

# Ecocritical Representation of Karen Identity in the Andaman Islands in Shubhangi Swarup's *Latitudes of Longing*

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**Abstract:** This research paper is an inquiry into the inclination of the two principal characters in Shubhangi Swarup's debut novel *Latitudes of Longing* to relate their own lives with the components of their respective ecological environment(s) that they come into contact with in the narrative. The plight of immigrants from India and Burma in the colonial Andaman Islands that the novelist implicitly and explicitly touches upon has prompted this research to be carried out through the perspective of postcolonial ecocriticism. Given that the Karen<sup>1</sup> are a relatively recent population to be recognized as a separate community, another aim of this paper is to bring to light the sort of representation found by the Karen in contemporary novels, with respect to their treatment and perception of nature through the years of resettlement, rebellion and seeking an identity.

**Keywords:** identity, ecology, ecocriticism, Karen, Andamans, subaltern, marginalization

## INTRODUCTION

The islands of Andaman and Nicobar have witnessed regimes and governments that have each left a distinct impression upon the culture of the Karen people settled in these parts (Mittal 2015, 10). Brought in as labour force (Maiti 2004, 967), the Karen made the forests and the islands their own and managed to commendably retain their distinct cultural traits despite being under the constant pressure of change as a result of forceful association with the population from the Indian mainland (Mittal 2015, 14). In Shubhangi Swarup's debut novel,

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<sup>1</sup>The Karen people of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands were brought from Burma (now Myanmar) through illegal human trafficking by the British in the latter half of the nineteenth century, as labourers for the construction of a penal colony meant for captives from the Indian rebellion. The Government of India granted Indian citizenship to the Karen people in 1947. (Sen 2010, 214)

*Latitudes of Longing*, four loosely connected stories have been etched against four different climatic landscapes. Of these, the research paper principally focuses on “Faultline” - a story that traces the journey of Mary, living in the Andaman Islands, to her son, imprisoned in Sagaing, Burma. In an interview with the YouTube Channel *Books on Toast* (2018, 28:00-29:03) Swarup clarified that all the four novellas in the novel have been named after their natural topography and take place on tectonically active faultlines—which also happen to bind the narrative thread. Swarup meant to portray humanity as existing in the faultlines; with both of them coming together while resisting each other. The author also mentions her journeys to the places that she writes about in her novel, for she is not a dweller of any of the regions mentioned (Ibid, 11:14-11: 17). With several depictions of human life in contrast with elements of nature, Swarup’s novel compels an ecocritical study of the Karen identity concerning their perception of their environment. By analyzing the descriptions of their thoughts and actions, the characters are studied in this paper, in juxtaposition with their immediate natural environment and their inner-most animalistic thoughts, to establish their deep ecological sensitivity and the manner in which the Karen associate their identity with their ecology.

#### HISTORY OF PEACE IN KAREN IDENTITY

As the Karen set foot upon a group of islands from a war-torn land, one could readily assume survival as their first and obvious goal. However, even while clearing forests at work and to set up homes for themselves, the Karen remained the peaceful folk that they have always been: “[...] the Karen are largely a peace-loving community who try to avoid any kind of altercation and lead a life based on the preaching’s (*sic*) of the Bible. Thus instances of violence or crime have been very rare” (Maiti 2004, 973-974). However, being an agrarian tribe, the Karen realized in time that unless they battled the elements of wilderness, they will not live: “[t]he Karens were at the frontier of the war against nature, and she was a child soldier” (Swarup 2018, 145). Shubhangi Swarup speaks of the strength of a Karen girl who grew up perfecting her fishing skills and challenging the gender-normative notion of male-fishing yielding good catches (Ibid, 146). Rose Mary is a teenager who elopes with a Burmese man against the wishes of her very traditional Karen family. While the island is still in the making and labourers pour in from the Indian mainland from places like Ranchi and Bengal, Rose Mary begins her life as a wife and a mother-

to-be (Ibid, 161). The islands had been the home to the indigenous tribe only till the British set foot upon them for the first time in 1789 (Vaidik 2010, 5). The Karen were forced to associate with the convicts who were aggressive towards them as well as the migrant labourers from the mainland while constructing the prison<sup>2</sup> (Ibid, 61).

Meanwhile, the indigenous tribes were seething in bitterness towards all external invaders on their island. Thus, the Karen were put in a spot and had to make the best of the situation. Swarup brings this aspect of alienation and marginalization of the Karen into her narrative by subtly stating the Burmese men as being considered the better fishermen in the locality (Swarup 2018, 147). The Burmese men, in turn, seem to be in awe of their new environment which appears to be overwhelming; as evident in the description of the large fish caught by the *Burman* to an adolescent Rose Mary: “[s]o powerful is a grouper’s ability to suck, that when it takes in water from its gills a small whirlpool is created on the surface. I have seen it with my own eyes.” (Ibid, 149) The novelist seems to imply the sheer wonderment of the men who are not confident that they have experienced the power of this fish despite having caught it. This could also hint at the mutual dependence between humans and nature, which retained their harmony. Rose Mary’s fatal attempt to stop her husband’s drunk aggression not only reinstates the difference between the violent Burmese and the mild-mannered Karen but also reaffirms the fact that the human instinct to live towers above all grounds of compassion. The instance of a pregnant Rose Mary’s fatal clash with her husband can further elucidate this; it seems to be encapsulated by the resulting failure of the Karen’s lack of desire for confrontation as a way to protect them (Mittal 2015, 11). Rose Mary also comes across as the mother-earth figure who sustains life with one hand and destroys detrimental elements with the other. The act also seems to imply that the Karen have learnt from nature to always attempt to remain passive even when under tremendous pressure, and resist till the other party gives in, but to always fight for survival, nonetheless (Alaimos 2010, 92-93).

#### DEHUMANIZATION IN KAREN IDENTITY

The Karen, the paper finds, have a close kinship with the idea of penalization, from being brought in to build a penal settlement for the

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<sup>2</sup> The penal colony of Andaman Islands was principally erected to house the prison *Kalapani*, meant for Indian captives.

British, to being constantly ambushed by the convicts engaged in the same labour (Mittal 2015, 5). Plato is a rebel and continually leads students in strikes against the ruling government. His rebellious streak goes a long way to show his instinct of survival through aggression and resilience. While undergoing torture at the hands of the Junta, Plato thinks of a military officer who is in charge of controlling students' hunger strikes against the government in Burma. The officer compares humans to poultry and cattle, assigning the same value to both kinds of life (Swarup 2018, 155). With the Burmese officer in question and Plato subscribing to essentially the same set of values, this comes as a shock to Plato that his ideologies mean little to a fellow citizen. The *speciesist* treatment meted out to rebels also highlights the plight of the marginalized Karen under the Junta. Thus, in moments of immense agony, Plato, questioning his original understanding and resignedly agreeing with the officer's view now, imagines himself as an animal and the how that particular creature would react when in pain:

With every spike in the current, he experiences life and death as an involuntary spasm. He will have no memory of the exaggerated way in which his body quakes and is flung across the floor, the pool of urine and shit that surrounds him and the stream of drool that flows down his cheeks [...] All he will remember is a voice. A shriek so loud and diabolical, it rouses him from unconsciousness. A cavernous shriek. In the delirium of torture, Plato attributes the cries to a pig being slaughtered nearby. (Swarup 2018, 155)

As mentioned before, prison and prisoners have been integral to forming the Karen identity in the islands. Their lack of a sense of belonging can be said to have instilled in them an instinct to surrender to their immediate circumstances which seems to have become a characteristic trait. While imprisoned, Plato feels one with nature and all its creations: "He bleats like a goat and yawns like a buffalo. He roars like a tiger and hisses like a snake. He cackles like the pouring rain and flip-flops on the floor like a fish out of water. He raises himself off the floor like a flower in bloom and crashes into the walls like a caged rooster" (Swarup 2018, 156). Swarup, again, indicates the inherent attribute of the Karen to turn to nature in moments of pain and indecision. Plato not only seems to accept that any escape from torture is impossible, but also finds solace in accepting himself to be as vulnerable in pain as any base animal—as the Bible (Genesis 1: 26)

teaches the humans to rule over all other creatures. He thus overlooks the fact that his religion advises him to separate himself from animals in every regard (Buell 2013, 6). Despite the Karen people's confusing faith in Christianity being an intrinsic part of their culture, Plato seems to forget all he knows and has learnt in life, in an absolute state of pain. Hence, he acknowledges all creatures as essentially the same. Julietta Singh voices similar thoughts in her 2018 book *Unthinking Mastery*: how the sheer strain of carrying another human within herself and parenting a pet made her feel dehumanized and almost possessive of animalistic instincts while dealing with both parties in an amicable fashion (Singh 2018, 127-128). From a subaltern perspective, this can also be seen as a decisive point in the narrative when the Karen man comes into his own regarding his long-denied identity as a citizen, rebel and part of nature.

Though the Karen people are a peaceful tribe, they have been subject to much violence at the hands of the ruling parties, the indigenous tribes and the prisoners on the island (Sen 2010, 2). Their task was to clear forests to build the intended prison for Indian rebels: one which they undertook with utmost sincerity and fear of having to resort to a nature that is against their truth for “[t]he islands, they made no distinction between ants, centipedes, snakes and humans. They engaged them all in a primal struggle for survival” (Swarup 2018, 164). This sentence from the novel could be viewed as a turning point in the understanding of nature and life, as possessed by Rose Mary, that the Karen need not always ace their challenges by adopting peaceful measures to meet them. Despite leading peaceful and non-violent lives, the Karen people must choose between life and death. However, their Pastor, who helps Mary<sup>3</sup> leave with the Varmas, teaches them differently. While attempting to build a flock upon the newly discovered archipelago, the Pastor fed the spiritually starving tribe a new tenet; that the souls of those who were killed and eaten by animals “doth not perish” and lives on “in the devourer” (Ibid, 60). He encouraged the Karen's persistent faith in animals that had killed their relatives, carrying the spirit of the dead; so much so, that they continued to feed dangerous animals like crocodiles, while risking and even losing their own lives in the bid. The Karen, here, subscribe to their inherent love for nature and all its components even as they hold on to their non-confrontational spirit and display uninterrupted

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<sup>3</sup> From the point that she enters the Varma household, Rose Mary becomes ‘Mary’.

conviction in the self-centred teachings of the Pastor. However, the very task of clearing the forests for constructing the Cellular Jail could have possibly challenged this attitude and awakened the need for violence and aggression in them.

As reluctantly accepted by the Karen in complete contradiction of their values, a necessity for violence appears as being further realized by Rose Mary in another incident. Swarup narrates an instance of Rose Mary's husband bringing home a turtle after a particularly long bout of starvation. "Such a big animal would last them a fortnight if consumed prudently. She borrowed a metal bucket big enough to accommodate the turtle and placed it in a corner. She began by chopping the legs off, consuming only one per day. She made it a point to feed the turtle and tend to its wounds. It was the only way to keep the meat fresh" (Swarup 2018, 161). However, the pain and sorrow in the turtle's eyes deeply moves her and she feels compelled to put the creature out of its misery (Ibid). Mary realizes that she has been nourishing the life within her by slowly and painfully taking another life. This can also serve as an extended metaphor for her own feelings; trapped in a life she regrets having chosen and inwardly yearning for someone to end her own suffering. By relating her plight to having limbs cut off of one's own body, the research paper understands Mary as undergoing pure agony.

Even when her world is crumbling around her, Rose Mary holds on to her faith as her guide. At the same time, she raises Devi to respect plants and animals (Ibid, 93) and instinctively finds her way back to her child in Burma, hoping to see him free like the mynahs whom she sets free at the Shwedagon Pagoda (Ibid, 142).

#### IDEOLOGICAL CONGERIES IN KAREN IDENTITY

As an advantageous factor in adjusting herself to an unfamiliar environment, Mary seems to be leading a life of blissful oblivion towards her roots, wanting to know little of traditions but constantly wondering about the *anthropos* and *humanitas* distinction that she knows of. Upon being bitten by a particularly notorious centipede, Rose Mary is comforted by her mother, who tells her that only the ungodly creatures hurt other beings, like the centipede. This distresses the young child, who begins to endlessly ponder over the question of whether or not she is a part of the world that God created:

Her mother's words had upset her more than the centipedes. The venomous snakes, the bone-crushing crocodiles and the strangling

creepers, were they not creatures of god too? In the unconditional kiss of a leech, the night-coloured bruises left on her skin by the jungle and a sea urchin's spines, lived the will of a god very different from Christ on her mother's locket. A god whose worshippers had the freedom to bite and hurt without guilt. (Swarup 2018, 146)

Here Mary's childhood is portrayed as a period of confused ideological development. Though she is a Christian, Mary begins to see that her religion sometimes fails to explain certain earthly phenomena adequately. While a part of her fears and reveres the creatures that surround her home and sustain life around her, another part grapples with the knowledge that they might not be as pure of heart and good animals as she, as a human, is. This could be a possible reason for Rose Mary's confusion throughout life and her failure to be decisive when faced with opposing ideas—stay on with her familiar but constraining parents or elope with a loving and liberating stranger; endure her husband's drunken fits of violence or put an end to it; hold on to her child or give him up to start afresh; continue to live on Mount Harriet, serving Girija Prasad, or reconcile with her estranged son and start life anew.

As a child, Plato too, attempts to draw connections between his physical world and the one in his mind which he makes up on his own: "The jungle was a place where tigers, crocodiles, Nagas—serpent dragons—and Nat<sup>4</sup> spirits ruled. It was where he belonged. His mother, a Naga, had taken human form for his birth. His father, a Naga too, was a serpent from the sea. Earthquakes, whirlpools, cyclones were all their doing, as they slithered through their serpent holes" (Swarup 2018, 130). As a child, Plato seems content imagining the jungle as his home, for there is no distinction between beings within the jungle.; However, growing up he woefully realizes that human beings cannot live without creating distinctions among themselves everywhere (Ibid, 172).

## CONCLUSION

The Karen identity is constantly changing with time. From colonial rule to democracy, the Karen have maintained a low profile and focused on working on their environment to make it sustainable and on building bridges and socializing with the mainland population (Mittal 2015, 20). However, for Plato and Rose Mary, it is more of a

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<sup>4</sup> God-like spirits worshipped in Myanmar.

compulsion than a choice to adapt themselves to their environment. While Plato quietly accepts his fate as a prisoner, Rose Mary chooses to follow the path that life takes, having lost all faith in her instincts after losing her family.

For the Karen, their environment does not exist based on the established sets of binaries or other such colonial distinctions but rather it rests upon their ability to make peace with their situation as migrants in a land where they have made their own. While land may mean flora and fauna to someone like Girija Prasad Varma (Swarup 2018, 8), for the Karen people of the Andaman Islands, it means new soil that demands not only their uprooting from their home but also persistence. Their attempts at sustaining life on the islands are not limited to their practice of building eco-friendly houses and roads or holding on to traditional methods of agriculture (Maiti 2004, 975) but also extend to maintaining a model code in the treatment of environment. Rose Mary and Plato hold true to their environmental convictions and live not just with nature, but also as nature; drowning their most poignant experiences in the nature around them and within them. Not only do they rely upon nature to guide their spirits in moments of decision-making but also ascertain the quality of those decisions based on how it affects their immediate environment. As in Rose Mary's case, there are multiple instances in the novel which convey her guilt surfacing over torturing a turtle a very long time ago and the horror of her deeds returning to berate her internally (Swarup 2018, 165). However, these instances help her to realize that her heart belongs in the islands, much like the song she remembers in moments of intense emotional experiences, as sung by Karen mothers to soothe infants; asking their wandering souls to return home (Ibid, 153).

Plato learns similar lessons in the years leading up to his imprisonment and yearns for the intimacy that he once shared with his environment, as justified by his belief that names are forgettable but not seasons (Swarup 2018, 158). Hence, he not only equates his stature to that of an animal but also feels like one in degrees of acute pain. Through highly graphic descriptions of military torture undergone by Plato and his fellow prisoners, which culminates in the prison guard carrying the prisoners back and spotting bats hanging from trees in sleep, Swarup also showcases the strange bond between the prisoner and the imprisoned (Ibid, 158). Plato's experiences can be said to have taught him the impermanence of life and the infinity of grief and loss; ideas that ultimately mirror the rule of nature—that nothing is worth



holding on to as much as life itself. Plato also seems to be aware of nature's ability to echo. Thus both these characters can be seen as propagators of the concept of Karen ideas of harmony. "The natural world has often provided a rich, colourful, permanent and universal compass to inform and inspire human actions, as well as to forge environmental and national identities. Nature is also an exercise in power in the hands of the powerful, and is entangled in the politics of belonging and alienation, exclusion and inclusion" (Sharma 2017, xviii).

The novel also portrays the Karen as prompt to adapt to their environment, possibly due to them being an agrarian community. When Mary reaches Sagaing to visit her son, she discovers resemblances in the topographies of the islands and the mountains while comparing the two: "Mary is reminded of Mount Harriet as she stands on the highest peak in Sagaing. The greenery rolls out in every direction. But the trees are not as high, the thicket not as dense as on the islands. Golden spires and domes of all shapes and sizes rise up higher than the trees, like anthills over grass." (Swarup 2018, 187). While she sees the Karen community on the Andaman Islands as her home and feels a degree of shock and sorrow when she has to leave, her journey to her son may be telling of her inherent human ability to see a home in every new land. Upon her arrival at Sagaing, Mary draws comparisons between her old home and her new place of dwelling, perhaps hoping to find commonalities that would help her forget the discontent of having to relocate. The *Ubi sunt* that Mary faces is taken in stride as well and Mary seems to be learning from her past by imbibing empathy for herself as well as her fellow creatures as shown by the figures which she carves on the dinghy's wood—of a turtle, a sea, a man, woman and child (Ibid, 140).

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