

The Sea is Alive: Navigating Waterscapes in South Asian Speculative Fiction

ATHIRA UNNI
LEEDS BECKETT UNIVERSITY

Abstract: The Anthropocene has cracked open the possibility of a liminal exchange between water and land. My article proposes that South Asian speculative fiction, with the background of the Vedic figure of Varuna — the Hindu god of water, sky, and the ocean — furthers the possibility of agency and life being attributed to waterscapes. This posthuman reading of an elemental force as ‘alive’ is seen in the short stories of Vandana Singh, Asif Aslam Farrukhi, and Mimi Mondal. While speculative fiction has probed and exposed the bareness of landscapes, few narratives have tackled the much pregnant excess within seascapes. These stories explore the themes of appearance/disappearance and of belonging/Otherness in varied forms of water. They combine climate anxiety with posthuman ontology to explore a unique path of ascribing agency to the hydrosphere itself, not solely through human-waterscape interactions, but also by enlivening the inhabitants of the waterscape. I situate these

stories as constructing the trope of oceanic posthumanism while speculating about the future of landscapes in the South Asian context. By foregrounding waterscapes, these stories underline the relationship we still have with the hydrosphere, question our destructive actions towards water bodies, and finally, break down familiar land-water and human-animal borders. These works subsequently depict a South Asian futurism that can clearly see the sea creeping onto land.

Keywords: posthumanism, waterscapes, oceanic posthumanism, speculative fiction, South Asia

Contemporary South Asian speculative fiction writers are largely cognizant of the manifold influences in terms of cultural references, mythology, and the traditions of Western science fiction that shape their own work.¹ This article proposes that works of South Asian speculative fiction depicting waterscapes can be read from a posthumanist perspective.

¹ See Padmanabhan (2021) for an account of how contemporary South Asian science fiction handles cultural stereotypes, and acknowledges the fusion of different influences — be it local or global.

Cary Wolfe uses the term posthumanism in the sense that it “opposes the fantasies of disembodiment and autonomy” (2010: xv), namely, for Wolfe, posthumanism is embodied. Posthumanism engages with “the problem of anthropocentrism and speciesism,” and is also “generative of openness to the environment” (2010: xix, xxi). Consequently, from Wolfe’s perspective, the human is and has always been “radically ahuman and constitutively prosthetic” (2010: xxvi). Drawing from Wolfe’s insights, this article applies a posthumanist perspective that perceives the human as embodied, prosthetic, and composed of more than the biological — a conception which confronts both anthropocentrism and speciesism. Such a perspective involves looking at boundaries that are both broken and maintained between land and water, and human and non-human bodies. Three stories which tap into the potent potential of waterscapes are ‘Stealing the Sea’ by Asif Aslam Farrukhi, ‘Sea Sings at Night’ by Mimi Mondal and ‘Thirst’ by Vandana Singh.

With reference to these short stories, I define oceanic posthumanism as a critical stance which addresses the breakdown of land-water and human-animal borders, as is expressed via the undercurrents of climate anxiety working through speculative narratives. My article broadly falls under the emerging field of blue humanities, which favours “capacious hydroecological frameworks” instead of terrestrial thinking and epistemological structures (Oppermann, 2019: 445). While thinking discursively and metaphorically about the sea which is “constituted by sociopolitical systems of capitalist regimes,” there is a danger of undervaluing the materiality of all that is oceanic, which is why Oppermann argues that

the meanings of the sea always remain in the “interstice between the *discursive* and the *real*” (2019: 445, 446). Relatedly, the necessity of defining the term oceanic posthumanism arises from a current lack of scholarly research into the waterscapes of South Asian speculative fiction. This term makes space for posthuman spaces where the elements — land and water — expose the unfolding climate crisis alongside its possible consequences.

A posthuman feminist understanding of Farrukhi, Mondal, and Singh’s short stories reveals themes of appearance/disappearance, and of belonging/Otherness in relation to waterscapes. Astrida Neimanis points out that our “inescapable humanness” is always more-than-human, with planetary bodies of water rupturing and renegotiating territory (2017: 2). In stories written in the Capitalocene epoch, climate anxiety is often addressed indirectly, portraying the boundaries between water and land becoming increasingly unstable. For posthuman feminism, I draw on the work of Neimanis and Rosi Braidotti — particularly her figurations of animal, insect, cyborg, and machine. Neimanis’ positioning of posthuman feminist concepts as “figurations” is in turn borrowed from Braidotti and Donna Haraway; according to Neimanis, these figurations can be understood as embodied concepts (2017: 5). Neimanis points out that there is some relationality between the human and the posthuman, but when considering bodies of water, those comprising the proverbial ‘we’ in the adage “‘we’ are all in this together” are not all the same (Neimanis, 2017: 15). *Videlicet*, climate crises disproportionately affect coastal communities in the Global South.² And yet, scholarly discourses around climate anxiety

² The dangers of sea level rise and exposure to multiple further vulnerabilities including salinity intrusion, drought, tropical cyclones, floods, and rainfall irregularities render the coastal zones around the Indian Ocean under severe risk when it comes to climate crises (Rabbani, et al., 2010: 17). Climate anxiety is worse for such coastal communities given

within South Asian speculative fiction presently remain limited.

In framing the new concept of oceanic posthumanism, it is important to closely delineate its scope of enquiry. Oceanic posthumanism explores the potentialities of utilising a posthumanist approach to highlight climate anxiety in speculative fiction. Posthumanism does not dismiss embodiment, but rather, looks to reclaim the body in new ways, transcending the mind-body dualism. Asserting that “the body is materialized through discourse as both word and practice,” Margaret Shildrick points out that, like postmodernists and scholars of deconstruction, posthumanists have “a way of rethinking bodies and subjects” (1996: 7). For Shildrick, embodiment extends from the humanist to the posthumanist tradition, with feminist theory paying particular attention to the body as a “site of contestation” of sexual politics (1996: 8). The postmodern understanding of embodiment is consequently that “social and biological bodies are not given” but are always changing, and that there are only “hybrid bodies, restless bodies, becoming-bodies, cyborg bodies; bodies, in other words, that always resist definition” (Shildrick, 1996: 9). This epistemological flux around the embodied posthuman justifies my use of the term assemblage over body, implying a corporeal alterity that manifests from liminality and hybridity.

Within this emerging understanding of posthuman embodiment, there has been a movement towards viewing the embodied

posthuman as functioning “less as a substantive entity than a figuration, or *conceptual* persona” (Braidotti, 2019: 34). By the term figuration, Braidotti proposes that the posthuman becomes a “graphic tool” that helps us understand the “processes of undoing the human” or “processes of becoming-subjects” in the Anthropocene (2019: 34). Via this understanding of the posthuman entity as a tool for comprehending the formation of new subjects and new narratives — of which narratives of the oceanic space are one kind — the idea of embodiment becomes less material and more conceptual. Likewise, Astrid Neimanis’ positioning of figurations as embodied concepts establishes that, via the breakdown of the human-animal border, liminality comes to manifest a means of addressing climate anxiety. Characters themselves subsequently become embodied concepts and oceanic posthuman agents, themselves determining how the text’s engagement with issues of climate crisis is presented. Posthumanism seeks to overturn dualist stances on the human and the animal, as well as other aspects of the environment such as physical and nonphysical processes.³ Significantly, the “reductive but effective categories” of nature/culture (Castree & Nash, 2006: 502) are disturbed in oceanic posthumanist texts. When the land-water breakdown occurs, a direct equivalence between land as culture, and water as nature occurs; a paradigm shift vital to the precepts such texts advocate.

their proximity to waterscapes, and the unfortunate crisis-related consequences of such locations. For more on how and why coastal communities are more at risk due to climate change, see Dolan & Walker (2006).

³ Consider how the Vedic figure of Varuna — the Hindu god of water, sky and the ocean — furthers the possibility of agency and life being attributed to waterscapes. In the Hindu mythological imagination, the ocean and the waters, along with the skies that give us rain, are controlled by a single personified entity. This reading of the element of water as being ‘alive’ is reflected in the stories of Farrukhi, Mondal and Singh. The physical process of the rain cycle is seen as a blessing of Lord Varuna, and such an understanding still colours the pantheistic imagination of many South Asian farmers amongst others.

Oceanic Posthumanism

In order to closely define oceanic posthumanism, consider three distinct textual conditions. Firstly, there ought to be a liminal landscape constantly shored up by water, or rather, the littoral ground must be one that exists precariously, with a possible breakdown of the land-water boundaries. The waterscape can be a sea, an ocean, a river, or even a lake, so long as its magnitude as a setting counts as tremendous and oceanic within the diegetic world. The field of oceanic humanities — while rightly focusing on historical narratives, and history itself — has largely ignored speculative fiction. Likewise, when considering speculative fiction, waterscapes in South Asia cannot be restricted to the Indian Ocean, given that the rivers and lakes in the subcontinent are rife with local myths, folk stories, and the potential for innovative narratives. Lavery notes that the ocean offers a method of reading that encourages one to look at “alterity, circulation and turbulence, as well as its stratification and navigability” (2021: 8). Any waterscape could function as an oceanic space in this sense; even within a lake or across a river, there will occur circulation and turbulence. Stories of stratified communities could be narrated around such waterscapes and importantly, these waterscapes tend to play a part in the story of stratification itself.⁴ In other words, an oceanic waterscape — not necessarily an ocean — is usually central to oceanic posthumanism. A speculative fiction narrative could be set around an artificial lake, or a tube well, whilst still emblematising oceanic posthumanism.

Secondly, there must be engagement with the amphibiousness of being human. Posthumanism is both a continuation of and a departure from what is human (in both the technological and biological sense), and from the humanist tradition of thought (Herbrechter, 2013: 23). Posthumanism and especially posthuman feminism recognises the need to consider alterity and criticise “narrow-minded self-interests, intolerance and xenophobic rejection of Otherness” (Braidotti, 2017: 25). When it comes to science fiction, the cyborg is only one of many creatures where a “dissolution of diverse boundaries” takes place; the “boundary between human and animal, between human-animal and machine and the one between physical and nonphysical processes” rapidly vanishes (Herbrechter, 2013: 108). Thus, posthumanism itself is inherently cognizant of the potentialities of dissolving boundaries. Alterity therefore commands prominence in posthumanist discourse. In oceanic posthumanism, the Other is usually a posthuman figure with an amphibious nature undergirded by a turbulence coming not only from identity, but also from ties to the unstable boundaries of the waterscape.

Bonds between beings across land-water borders have been explored since myths of krakens right up until recent visual media such as the much-lauded movie *The Shape of Water* (2017) and the documentary *My Octopus Teacher* (2020). A distinction nevertheless has to be made between deep-sea monsters of mythical fame who relate to the human in threatening ways, reacting to disturbances or

⁴ Although I am using three short stories to define oceanic posthumanism in this article, I see no reason to think that novels do not also embody characteristics of oceanic posthumanism. Some recent novels have explored speculative fiction narratives set around seascapes, including novels by writers from the Global South such as the Nigerian American Nnedi Okorafor with *Lagoon* (2014) and the Caribbean writer Monique Roffey with *The Mermaid of Black Conch* (2020). A deep dive into the potential of oceanic posthumanism as seen in these works lies beyond the scope of this article but is something I hope to return to in a later exploration.

fiercely protecting their deep-sea ecosystems, and the amphibious posthuman who relates to the human beyond the emotion of fear. Thalassophobia (fear of the sea) appears primal for humans, manifesting in sea monster myths which are deeply pervasive across cultures — in line with Jungian philosophy, “the deep-sea monsters we create are archetypal images of repressed shadow elements in our collective psyche” (Jamieson et al., 2020: 798). In contrast, the posthuman tends to be less feared but more doubly Othered within waterscapes; initially tolerated only for its otherness or strangeness, and eventually rejected due to its assimilation to ‘normality’ being impossible. Neimanis’ concept of embodied figuration is useful when analysing such posthuman figures arising from, or belonging to waterscapes, where embodiment becomes liberating as much as it is restricting, in terms of forming bonds across land-water borders.

Thirdly, questions of land/culture and water/nature equivalences commonly arise when considering narratives characteristic of oceanic posthumanism. It is necessary to consider these equivalences on a case-by-case basis. In the following discussions, I consider the possibilities and dangers of such equivalences where they exist and show that the breakdown of boundaries is accompanied by strong undercurrents of climate change discourse. Where posthuman ontology and embodied figurations force such an equivalence, this equivalence between land/culture or water/nature transpires in line with the issue of climate crisis. Subtexts of climate anxiety in these contemporary stories must be read in the context of the very real threat of floods, hurricanes and tsunamis affecting the livelihood of coastal communities in South Asia, and across the Global South.

The ocean as historical archive is a useful methodology for approaching the problem of the climate crisis, as the Oceanic Humanities for the Global South website implies (Hofmeyr, 2018). Detailing public humanities projects that contain flood maps or study submerged cities, the website showcases uses of technology within the critical humanities to understand, record the impacts of, and help prevent natural catastrophes. These practical applications of technology to study the historical and geological archives of the ocean in the face of climate change are contemporaneous with emerging scholarly literatures on oceanic spaces and their literary value. In the three short stories within the scope of my own critical enquiry, each literary diegesis recognises the omnipotence of waterscapes. Regarding stories set around the Indian Ocean, Lavery notes that a recentring of fiction towards seascapes “shift conceptions of literary space” significantly (2021: 1). Lavery’s work within the larger field of oceanic humanities encapsulates her research on literary representations and the cultural implications of the ocean as a resource; engendering a new oceanic way of thinking, and a space where entire histories are formed.

Crucially, the short stories discussed within this article illustrate oceanic posthumanism in more than one type of waterscape. Farrukhi’s and Mondal’s stories are set around a sea — presumably the Indian Ocean — and Singh’s story takes place near a lake. All three stories evince a conscious sensibility towards the waterscapes as not just spaces to be navigated, but as precious resources appreciated for their vitality and permeable borders, not to mention the various stakeholders dependent on them. Kathleen D. Morrison’s term “[p]rovincializing the Anthropocene” (2018: 4) is crucial here, as the Indian Ocean, and its neighbouring water bodies are indigenous sources of sustenance, yet

have become subject to destructive changes in specific ways due to the climate crisis.⁵ Over decades, the monsoons and environmental changes have enabled a connectedness around the “Indian Ocean world” (a construct modelled on Wallerstein’s world-systems theory) that has allowed “coastal, island, and maritime communities” to thrive and survive (Lavery, 2021: 2). Instead of relying on Eurocentric history, studying fiction surrounding the Indian Ocean and other local waterscapes allows access to provincialized histories and stories of South Asia.

The emergence of postcolonial literatures has paved the way for different conceptions of modernity that recognise the hybridity brought about by colonialism. In other words, postcolonial scholarship has changed the ways in which modernity has been perceived outside the West. In her book, Lavery studies the works of Joseph Conrad, Amitav Ghosh, Abdulrazak Gurnah, and Lindsey Collen whilst employing Isabel Hofmeyr’s conceptualisation of the Indian Ocean as a site of alternative modernities (2021: ix). The concept of alternative modernities — and related concepts, such as multiple modernities, and postcolonial modernities — is defined in terms of appropriating global cultural forms and global practices to local practices and customs via processes of “appropriation, adaptation and transformation” (Ashcroft, 2014: 6). Alternative modernities imply that Western modernity needs to be situated in the West. The idea of the Indian Ocean being a site of alternative modernity therefore attends to not just the postcolonial perspective but also opens the possibility of applying a range of perspectives to other waterscapes as well. Thus, a posthumanist reading of South Asian speculative fiction which depicts waterscapes as

sites of alternative modernity is apposite and in order.

Except That the Sea Had Gone

In Asif Aslam Farrukhi’s story “Stealing the Sea” (originally published in Urdu in 2011, as “Samandar ki Chori”), the sea disappears overnight, shocking the citizens of a coastal city. Hailing from Farrukhabad but having lived in Karachi most of his life, Farrukhi greatly admired the area, and was inspired to write “Samandar ki Chori” during a walk along Seaview Beach in Karachi (Salman, 2020: online). Trained as a physician, Farrukhi had literary influences in his own family, with his father and uncle being writers (Salman, 2020). His family had migrated from an ancestral home in Fatehgarh-Farrukhabad with its Mughal and British histories to the coastal city of Karachi after the India-Pakistan Partition in 1947 (Farooqi, 2020: online). Farrukhi was a “modern-day literary giant” in the Urdu literary scene writing in and translating to English, and he even co-founded the Karachi Literary Festival (Salman, 2020). In this particular short story, Farrukhi’s imagining of the absence of the sea allows for a thorough observation of the sequence of events that follow.

After the sea vanishes overnight, the citizens are too busy with their routines to note that the sea is missing and to mourn its absence. Where the sea once was, there is only a “huge crater,” but joggers, milkmen, and pedlars continue to go about their business (17). The absence of the sea is repeatedly iterated to indicate the central premise, namely a sense of aporia throughout which the seascape nevertheless survives to mourn the monumental loss. These repeated iterations occur thus: “[t]

⁵ See Chakrabarty (2000) for a study of the limits of Western thinking when it comes to addressing the problems of the Anthropocene — which Chakrabarty argues were brought about by long-term European colonial capitalism.

he sea was not where it should have been” (18), “[n]o one could see the sea” (18), “the sea had gone” (20), “[o]nly drops were left, but no sea” (28). With the sea gone, the seascape is merely a spread of sand that extends across the crater-shaped land, smelling of dead fishes. Around this new bizarre seascape, the city’s citizens slowly awake to the absence of the water, and come to terms with the implications, ranging from ecological repercussions, to economic loss, and political turmoil. The absence of the sea is additionally marked by a sense of mourning, including evoking memories of the sea, and memorializing it with poetry (23-24). Yet, it is ironically the absence of the sea that makes the citizens more present, and aware of the seascape that survives.

The concept of alternative modernities can be used to shed light on what transpires among the citizens around the surviving seascape. The reasons for the disappearance of the sea are much debated in the story; as the title implies, the sea is thought to have been “stolen” and the theft impacts the whole city. The reactions to this ‘theft’ occur across different professional discourses, illustrating that postcolonial modernity has permeated the coastal city of Karachi that Farrukhi so loves. A retired bureaucrat, an activist, a lawyer and a teacher all respond to the disappearance of the sea in stereotypical ways. The bureaucrat talks about money and land grabbing, pointing out that the “sea belonged to the whole city” (21). The impact on the wildlife and the mangroves is of prime concern to the activist, who recommends a “peace march” (22). The lawyer recommends filing a Freedom of Information Request against the person who presumably stole the sea, while the teacher suggests that they determine the true “extent of the loss first” (22). These varied reactions are not simply humorous elements, but indicative of thriving postcolonial modernity,

and surviving colonial structures of bureaucracy and the legal system. The disappearance of the sea is symbolic of the city “being sold to speculators and real-estate developers” (Ali, 2021: online). Farrukhi portrays postcolonial modernity via these professional reactions to an event with no precedent which puzzles everyone. At the same time, he manages to capture the local charm of Karachi, conveying the concern of the city dwellers despite their professional filters.

The ecological repercussions that the activist ruminates on might lead readers to assume that ecological reasons have indeed caused the disappearance of the sea. The “fine ecological balance” between the environment and humans is so delicate that if “one goes, the other will not survive either” (21). Patently, the breakdown of land/water borders that happens with the disappearance of the sea threatens ecological balance. Some citizens also speculate that the catastrophe could indicate a bigger problem such as an “oil spill, an ecological disaster, a local effect, a nuclear holocaust...” (19). The traditional procession of mourning floats that used to be sailed to the sea now have nowhere to go (28), and the sea was also an outlet for humans, the site of family picnics, romantic dalliances, and recreational activities: “[t]he sea used to absorb a lot” (26). Ahead of its time, Farrukhi’s story brings climate anxiety in the Capitalocene to the surface, via narrating a near mythical disappearance which reveals that this particular omnipresent aspect of the landscape held together a community with its economy, set of cultural practices and daily activities. The sea’s sudden disappearance not only triggers latent fears related to ecological imbalance but has also significantly unsettled community dynamics.

The blurring of land/water borders — or rather, the complete vanishing of the sea and the

taking over of the land — sustains focus on the city that remains. A retired bureaucrat reminds people that the city needs “open areas and picnic resorts badly,” a realization specifically brought about by the catastrophe (21). He also opines that the sea belonged to the whole city and not to any particular class of people. The idea that the sea belongs to a city, to a people, is however reversed at the end of the story when the sea remains gone: “the people of the sea will see that the city has been stolen” (29). The people who were denizens of the city, who made up the coastal community, are now people of the sea, and it is the city which has effectively been stolen. As such, the city now belongs to those who would buy it as a novelty, a coastal city that has been drained of water, and who proceeds to advertise it with imagery “showing receding water, and a twinkling city rising from the sand” (29). The disappearance of the sea has become a selling point for real estate. Thus, the city is in turn stolen from the people who, after mourning and memorializing the sea, have become people of the sea.

Towards the end of the story, the catastrophic consequences of the unprecedented disappearance are described vividly:

The sea breeze did not blow despite the day’s heat. It would have, if there had been a sea. Humidity had engulfed the city as if someone had inverted a hot, sticky glass jar over it. By the evening, the smell was spreading all over the city. Fish and octopuses were seen strewn on the footpath. Seabirds sat on the electric poles with puffed wings, tired of flying like drenched crows in the rain. (29).

These details are reminiscent of reports from places that have weathered natural disasters. The references to dead fishes, octopuses, and tired seabirds shows how the

disappearance has had tragic consequences for the wildlife, an aspect of the story crucial to any posthuman perspective which seeks to probe the boundaries between the human and the animal. The ending of the story likewise indicates that the death of animals — fishes, octopuses and other kin — which has been brought about by the disappearance of the sea happens in tandem with the slow dissipation of humanity, or the failure of the coastal community, manifesting an unparalleled collective loss for humans and their companion kin. It is not just the wildlife such as “fish... prawns” (27), but rather the community overall that suffers from the absence of the sea; the whole city suffers. When the city is stolen, the stories of the people are also gone and, without the sea, the inescapable question becomes “[w]here will anybody be” (29). Appropriately, the story ends with the phrase “a camel owner is crying” (29). Within the diegetic world, and perhaps even outside it, the sea owns humans and the city, as opposed to the converse.

The Surf Song

Mimi Mondal’s short story “The Sea Sings at Night” is about a woman in Mumbai who wakes up with the recognition that her girlfriend Matsa — who hails from among the sea folk — feels trapped by her newfound life on land. Mondal is a contemporary Dalit science fiction and fantasy writer and was the first Indian to be nominated for the Hugo Award. According to Mondal, many contemporary Indian speculative fiction writers are not just ripping off Western science fiction, or recycling mythological tales, but instead writing “fresh, innovative stories” (2018b: online). For her, SFF has always been a political genre, and she writes with a recognition that her Dalit ancestry seems to inadvertently “set off some triggers”

(Mondal, 2018a: online). She points out that she exists in “a halfway space between” those speculative fiction writers from various other disenfranchised minorities, and Dalit writers writing in genres other than speculative fiction (Worra, 2017). With this particular story being about not just the dénouement of a relationship, but also about the breakdown of boundaries between land and the sea, Mondal’s unique liminal position in the contemporary Indian speculative fiction scene becomes particularly relevant.

The story’s secondary protagonist Matsa is compelling because she straddles two worlds, encouraging at least two readings of her character that work in the context of the story. To the Western reader unfamiliar with the context of Mondal’s writing, Matsa might be read as a mermaid-like figure. The mention of singing in the story’s title alongside Matsa’s fishy nature — including her devouring large quantities of seafood in the narrator’s kitchen — add to the likelihood of her being read as a mermaid. Many scholarly works pertaining to mermaids have been produced, including readings of agency, sexuality, and mythological imagination, whilst mermaid characters in popular culture and literature range from sirens to Disney princesses.⁶ Matsa herself is most likely named after the Sanskrit word for fish [matsya], and she is set apart by her identity being defined in relation to the sea. As Melody Jue proposes, the introduction of a character from a different habitat in oceanic fictions allows the reader to tune in to “normative habits of orientation within a particular environment” (2020: 7). Hence, conceptual displacement, modelled on Philip K. Dick’s term conceptual

dislocation, is defined by Jue as a “method of dislocating terrestrially nurtured thought into the ocean, a process that may involve physical immersion, technically mediated immersion, and speculative immersion through fiction, film, digital media, and the arts” (2020: 7). A reader’s terrestrially nurtured thought is here dislocated by way of Matsa’s character, and this immersion effectively brings out the strangeness of having a fishy woman in one’s bed. Ultimately, readers are compelled to consider the relational nature of habits and habitats’ character.

A second plausible reading interprets Matsa’s Otherness as representative of a Dalit woman’s caste identity. Matsa is uncomfortable in the narrator’s apartment; her habitat is the sea, and land becomes a place where she is “hungry, panicked, trapped” (36). Furthermore, Matsa cries in her language with a “guttural cadence” that sounds like “surf song” (36). Distinctions in both native habitat and language establish Matsa’s character as the Other. The narrator is not one of the sea folks, and at best only seems politely interested and curious enough to explore a relationship with one. This attitude appears common; the narrator observes that the guy who brings lunch for her at the office might be “sea fauna,” and her friend Sanjoy uses the phrase “sea types” to refer to those like Matsa (38, 37). Later, when the narrator realises that there is no point continuing the “forced assimilation,” she drives Matsa to the sea, and tells her to give her regards to her folks after having supposedly tried her best (38). It is not hard to imagine that the forced assimilation that the narrator admits to could be the assimilation of a Dalit woman into a Savarna — ‘upper caste’ — environment. Mondal consistently

⁶ For the origins of mermaid-lore in relation to Ancient Greek literature, see Mustard (1908). For an account of how mermaids have formerly comprised a feminine symbol of sexuality in popular media and film, see Bell et al. (1995). For a more up to date understanding of how mermaids have stood for an other-than-human self, evolving from mythical origins towards a figure integral to human meaning-making, see Robertson (2014).

portrays the narrator's seaside apartment as an uncomfortable, distressing space for Matsa, yet soon after the narrator closes the window overlooking the sea, wanting to close her space off entirely, the sea encroaches onto the bed that Matsa has recently vacated. In a pervasive act of justice that is simultaneously personal, political, and environmental, the land-sea demarcation in the story fails. Characteristics of oceanic posthumanism pervade this breakdown of borders between the land and the sea, and settle upon the amphibiousness of Matsa's character.

To what extent then, does an interpretation of Matsa as an analogue for a Dalit woman speculatively explore the desired ends of contemporary caste politics? It certainly does not do so in obvious terms, as it would in a realist story; here the mode of speculative fiction both limits and assists the expression of political perspectives. Consider Mondal's portrayal of Matsa as inseparable from the sea. Does it help the cause of caste emancipation to portray a Dalit woman being uncomfortable and unable to cope in Savarna space? It is certainly interesting to think of space in speculative fiction serving further political ends. In the extreme, space inside narratives can be used so effectively as to shape dystopian landscapes that exert authoritarian control, one example being the cityscape in Prayaag Akbar's dystopian novel *Leila* (2017) where the Purity One walled sector and inaccessibly built flyroads maintain strict class divisions and ideals of caste purity (Dawson Varughese, 2021: 1045). Antithetically, it could be argued that assimilating into the narrator's living space and conforming to Savarna ideals is a betrayal of the Dalit identity, and a renunciation of the surf song. Hence, naturalizing caste demarcations via the parallel of a land-sea divide and showing the failure of these divides as the sea rushes on to the land becomes a powerful means of

representing caste politics in Mondal's story. The ending of the story suggests that what can replace Savarna-initiated forced assimilation is a rush of intercultural excess, with the sea in the story representing memories, grief, or alterity that cannot be resisted. The point here, however, is that the sea itself is an active agent, a habitat alive with purpose, and more importantly, home to the "ethereal" and "wild, strange, free" character of Matsa (37). In the end, it is this untamed agency of the sea that the narrator challenges, shutting the window and desperately trying to cling onto land.

The breakdown of the relationship between the narrator and Matsa invites a corresponding breakdown of land-sea borders. The embodied figuration of Matsa's character is rejected in accordance with territorial norms, triggering a response from the seascape. Even before Matsa leaves, her discomfort had turned her half of the bed in the apartment "into the sea" (36). This is too much for the narrator. She wants to stop the midnight madness, but laments that with half of Mumbai "reclaimed from the sea" the city is teeming with sea fauna anyway (36). The undercurrents of climate anxiety in the story, from the mention of reclaimed coastal land, to the sense of grief after the sea rushes in to claim it back, are strong. The references to the sea folk — those "hunting for lesser sea fauna" and selling them, and others who "could also be the autowalla" or "could be the guy furiously writing programs in a cubicle" — betray upper caste snobbery and xenophobia (36). The story's overriding tone is one of distrust and fear, this fear crystallizing around the sea's reclamation of what has been claimed from the seafolk, some of whom are now functioning capably within the confines of territorial norms. Matsa's character signifies the failure of trying to conform to these assimilationist norms, as is evidenced by her "thrashing and struggling to breathe in our little

flat open to the sea” (36). The sea’s response — or reclamation of the land — therefore becomes politically significant, environmentally relevant, and tinged with private grief:

I turn to the space next to me... and in the light of the full moon, I see your half of the bed has turned into the sea. The silvery water stretches all the way to the horizon, rippling, dancing, but in that vast, empty stretch, there is not a sign of you. I lie curled up by the seaside and weep. (39)

With her dripping long hair and surf song, Matsa embodies the sea itself. Now, the sea stretches towards the horizon with Matsa nowhere to be seen, in turn indicating a rejection of the narrator by the seascape. Matsa’s absence also emphasises the omniscience of the element over the individual, and of waterscape over watery embodiment. It is unclear whether the narrator is grieving the loss of Matsa, or the invasion of the silvery water turning the bed into the seaside. Given that the seafolk are defined in terms of proximity to the sea, it could even be said that the narrator is, by proximity to the sea, now closer to being one of them than before.

On Thirsts and Lakes

Vandana Singh’s “A Speculative Manifesto” specifies “wonder” as the principal emotion she intends to generate through her writing (2020a: 197). In her 2008 short story “Thirst,” the

young female protagonist Susheela experiences a pull towards her local lake, transforms into a water-snake, is bound by a family curse (vaguely reminiscent of the Indian myth of *nagins*, or half-snake, half-woman beings) and ends up killing the intrusive gardener who makes advances towards her (Singh, 2020b: 107). The story has an ambiguous ending, as Susheela returns as a human to her husband’s house following sexual exploits in the lake with another snake.⁷ The lake functions as an omnipotent space in the diegetic world; it witnesses Susheela’s posthuman transformation and becomes an agent of oceanic posthumanism by facilitating her immersive experience. The waterscape of the lake is both the site where the family curse manifests, and the place that pulls Susheela towards the possibility of pleasure and away from her stifling married life.

Throughout Singh’s story, the binary between species breaks down. The human and the snake are shown as one and the same person, with the same consciousness; Susheela remembers herself as the snake, and the snake vaguely remembers herself as human.⁸ The title of the story is also a direct reference to Susheela’s mentality; she is pulled towards a thirst for transformation and a literal thirst for water, which she associates with the memories of her grandmother who disappeared during a flood (100). Her name means ‘good behaviour/habits’, a namesake which she carries as a burden. When she wakes up at the beginning of the story, “her name came to her — Susheela — and with it the full weight of her misery returned” (90).

⁷ In the Western mythical imagination — fueled by Biblical imageries of the snake as a tempting figure that leads Eve astray — snakes are associated with evil and danger. Contrastingly, the figure of the *nagin* as half-woman and half-snake is more morally complex in its originary cultures than Singh’s story suggests.

⁸ For an evocative parallel, see the videopoem “Philosophy in the Wild” by Bogna Konoir and Yvette Granata, which explores the possibilities of an interspecies alliance between woman and snake, the dynamic carrying heavy symbolism from the Judeo-Christian tradition. The epistemological exchange here, and the motto of the work — “evennement, not enlightenment” — points to interesting ways in which feminist discourse has reclaimed and rethought the moral connotations associated with body, knowledge, and serpents.

The expectation of good behaviour therefore positions her thirst as aberrant, something akin to a rebellious angst to break social norms, an intergenerational feminist urge and the will to defy familial expectations.

“Thirst” can subsequently be read as an ecological commentary about protecting local water bodies and their inhabiting creatures. Susheela’s characterisation depicts an immersive experience of going underwater and experiencing a transformation that then changes the liminal self. With this transformation, the ecological angle sharpens. The story clearly has an underlying ecofeminist agenda, hinting at the bond between women and nature, whilst depicting the taming and exploiting of one being tied to the abuse of the other. The only reference to religion in the story concerns the worship of snakes; the folklore figure of the *nagin* arises, associating the waterscape of the lake with the *femme fatale* posthuman figure. Importantly, the *nagin* is not typically portrayed as a friendly being in folklore. Hence, in the story, the snake/woman is a killer, with a hint of misandry in the act of killing the gardener. Haraway’s notion of posthuman “pleasure in the confusion of boundaries” (2017: 307) is relevant here, in describing an inter-species play of emotion and sexuality, where human sensibilities are framed using myth, instead of technology. This challenges Haraway’s notion that only biological and technological breakthroughs can blur species boundaries in order to create posthumans; mythical inter-species beings such as *nagins* imply alternate posthuman imaginations drawing from local folklore in order to tell ecofeminist stories.

The transformation of the human body is described in the story with a feeling of terror, but also as culminating in meeting a community of snakes, experiencing each other’s thoughts and memories. The snake that is Susheela couples

with a male cobra in a sensual watery episode, markedly different from the “barren” life that she knows as a human (105). She becomes suddenly aware that she was conceived in a similar way, that her mother and grandmother had experienced the same union. Soon after, she transforms to her human form, which suddenly feels “strange, awkward” after the lightness of being a snake (106). It appears that her repressed sexuality is coming to the fore in a watery, inter-species coupling that is described as an “alien” experience (104). Here, oceanic posthumanism brings a narrative of repression to the fore, suggesting a method for finding pleasure in metamorphosis and coupling which possibly facilitates species propagation, with the waterscape being the fertile ground for such pleasantly irreverent possibilities. Considering the continued survival of local ecologies and the murder of the gardener (a figure who imposes and maintains human order on local ecologies) the story neatly captures an ecofeminist sentiment without drowning in the wateriness of itself.

Conclusion

“Watery embodiment” challenges “three related humanist understandings of corporeality,” according to Neimanis, these being discrete individualism, anthropocentrism and phallogocentrism (2017: 3). In all three of the short stories discussed in this article, individualist notions are challenged, and a system set up under anthropocentric assumptions is overturned by posthuman feminist embodied figurations. This work happens around waterscapes that act variably as economic and political resources, habitats, and sites of personal transformation. If posthumanism advocates for an expansive sense of the human, then watery embodiment

also makes a case for a “more expansive sense of ‘we’” (Neimanis, 2017: 12). With this understanding, this article has broadly made three claims. Firstly, it has shown that waterscapes in speculative fiction function as sites of liminality, with boundary crossings happening across their borders, and reshaping embodied posthuman figurations themselves. Secondly, posthuman transformations, such as in Singh’s story, can occur to make an ecological statement not forgoing the ecofeminist consciousness that drives local mythical imaginations. Thirdly, the seascape in its sheer force acts to shape entire cities, local wildlife, and economies in a questioning of capitalism, caste, and interpersonal relationships bound together with its own fate.

Oceanic posthumanism acknowledges the broken and reshaped boundaries between land and water in these stories, and recognises the watery embodiment in some representations of posthuman subjectivities. These representative stories advance ecological sentiments or betray climate anxiety aptly and appropriately, considering the contexts of their origin. At the same time, they are not devoid of hope, with the liminal existences of embodied figurations such as Matsa and Susheela exerting agency to extricate themselves from oppressive situations, with similar agency exerted by the waterscapes of the stories. Thus, when considered from a posthumanist perspective, waterscapes in fiction can provide exciting insights into how co-existence is possible without losing sight of our dependence on the provincial and the oceanic for survival.

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