

2-28-2018

Listening to Earth Stories: An Interview with Swarnalatha Rangarajan

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Recommended Citation / Citation recommandée

K, Sufina, and Bhuvaneswari R. "Listening to Earth Stories: An Interview with Swarnalatha Rangarajan." *The Goose*, vol. 16, no. 2, article 47, 2018,

<https://scholars.wlu.ca/thegoose/vol16/iss2/47>.

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SUFINA K. AND
DR. BHUVANESWARI R.

*Listening to Earth Stories:
An Interview with
Swarnalatha Rangarajan*

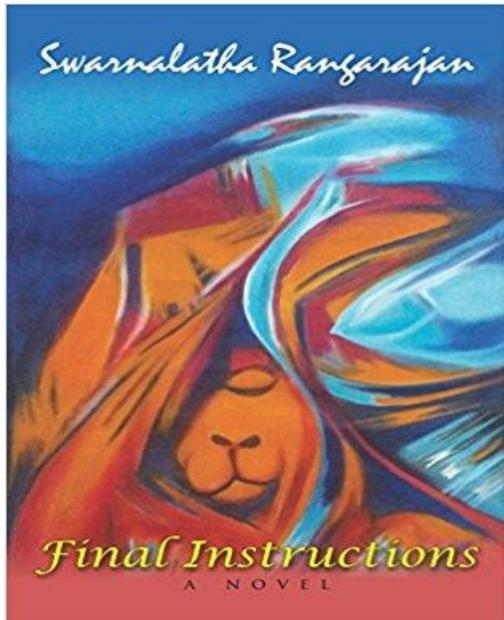


Swarnalatha Rangarajan. Photo credit: Lakshmi Chithra

A professor of English at the Indian Institute of Technology Madras, Swarnalatha Rangarajan wears many hats—teacher, editor, writer. She is a well-known ecocritic who has significantly contributed to the growth of field in the Indian context. She is the founding editor of *The Indian Journal of Ecocriticism*, and her scholarly publications include co-edited works like *Ecoambiguity, Community, and Development: Toward a Politicized Ecocriticism*; *Ecocriticism of the Global South*; and *Ecocriticism: Big Ideas and Practical Strategies*. A course in advanced

fiction writing at Harvard University inspired her to explore creative writing seriously and provided the initial impetus for her debut 2014 novel, *Final Instructions*. The novel is a multi-stranded work that embraces myth, fantasy, spirituality, and environmental concern. Apocalyptic in tone and narrating the environmental violence that is somatised in the bodies of the subaltern poor in typical Global South scenarios, the novel uses the languages of spirituality and myth to relate to the earth and to understand the language of the “other”—both human and nonhuman. The novel’s ecospiritual hermeneutic draws from Buddhist and Hindu traditions to move beyond questions of survival in the face of environmental crisis and explore deeper questions of how our lives can enrich the lives of others and create the conditions where life can flourish.

Because it straddles many dimensions, *Final Instructions* occupies a unique niche in the genre of environmentally oriented fiction from India. While the novel has much in common with the work of novelists like Indra Sinha, Ruchir Joshi, and Amitav Ghosh, who use the lens of social ecology to represent the environmentally fissured landscapes of India, it also resonates with the work of contemporary Indian women writers like Ambai and Volga, who remythicise the



epics, placing them in contemporary frameworks to make the subaltern visible. *Final Instructions* engages with the Ramayana story at many points in the narrative to offer a gentle, earth-centric perspective. The mystical dimensions of *Final Instructions* also invite analogy with writers like Paulo Coelho, as the novel incorporates the language of quest, adventure, fantasy, and spirituality. It could even be called a “Dan Brown meets India” thriller because, as in Brown’s novels, *Final Instructions* depicts forces of good pitted against the dark forces in a mysterious parallel universe where the quest for the Holy Grail is also a sinister struggle for power. Finally, Swarnalatha Rangarajan’s use of magic realist techniques to describe environmental distress in the novel also echoes the work of Chicana writer Ana Castillo.

The strength of the novel is its capacity to hold together various micro narratives of brokenness without a forcing closure. It is a fine example of “mosaic writing” that will not only appeal to the general reader looking for an interesting storyline and striking language, but will also challenge the deep reader looking for ways to contemplate and connect with the many dimensions of inter-being that the earth offers.

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IIT Madras, one of the most prestigious educational institutions in India, is usually referred to as the lungs of the megacity Chennai. The campus is tucked away from the frenetic buzz of the city in six hundred and thirty acres of wooded land that has been carved out of a natural forest. The

area is home to deer and endangered species like black bucks, and it teems with more than forty species of butterflies and a hundred species of birds. The area houses mini ecosystems ranging from wetlands and scrub jungles to open grasslands and dense forest patches. One cannot help but associate the natural riches of the campus grounds with the description of the forest in the opening chapter of *Final Instructions*. In our correspondence leading up to the interview, Professor Swarnalatha had instructed us to look out for a hoary Banyan tree. Although there were many on campus, it was easy to identify the big old Banyan tree standing like a giant, spreading its green canopy in front of the building that contained the writer and professor's office. Professor Swarnalatha's cabin is compact and has a wide east-facing window that opens out to dense foliage where nesting birds and monkeys are at play. Rays of sunlight kiss the room with brightness and warmth and the green ambience of the place, twice removed from the reality of the busy city, adds significance to our conversation.

Professor Swarnalatha spoke at length about her views on ecocriticism and also shared interesting experiences that had informed the writing of her novel. Our conversation is evidence of her deep interest in environmental literature and philosophy and her passion for exploring regional narratives about the environment to make them visible in the global academic scenario. She and her research scholar are currently engaged in the task of translating a Malayalam life narrative of the tribal eco-activist, Mayilamma, who opposed the setting up of the Coca Cola Plant in Plachimada village, from Kerala into English.

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**Sufina K. (SK):** *Most of your writings are on ecocriticism. What inspired you to take up ecocriticism?*

**Swarnalatha Rangarajan (SR):** I was not aware of ecocriticism until I finished my PhD, although ecocriticism as a vibrant theoretical domain had already taken firm roots in the 1990s. Ironically, I was at Harvard University as a Fulbright scholar at the same time as Lawrence Buell, the "grand old man" of ecocriticism, was teaching courses on environmental literature. However, I did not interact with him at that time since my doctoral work focused on the unpublished manuscripts of Thomas Wolfe, the American novelist. As an academic, I have always been haunted by the question, "How am I contributing to the world?" Attending a couple of ASLE conferences in India in the early 2000s answered this question satisfactorily for me because it put me in touch with a theory that emphasized the importance of relating to the earth and its human and nonhuman others in a meaningful manner. Ecocriticism, in other words, appeared to be a consciousness-raising experience to me.

**SK:** *The environmentalism of the West and the environmentalism of India are different. Dr. Rayson K. Alex in "A Survey of the Phases of Indian Ecocriticism" has emphasized that we need to form theories on our own, but we still quote and use Western concepts of ecocriticism. What is your suggestion?*

**SR:** Dr. Rayson K. Alex is absolutely right. We need to look at Indigenous ecotheories, which have figured in our cultural and literary spaces since ancient times. For instance, nature in her

creative aspect was revered as *Prakriti*, the female principle that works in tandem with *Purusha*, the male principle representing consciousness. We have the *Sangam* concept of *tinai*, which connected human communities with landscape, flowers, trees, geography, and the deity associated with that bioregion and particular ecozones like the pastoral lands, the forests, the littoral zone, the mountains, and the desert. *Tinai* integrates the natural, the cultural, and the sacred seamlessly. Similarly, cultures throughout the world have their own unique ways of conceiving nature. Ecocriticism began as a North American phenomenon, but it is no longer so. A convincing argument can be found in the excellent article by Scott Slovic and Joni Adamson, “The Shoulders We Stand On: An Introduction to Ethnicity and Ecocriticism,” published in *Melus*. Western academia is also looking to the rest of the world to contribute to regional discussions on the environment, which add considerably to the global understanding of the risk society in which we dwell. Even though in most of the seminars in India, scholars tend to dwell on eco-theories from the West, I would say ecocriticism in India is making new interventions in domains like risk studies, eco-cinema, and ecodocumentaries. Rayson K. Alex’s recent collection, *Ecodocumentaries: Critical Essays*, is a good example.

The very idea of ecocriticism is inclusive. It is about the need to create space for all Gaian stories. So, there is no need to have rigid binary boundaries and compartmentalize it as Global North or Global South ecocriticism. Instead, we need to talk across the species boundaries and nation boundaries. After all, Earth is filled with all kinds of stories waiting to be heard—your story, my story, the story of a leaf.

**SK:** *Today’s lifestyle is chaotic. At this rate, do you think biognosis is possible in our lifestyle? And how can a person change his attitude towards his environment through biognosis?*

**SR:** The dictionary defines biognosis as the scientific investigation of life. In my opinion, both science and the arts envisage the universe as a web of interconnections in which communication is taking place at gross and subtle levels. This concept is best illustrated in the work of the quantum physicist Fritjof Capra in his book *The Tao of Physics*. Capra uses the symbol of Shiva, the dancing God, to talk about the interaction between the static and dynamic energy flows of the universe. Capra goes on to say that at the quantum level everything is always in a state of communication with the other. I will explain my experience of biognosis by using a homespun example from my college days. I wrote about this experience in a short story called “Speaking in Many Tongues,” which was published in a collection called *Chicken Soup for the Indian Spiritual Soul*. I used to live in an old house that my family was planning to sell and move away from. I was an avid gardener who maintained a lawn with fragrant rose bushes and flowering vines. However, my favourite was a cannonball sapling that I planted to mark the end of my higher secondary examination. The sapling grew into a strapping young tree but did not blossom. Alarmed at the thought of going away without seeing a single flower from my favourite tree, I would spend hours talking to it about our proposed move from the house. I would fling my arms around it and plead for a flower. Imagine my surprise when the tree reciprocated by displaying a tender sprig of flowers the week before we moved out. At that age, it was proof enough to me that the universe communicates in many tongues, not necessarily human.

Another wonderful book, *The Secret Life of Plants* by Peter Tompkins and Christopher Bird, gives an interesting introduction to plant sentience. The book talks about experiments involving polygraphs attached to plants, which revealed that plants display emotional reactions when faced with a life threat. We are all energy bodies, not just flesh and blood. Everything in the world of nature communicates. We have to be patient to understand the language of nature and also speak for it, if possible.

**SK:** *As a writer, your deep understanding of ecocriticism is reflected in many of your articles and books, and equally in your creative works. Which is more challenging to deal with—theoretical or creative work?*

**SR:** I would say creative writing. I find creative writing more challenging than academic writing. I have published a number of short stories and poems. However, writing a novel was a more challenging task. The work faced multiple rejections since it is not an easy read. I am a spontaneous writer; I sit to write only when there is a flow of thought, and that was the case in writing the novel too. I would even go as far as to say the novel wrote itself. For example, the character of Hanuman materialized on its own and I realized only later that it was the pivotal symbol for the novel. Creative writing is a mysterious process which takes even the author by surprise. It flows from the subconscious mind.

**SK:** *Nature has a prominent role in the ancient literatures of India wherein it has been regarded as a sacred force. However, with the advent of colonization, nature became instrumentalized and began to be perceived as a mere resource. Do you think environmental awareness has gained momentum in Indian literature recently? Has the perception of nature changed?*

**SR:** Ancient literatures have documented the richness and importance of Nature, be it the *Vedic* or *Puranic* narratives or the vibrant oral and tribal traditions. We can't speak of one classical Indian tradition since it is impossible to contain India's heterogeneous cultures and worldviews into one mainstream idea. For instance, take the *Bishnois*, one of the ancient communities for whom nature protection is a *dharmic* code of honour. The community has vibrant stories of women and men who gave up their lives in order to save Khejri trees (*Prosopis cineraria*) from being cut. All ancient civilizations, not only India, believe that the Earth is the source of all sustenance. For example, the *Prithvi Sutra* in the *Atharva Veda* proclaims, "I am the son of the Earth, Earth is my Mother." But during the colonial rule in India, the invaders instrumentalised nature by introducing various disruptive practices, like the exploitation of the commons and the introduction of alien species, which interfered with the well-being of native plant and animal life.

In recent times we have stripped myths of their sacredness and religion has been reduced to a political tool. We have to respect diverse cultures and practices and we need to recognize the sacredness of myths. I strongly believe that Earth is sacred and that everything about Earth is sacred. When we live in this attitude of gratitude, sustainable living becomes more of a reality. The forum on Religion and Ecology at Yale University, which conducted The Religions of the World and Ecology Conference Series, has brought out an important series of books including *Hinduism and Ecology*, *Islam and Ecology*, *Buddhism and Ecology*, *Christianity and Ecology*, and

*Jainism and Ecology* in order to emphasize the role of world religions in bringing about environmental consciousness. The greening of religion is important since we need new myths to forge a deep relationship with the Earth during these troubled times.

**SK:** *Is there any reason behind setting the plot in a distant future in Final Instructions?*

**SR:** Yes, a sense of the future pervades the novel since it uses the trope of the apocalypse. However, it is not a distant future but the immediate future. Apocalypse is a very ancient way of imagining the way life on Earth will end. The Bible talks about it in the Book of Revelation; so do the religious texts of other world religions. Human imagination will dwell on the apocalypse, until the sun dies out, or until we inhabit or colonize other planets.

**SK:** *Final Instructions is infused with magical realism. Can you share your views on it?*

**SR:** *Final Instructions* cannot be compared to the Latin American novels which employ the genre of magic realism. What is magic? A deep experiencing of the wonders of the world is magic. Ecophilosophers often talk about the need for the re-enchantment of the universe. Although I have not used magical realism as a deliberate technique in the novel, I have used it as an antidote to the dreariness that happens when we allow ourselves to be mechanized by custom, thereby losing the magic inherent in our lives.

**SK:** *In the novel, you mention human compost. How does the thought of human compost germinate in you? Will future generations accept the idea?*

**SR:** In Japan, they are running short of burial space. As a result, they have built memorial buildings with numerous storied spaces to house the urns bearing the ashes of the dead. Death can nourish life instead of adding to Earth's copious carbon footprints. Today, projects like the Urban Death Project are evolving new systems of death care that honour both the dead as well as the Earth. Human composting transforms bodies into soil, which can grow new life after we die. I see earth-centric communities adopting this practice in the times to come.

**SK:** *Bhu Samrakshini means "protector of Earth"; Dakini is a name of a deity who has the "power of Earth, water, fire and air." Can you share your views on naming the characters?*

**SR:** The name Bhu came to me naturally. In the case of Dakini, the character asked me to be included in the novel; she was not there in the beginning, in the framework. She just came on her own. Dakini is a name I chose consciously. *Dakini* is a wrathful deity in Tibetan Buddhism, and we have *dakinis* in Indian traditions and other mother goddesses who symbolize the powers of the human mind. She is the guardian of the *mandala*—the circle with a centre in Hindu and Buddhist iconography—which symbolizes the inner self of an individual. The gateways for entering the *mandala* are guarded by fearsome deities who represent an individual's dark emotions. In order to reach one's own centre, a person has to fight with his/her terrible emotions. So Dakini is one such character who symbolizes the dark aspects of the self.

**SK:** *The emotions of the crow, Kalu, are highlighted with colours. What makes you associate particular colours with the emotions?*

**SR:** I borrowed this idea from theosophists like Annie Besant and C.W. Leadbeater, who believed that every thought has a form. According to them, emotions like sorrow are associated with dark colours such as black and brown, while feelings like happiness and fulfillment are clothed in colours such as pink, green, and gold. This is why the speaking crow in my novel has colourful thoughts. Literally!

**SK:** *Can you tell us about the state of bardo? Is it possible for a common man to experience or identify with the state of bardo?*

**SR:** *Bardo* is a term from Tibetan Buddhism for the intermediate state we experience between two stages. The traditional meaning of the *bardo* is the liminal passage, the state after death, and it is a crucial time, where the soul has to choose between another life on earth and liberation. All of us experience the *bardo* in our daily lives and there is no need for physical death to experience it. *Bardo* is a metaphor for the choices we make in life, the rites of passage we undergo that determine and shape the course of our life, and the trajectory of our growth that is a natural corollary when we transition from one state to another. *Bardos* are spaces of potential since they break our habitual patterns and allow us to act with greater freedom.

**SK:** *Nettle (Urtica dioica), kanakambaram (Crossandra infundibuliformis), and the Ashoka tree (Saraca asoca) are mentioned in the novel, which are not commonly seen or recognized in urban spaces. Do you deliberately mention the names of trees and flowers in order to educate the reader?*

**SR:** We need to celebrate our nonhuman denizens. Speaking of the Asoka tree, I am reminded of the beautiful verse in Kalidasa's poem, *Ritusamhara*, in which the poet talks about the coming of spring and the emotions induced by spring in the hearts of young girls by describing the beauty of the tender shoots of the Ashoka tree and its intoxicating bunch of red flowers. In ancient cultures, trees always bound humans to the cyclical rhythms of nature and also serve as bioregional markers. Today we have lost this sense of connection. The novel reflects this self-conscious desire to speak about indigenous flora and fauna.

**SK:** *In the novel, little Bhu has a conversation with the poisonous gas, which is personified as Yama, the God of Death, who is also the keeper of Dharma in Hindu mythology. But the poisonous gas you describe is more like Frankenstein's monster.*

**SR:** You are absolutely right! I am reminded of Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann's recent book, *Material Ecocriticism*, which forcefully describes the agentic force of matter—"matter matters." In that sense, Yama in my novel is the agentic force of *Prakriti*. In any mythology, the god of death is hardly a pleasant figure. For example, when we go to temple of Yama, we are not supposed to see the deity face to face. The word Yama literally means limits, and we can interpret this to be a limit to consumption and also about how long one can live sustainably on earth. Ramachandra Guha's *How Much Should a Person Consume?* offers an extended

meditation on this topic and critiques unchecked productivity and consumption, which have become the watchwords of the newly affluent middle class. When humans try to push the limits set by Yama, crisis occurs. Scientists and environmental theorists call this the Age of the Anthropocene. Human beings have become agentic forces who have meddled with nature so much that they are presently harrowed by Frankenstein's monsters who cannot be reined in anymore. The conversation between Yama and little Bhu is one of the parts that I enjoyed writing the most.

**SK:** *Are there any autobiographical touches in the fiction?*

**SR:** The novel was conceived while sitting on the stretch of black rocks extending into the sea at Pondicherry (one of the Union Territories of India). I have set the climax of the novel in the same location. This is the only autobiographical touch.

**SK:** *In the novel, you use a phrase "seeing nature as text." Can you tell us more about it?*

**SR:** Very often, text is related to papers and books, but it is not exclusively so. Nature is itself a text and is in a constant state of enactment. As human beings, we love narratives since we want to tell our stories. So, in a way we are textualizing our lives. In nature's diverse terrain, there are nonhuman actors who speak their unique languages, which we don't understand. This is a human limitation. It is therefore important to recognize the diversity of communication that can be found in the text of nature. Silence helps us enter this space; so can qualities like empathy, active listening, and a sense of camaraderie with our nonhuman neighbours.

**SK:** *In the novel, when Bhu injures her leg, a nameless weed helps her recover. The mythological Sanjeevini herb can heal the world. The characters in the novel talk to plants. Through examples like these, you seem to posit Nature as humankind's solace. Can you tell us more about why you think "humans cannot live in isolation"? Do you believe that there is holism in nature?*

**SR:** "No man is an Island," said the poet, John Donne, and I believe he is right. I exist because so many other things in this world help me exist. Even a plant that we dismiss as a weed can be an herb in disguise. We do not know about the healing properties of species in dense rainforests, although they are on the verge of extinction. There is an example given by Thích Nhất Hạnh, a Vietnamese Buddhist monk, that explains this chain of being beautifully. It is one of my personal favourites. He would hold a sheet of paper in front of his students and ask them, "What do you see here?" After many attempts the students came to realize that this was a deep question that could not be answered casually. The teacher would then continue, "Deeply see! Do you see the rain cloud and sunshine which nourished the tree? Do you see the soil which allowed it to put out roots? Do you see the man who cut the tree? Do you see the cart which took the tree to the paper mill?" Thích Nhất Hạnh would conclude that the whole universe is contained in that sheet of paper. This is the holism of Nature.

**SK:** *Is Dakini a personification of Earth? She seems to be such a negative character!*

**SR:** I have created two strong women characters in the novel—Bhu and Dakini. Dakini is an earth spirit who becomes an instrument of healing despite the pain and torture she has been subjected to. As I am trying to explain Dakini to you, I am reminded of the work of Joanna Macy and her amazing Nuclear Guardianship project, which assumes stewardship of contaminated nuclear sites and also transforms them into sacred spaces of prayer. Dakini is a symbol of this restorative earthwork which is the need of the hour. If something is ugly and deformed, we have to be personally responsible. The nuclear dump or the pile of trash outside our door becomes sacred if we approach it mindfully. This is the “Dakini Vidya” that the novel illustrates.

**SK:** *Is nature feminine?*

**SR:** It is a difficult question to answer. When we have a gendered approach to nature, we are ascribing qualities like patience and the capacity to procreate and nurture, thereby feminizing nature and also naturalizing women in the process. However, it is true that in the Global South, whenever nature is destroyed, women are also affected.

**SK:** *The Deep Ecology Movement founder, Arne Naess, has suggested that one can create one’s own ecosophy. Can you tell us about your own ecosophy?*

**SR:** I am deeply influenced by the mystics of all religions who talk about oneness and the field of all beings. Heaven and hell are first created in the mind before they manifest as external utopian or dystopian spaces.

**SK:** *There is a need for environmental justice for the tribes and peasants. How far can it be reached with the help of literature?*

**SR:** Literature is a wonderful tool to sensitize the reader to all forms of social injustice. Oiko-environmental justice narratives in India reveal the plight of all kinds of subalterns defined by the fault lines of gender, class, and caste. Significant examples include autobiographies like Plachimada activist Mayilamma’s life story, C.K. Janu’s *Mother Forest*, Kallen Pokkudan’s *My Life in the Mangrove Forests*, and the environmental fiction of writers like Amitav Ghosh, Mahasweta Devi, Sarah Joseph, and Ambiga Sudan Mangad, to name a few.

**SK:** *Can we expect another novel from you?*

**SR:** The creative process is a subterranean process. It may take some time for the efflorescence to become visible. I do hope to come up with another earth-centric piece of writing in the near future.

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