place lose its foundation. "The gap between generations would turn into a gulf between people who inhabited different maps" (86).

In this way, the whole novel can be read as a game of nature with human beings whose efforts at meanings are constantly let down. Man creates illusions to get disillusioned at the end. Human beings vanish and even their language is a ploy of time. Lord Goodenough gave new names to those places that would eventually be devoured up by the forces of planet that are far mightier than any human venture. Meanings, words and the reality human beings produce is thus intangible and a mere chimera. Shubhnagi has similarly problematized the idea of "Kashirsagar". A revolutionary poet who is fighting against English colonialism is inspired by Hindu mythology and talks of Kashirsagar in his poetic work. While his English friend who is his warden at Andman jail points out that English people call this mythical ocean as "Tethys". Shubhangi highlights the politics of naming and the meaning they produce and how it engenders political strife.

Peter van der Veer points out, that "the independence movement was ostensibly secular, but the "most important imaginings of the nation" in India have always been religious" (22). Kashirsagar episode justifies the point. As Shubhangi points out, such naming politics is extended even far beyond the actual struggle for freedom:

"Rana had arrived at the glaciers shortly after the official renaming ceremony. The earlier name, Siachen, or the Place of Wild Roses, wasn't patriotic enough to justify spending half the nation's defence budget on- a sum greater than the one allotted to national healthcare... The name Kshirsagar Glacial Complex was inspired by an obscure epic written by an incarcerated revolutionary poet during the Raj. (303)

National boundaries are point of conflict in between different States. Shubhangi highlights how no-man's land is a disputed area which both Pakistan and India want to own. At the same time, it is glaciers, mountains and hills that have the final say as they keep on changing and thwarting all human effort for stable boundaries. Rana is a scientist who tries to breed plants in the no-man's land as this could be a point for them to claim the territory for India: "Indian government will use the UN's guidelines on disputed territories to claim ownership over the glaciers. The first person to cultivate a piece of land can stake claim over it, one of its clauses states" (313). However, despite all his ardent efforts, Rana had to return back as simple wisdom of Apo pointed the fact to him that the glaciers are going to take all human lives here with their changing forms and it is not safe to stay in these places: "Even if India, Pakistan and China stop fighting over the ice and unite to remain there, the mountains will win. Sons, tell your armies and scientists to leave the glaciers. That is the only way they can be safe" (298).

Human beings must stop using technical weapons in these lands. Ultimately, it is not India or Pakistan who establish their meanings over the land, but the land that writes down its own meanings.

Shubhangi questions the concept of national boundaries even by reflecting upon the kind of life people live in no man's land:

"When Apo first came to the village, a young man told him he was in Pakistan. But the elders, unaware of Partition and its preceding struggle, admonished the young chap for creating a fictitious country to fool the outsider" (264). There people have no value for such political meanings and symbols that establish such meanings: "Pakistani currency notes made excellent rolling paper, and British coins were ideal for ornaments" (265)

If there is any fixed meaning at all which can have some tangible significance in characters life then it is the meaning designed by nature: "The river claimed Bagmati's first pet, a stray puppy who followed her into the water. It wasn't the only tragedy it inflicted upon her. Constant water logging led her parents to pay more attention to the shanty than their children. Being the eldest, she was sold as domestic servant" (96). Flood in Nepal, thus changed the life for Bebo completely who is left with no choice but to enter afterwards in prostitution. All meanings that human beings give are unstable. Apo's granddaughter takes the photograph that actually belonged to Thapa and mistakes it as representing her grandfather's friends. This photograph becomes central in her life and gives her emotional strength and peace. It takes her almost a decade to find the fiction behind the stories she had woven around the photograph. Finally disillusioned, she also realises that maternal anxiety and love for her husband are fictions. This is how human beings give meanings to things around in a bid to live a comfortable life. This is a part of common fiction that human beings wove around their lives to give a particular meaning.

And yet, beyond all this surface game of meanings and new-meanings, there is something that never changes and which unites everyone into one whole. Girija Prasad tried to portray the image of his wife after her death. But Chanda Devi fails to come to any concrete form:

"Born from an imagination that predates life's splintering into animals, plants and fungi, she is inchoate. She belongs to a time when life could commune with all its possible forms, because all life was one." (115)

Life was one. It is to this oneness that everyone goes back. In this sense, Shubhangi's voice can actually be read as representing the Vedantic philosophy of *advaita*. For primordial oneness, human beings evolve into different forms because of their longings. Throughout the novel, Shubhangi follows the territories that human longings lead one into. But at the end, all that one faces is mortality: "All evolution is guided by the primordial instinct. The one that set us free to explore the uncertain geographies of longing, only to stumble upon the bliss of mortality. (174) Human beings thus die, but planet and its natural forces stay there. Shubhangi also believes in the idea of re-birth which is also reiterated throughout the novel. While Girija Prasad and Chanda Devi were living only a relationship that was pre-lived in another life, another birth; Apo in the last part of the book had lived the no-man's land in the form of earthworm and as many other creatures in previous births. Apricot tree is his friend from previous births. Idea of boundaries is also challenged when Shubhangi portrays all differing territories as evolution from same core. In fact, different terrains are linked in the sense that changes in one lead to the form of another:

"Girija Prasad and Chanda Devi sit on the rock protruding from Mount Harriet's peak and are transformed into a pair of birds, hidden from the ocean by the highest branches of the tallest trees.... 'If it wasn't for the waves breathing,' says Chanda Devi, 'I would have mistaken this for an evening in the mountains.' (41)

And it is at such subtle points of unity where Chanda Devi's spiritualism finds cords with Girija Prasad's scientific observation:

'It may just be a possibility,' replies Girija Prasad. 'I read an academic paper that claimed the volcanic islands of Indonesia and the Andaman Sea are a continuation of the Himalayas. We are sitting, so to speak, on mountain peaks arising from the ocean floor. I find it hard to believe, though it is plausible.' (41)

Thus, the form of lands change but all land is linked, the way human beings are linked. Shubhangi writes that “Faces change. Sometimes, one may not recognize who the real person is because faces are misleading. But love is love. So long as you feel it, you give it and receive it, it is enough. You are connected through the force of love to everyone and everything”. (315)

Beyond faces, beyond ideologies, beyond difference in lands, it is love that unites all and everything into one whole. And it is thus love that carves out a space for itself by challenging the ideologies of gender or nation!

Conclusion

Latitudes of Longing portrays the longing of not only human beings but also of nature. While nature is the mightiest force on Earth, human being’s longing for love is an ultimate force that goes beyond the surface meaning and is capable of challenging all kinds of ideologies. It is the longing of love that questions gender, nation and in fact, all fixed meanings to meander through all appearances to reach the ultimate truth. The novel debunks the idea of gender and nation and presents whole humanity as a united whole beyond all categorization.

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