

Tidal Belonging: Maritime Displacement and Cultural Identity in Shubhangi Swarup's Latitudes of Longing

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Abstract:

This paper examines Shubhangi Swarup's *Latitudes of Longing* (2018), the opening section of the novel titled "Islands," and develops the concept of tidal belonging as a framework for understanding how maritime displacement shapes cultural identity. Drawing on the Blue Humanities and Bruno Latour's idea of terrestrial ethics, the paper focuses on the sheltered space of the Andaman Island household, where every day affective artifacts, fossilized sea creatures, conch shells, and carved dinghy figures function as living hydro-archives. On an isolated island such as the Andamans, administrative records are recognized as legal and cultural archives, while the natural oceanic artifacts that carry ecological and cultural memory are neglected and broken. These artifacts serve as alternative records of ecological and cultural preservation, bringing environmental deep time into intimate relation with historical memory and human consciousness. Analyzing planetary temporality through the Blue Humanities and Latour's terrestrial ethics, the paper argues that the state's materialistic approach and the affective cultural practices of island communities, small acts of care, dreams, and clairvoyance, may be erased by fixed national boundaries. The novel connects readers to the everyday rituals of island peoples and encourages them to learn, respect, care for, and respond to nature. In doing so, it anticipates the novel's larger concern with ecological crisis and demonstrates that humans, water, plants, and landscapes are interconnected, and that the ocean is not merely a setting but an active agent that shapes the human relationship with nature and culture.

Keywords: Blue Humanities, tidal belonging, maritime displacement, cultural identity, Andaman Island

Introduction:

Cultural identity in literary criticism has long been conceived through the land, roots, soil, territory, and nation, a terrestrial bias that the Blue Humanities has increasingly called into question. Steve Mentz's concept of a "wet ontology" reorients modernity toward

fluidity, instability, and immersion rather than terrestrial solidity (Mentz 3). Within this reorientation, the sea is not a passive backdrop to human action but an active agent that shapes history, memory, and identity. This shift is especially significant for postcolonial literary studies, where colonial expansion, labour migration, and forced resettlement unfolded through maritime routes, making water a medium through which displacement is produced, remembered, and negotiated.

The question of how cultural identity is preserved becomes urgent in island and coastal contexts, where state archives and administrative records are privileged as authoritative records of culture while the material traces of oceanic life, fossilized sea creatures, conch shells, and carved figures are neglected or broken. Bruno Latour's idea of terrestrial ethics offers a way to address this imbalance. For Latour, all living beings are "earthbound" and connected through the way they dwell on the sphere, and the connections between beings rest not on utilitarian value but on mutual "dependency" (ch. 18). Terrestrial ethics thus challenges the privileging of human-authored records over the natural artifacts that carry ecological and cultural memory.

Shubhangi Swarup's *Latitudes of Longing* (2018) opens in the Andaman Islands, where the botanist Girija Prasad and his clairvoyant wife Chanda Devi inhabit a sheltered household surrounded by the sea. The novel's first fifteen chapters, the section titled "Islands," establish water as the fundamental condition of island life: "Silence on a tropical island is the relentless sound of water" (Swarup 3). Within this domestic space, the household accumulates artifacts that carry oceanic and geological memory: fossilized deep-sea creatures collected from the white sand beaches of the Andamans (Bhattacharya 8), a conch shell that travels with the family from the Andaman Islands as a remembrance of the comfort and shelter of home (Bhattacharya 15), and the figures of "a turtle, a sea, a man, woman and child" that Mary carves into the wood of her dinghy (Sabu and Mudaliar 189). These objects function as living hydro-archives, alternative records of ecological and cultural preservation that exist alongside, and often against, the administrative archives of the colonial and postcolonial state.

The Blue Humanities framework illuminates how water, land, and material memory interact in Swarup's representation of the Andaman Islands. Girija Prasad explains to Devi that "the world under water is an undocumented map of the world over water", adding that "to solely inhabit the land limits our understanding" because "all terrains and forms of life, all the cycles of nature and emotions found on land, increase manifold in water" (Swarup 101). Water is therefore presented as an alternative epistemological space, one that reveals forms of life and histories obscured by land-centered knowledge. This idea is reinforced when Girija Prasad realizes that "no island is an island either" because each island belongs to "a greater geological pattern that connects all the lands and oceans of the world" (Swarup 10). The novel further materializes this connection through the shells embedded in the cliffs,

which “bear witness to the violence that also creates mountains as mighty as the Himalayas” and show how the destinies of species and civilizations change through “the course of a river and the tides of an ocean” (Swarup 95). Read through Latour’s terrestrial ethics, and these passages suggest that the household’s acts of care, its preservation of shells and fossilized remains, and its attention to dreams and non-human life are not merely private practices. They are forms of ecological relation through which human identity is shaped by water, geological time, and more-than-human existence. The sea consequently functions not as a decorative setting but as an active material force that reorganizes how the characters understand knowledge, memory, home, and belonging.

Existing scholarship has examined the novel's affective ecologies (Jayagopalan 170), its planetary and terrestrial agency (Yadav 214), its representation of Karen identity (Sabu and Mudaliar 181-82), and water as an archive of planetary memory (Devi et al. a713). What remains insufficiently examined is how the everyday artifacts of the island household function as hydro-archives that preserve cultural identity in the context of fixed national boundaries and the erasures of administrative record-keeping. The materialistic approach of the state and the affective cultural practices of island peoples have not yet been read together as competing modes of preserving belonging.

This paper argues that, in the opening section of *Latitudes of Longing*, Swarup defines tidal belonging as a form of cultural identity shaped by maritime displacement and ecological interdependence. By reading the household's artifacts as living hydro-archives, the paper demonstrates that the ocean is not merely a setting but an active agent that shapes human relationships with nature and culture, and that affective practices of care, dream, and clairvoyance constitute alternative records of ecological and cultural preservation. The analysis that follows will trace how these artifacts and practices produce a sense of belonging that is fluid, relational, and resilient, even as it remains vulnerable to national boundaries, geological instability, and ecological crisis.

The Blue Humanities: water as archive and agent

The Blue Humanities unsettles the assumption that land is the primary ground of ecological belonging. Rather than treating rivers and seas as scenic backdrops or symbolic metaphors, Blue Humanities scholarship conceptualizes water as “material agent, historical archive, epistemological medium, and cosmological force” (Devi et al. a713). Steve Mentz’s concept of a “wet ontology” (3) argues that modernity must be understood through fluidity, instability, and immersion rather than terrestrial solidity. Within this framework, the sea is “a space of circulation rather than isolation,” carrying goods, bodies, languages, microbes, and memories (Devi et al. a713). This is especially significant for postcolonial literary studies, where maritime routes carried colonial expansion, indentured labour, and forced resettlement, making water a medium through which displacement is produced and remembered.

Two further concepts deepen this framework. Stacy Alaimo's "trans-corporeality" emphasizes that human bodies are porous and materially entangled with environmental flows (2). Astrida Neimanis proposes that we are "bodies of water," suggesting that subjectivity itself is aqueous, relational, and distributed (2). For the present study, these ideas are important because they move the analysis beyond metaphor: the sea is not merely a symbol of longing but a material condition that shapes how characters experience home, memory, and identity.

Latour's terrestrial ethics

Bruno Latour's concept of the "terrestrial" (ch. 18) adds an ethical dimension to this aquatic reorientation. In *Down to Earth* (2018), Latour argues that the contrary pulls of the "local" and the "global" have prevented humans from recognizing the impact of climate change, and he proposes a third position, the terrestrial, which overcomes this polarization by enabling humans to interact with their actions and with non-human beings. For Latour, all beings are "earthbound" and linked in the way they occupy the planet (ch. 18). The terrestrial is therefore a political and ethical category: the "terrestrials" are those "who know they are in the Anthropocene and who seek to cohabit with other terrestrials" (ch. 18). Crucially, the connections between beings are not conceptualized in terms of utilitarian value but are based on mutual "dependency" (ch. 18).

Terrestrial ethics extends the Blue Humanities in a specific direction. Where the Blue Humanities emphasizes water as an archive and agent, terrestrial ethics insists on the obligations that follow from recognizing human dependence on non-human beings. This is directly relevant to the novel's representation of the Andaman household. The household's artifacts, calcified sea creatures, conch shells, and carved figures are not merely objects of personal memory; they are material records of a shared terrestrial and aquatic existence. They document what administrative archives neglect: the deep-time relations between humans, water, plants, and landscapes.

Synthesis: toward tidal belonging

The two frameworks converge in the concept of tidal belonging developed in this paper. The Blue Humanities provides the vocabulary for describing the sea as an active agent that shapes cultural identity; terrestrial ethics provides the ethical ground for treating the household's affective practices, small acts of care, dreams, and clairvoyance as legitimate forms of ecological and cultural preservation. Together, they advocate that belonging in the novel is not secured by territory but produced through movement, relation, memory, and environmental attachment. The novel's opening line, "Silence on a tropical island is the relentless sound of water" (Swarup 3), announces this condition at the outset: water is the ground of island life, and identity must be understood in relation to it. thus, functions not as a setting but as an active agent that shapes the human relationship with nature and culture.

The Andaman Household and Its Living Hydro-Archives

The "Islands" section opens inside a domestic space saturated by water. The novel's first sentence, "Silence on a tropical island is the relentless sound of water" (Swarup 3),

establishes the sea as the ground of island life, and the household of Girija Prasad and Chanda Devi is described in the same aqueous idiom: the newly married couple are “strangers in a bedroom damp with desire and flooded with incipient dreams” (Swarup 3). Water here is not a setting that surrounds the home but a medium that enters it. The narrator makes this explicit when the monsoons reduce the house to a gesture:

“The four walls and roof that are supposed to keep the couple dry are reduced to a mere symbolic gesture, a warm thought left behind by the British. For the rains have flooded deep into their beings” (Swarup 10).

The shelter the household promises is already compromised, and what remains of it is an inheritance of the colonial past. As Arunima Bhattacharya observes, water in the novel “records and induces changes” and gives “material form to the complex dynamics of multiscale time” (7). The sheltered household is thus the first site where the sea becomes a condition of existence rather than a backdrop.

Within this domestic space, the novel stages a tension between two ways of knowing the island. Girija Prasad, an Oxford-trained botanist, approaches the environment through classification and scientific observation, learning that “no island is an island either. It is part of a greater geological pattern that connects all the lands and oceans of the world” (Swarup 10). Chanda Devi, by contrast, communes with the non-human world through clairvoyance: “Chanda Devi, the clairvoyant one. She feels for ghosts and enjoys the laconic company of trees” (Swarup 5). The narrator records Girija Prasad’s bewilderment: “Girija Prasad, a keen observer and scientist of nature himself, could make no sense of it. Chanda Devi defied everything that he had learnt” (Swarup 109). This disjunct is not merely personal; it mirrors a wider division between the administrative and the affective modes of recording the island. The novel insists that the island resists colonial naming:

“In the Andamans, species lacked names. For the longest time, no one could colonize the islands, for the impenetrable thicket hid more than just natural history. It hid tribes left behind by the original littoral migration across the Indian Ocean” (Swarup 5).

The household's material culture offers an alternative to this archival logic. When the family prepares to leave the islands, the narrator inventories what they carry:

“Out of the nine suitcases they will take with them, one belongs to Girija Prasad, two to Chanda Devi, and Mary has only a little bundle. The rest belong to the islands” (Swarup 82). Reading the Blue Humanities as the theoretical perspective, the household’s artifacts prove that water functions as an archive and an agent. The novel’s emphasis on the sea structure’s identity at every scale: “In the Andaman Sea, each island is a person and each person an island” and “everything here, including the sea, belongs to the ocean and will be claimed in due course” (Swarup 98). Even intimacy follows the tide: “Intimacy and distance operate

like the tide” (Swarup 32). These passages suggest that the household's affective practices, small acts of care, dreams, and clairvoyance are not merely personal but constitute ways of belonging to the earth and its waters. Latour's terrestrial ethics clarifies why these matters: all beings are “earthbound” and linked in the way they occupy the planet, and the connections between beings rest on mutual “dependency” (ch. 18). The household's hydro-archives are records of this dependency, alternative archives of ecological and cultural preservation that survive alongside, and often against, the administrative records of the colonial and postcolonial state.

Conclusion

This paper examines how maritime space reshapes cultural identity in the section “Island” of Shubhangi Swarup's *Latitudes of Longing* and develops the concept of tidal belonging as a framework for that inquiry. The analysis has shown that the Andaman Sea is not a setting against which the novel's characters live but an active agent that structures their sense of home, memory, and relation. Within the sheltered household of Girija Prasad and Chanda Devi, the everyday artifacts of island life, calcified sea creatures, a conch shell, carved figures, the contents of suitcases packed for departure, function as living hydro-archives. They preserve ecological and cultural memory in forms that the administrative records of the colonial and postcolonial state neglect. Girija Prasad states the principle that governs these objects: “The world under water is an undocumented map of the world over water” (Swarup 101).

The paper's central claim is that belonging in the novel is neither secured by permanent attachment to a single territory nor dissolved by displacement. It is produced through movement, relation, memory, and environmental attachment. This is what the term tidal belonging names: a form of cultural identity that is fluid, relational, and resilient, shaped by the rhythms of the sea rather than the boundaries of the nation. The novel makes this legible at every scale of island life: “In the Andaman Sea, each island is a person and each person an island” (Swarup 98). Tidal belonging, in this reading, is not a metaphor for loss but a description of how identity is actually reconstructed in contexts of maritime displacement.

The concept of tidal belonging extends the Blue Humanities in a specific direction. Existing scholarship on the novel has emphasized water as an archive of planetary memory (Devi et al. a713), the affective ecologies of the “Islands” section (Jayagopalan 170), the terrestrial and planetary agency of the narrative (Yadav 209), and the politics of Karen identity (Sabu and Mudaliar 181-82). What these studies have not examined is how the sea operates as a condition of cultural identity formation at the most intimate scale, the scale of the household and its objects. The hydro-archives of the Andaman home are not merely symbols of loss; they are active records through which displaced subjects reconstruct belonging. Read through Latour's terrestrial ethics, these records affirm that all beings are “earthbound” and linked in the way they occupy the planet (ch. 18), and that the connections

between beings rest on mutual “dependency” (ch. 18). This is the paper's original intervention: it moves the Blue Humanities from the analysis of environmental agency to the analysis of cultural subjectivity, and it reads the neglected objects of domestic life as archives of ecological and cultural preservation.

The political stakes of this reading are significant. The novel challenges the assumption that cultural identity must be anchored to fixed national territory, and it insists that affective practices, small acts of care, dreams, and clairvoyance constitute legitimate forms of preservation that the state's records cannot hold. At the same time, this paper has been careful not to romanticize displacement. Tidal belonging does not erase the violence of forced migration, the precarity of refugee life, or the erasure of communities by fixed national boundaries. It names a fragile and contested form of existence, one that is always in process and always vulnerable to the forces that displace it.

This study has limited its analysis to the “Islands” section, drawing selectively on “Faultline” as a comparative frame. A fuller account might trace how the other sections of the novel, “Valley” and “Snow Desert,” engage with questions of displacement and belonging, and whether the concept of tidal belonging travels beyond the maritime context of the Andamans to other geographies of displacement. The concept itself, while grounded in this text, may offer a vocabulary for reading other narratives of maritime displacement in contemporary literature.

Latitudes of Longing offers a powerful reimagining of what it means to belong in an era of accelerating ecological precarity and forced displacement. By reading the sea as a condition of belonging rather than a barrier to it, the novel challenges us to imagine forms of identity that are as fluid, relational, and resilient as the tides themselves. The concept of tidal belonging developed in this paper is offered as a contribution to that imagining and to the growing body of scholarship that reads water not as a backdrop to human history but as an active force in its making.

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