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## Voices of the Wild: Human–Non-Human Relationships and the Ecology of Coexistence in Contemporary Indian Climate Fiction

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### ABSTRACT

The *Wildings* (2012), a seminal piece of modern Indian climate fiction that reimagines urban ecologies via a posthumanist and ecocritical lens, is examined in this article by Nilanjana S. Roy. Departing from anthropocentric narratives, Roy foregrounds the agency, sentience, and emotional lives of non-human animals particularly a community of feral cats inhabiting Delhi's Nizamuddin neighborhood. The novel constructs a multispecies perspective that interrogates dominant paradigms of urban development, environmental degradation, and interspecies coexistence. Through innovative narrative strategies, such as telepathic communication ("whispering") and decentralized animal governance, *The Wildings* resituates the city as a contested ecological space shaped by both human and non-human actors. The analysis draws on ecocriticism, posthumanism, and animal studies to examine how Roy destabilizes the human/non-human binary and constructs alternative models of kinship, resistance, and ethical interdependence. The novel's detailed mapping of urban environments from the viewpoint of animals challenges conventional spatial and social hierarchies, offering a sensorially rich and politically charged vision of coexistence in the Anthropocene. By centering non-human protagonists and advocating for multispecies justice, *The Wildings* expands the



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scope of Indian climate fiction and contributes to a growing body of literature that calls for inclusive ecological ethics. This article argues that Roy's work not only enriches literary discourse but also provides a framework for rethinking the ethics of coexistence in increasingly fragile urban ecosystems. Ultimately, the novel invites readers to "listen to the wild"—to engage empathetically with the more-than-human world and imagine a future built on solidarity, adaptability, and care.

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## 2. Introduction: Framing the Wild

In recent years, Indian climate fiction has undergone a significant narrative evolution from focusing solely on human experiences of environmental degradation to embracing a multispecies perspective that includes animals, plants, and urban ecologies as central agents in environmental discourse. This shift reflects a broader theoretical movement in the environmental humanities and posthumanist thought, where the entanglement of human and non-human lives is increasingly foregrounded in literary and ecological analysis. No longer relegated to background or symbolic roles, animals in contemporary Indian fiction are emerging as protagonists with emotional depth, decision-making agency, and political presence. This transformation signals a growing awareness of the urgent need for ecological coexistence in an era marked by environmental crisis, rapid urbanization, and climate instability.

India's urban landscapes are particularly ripe for such literary exploration. Cities like Delhi characterized by dense human habitation, historical layers of development, and vanishing green spaces have become sites of ecological tension, where human expansion routinely encroaches upon the habitats of other species. Amid these pressures, questions about how we inhabit cities, who gets to belong, and how space is shared among species become increasingly pressing. As Amitav Ghosh (2016) notes in *The Great Derangement*, "***The climate crisis is also a crisis of culture, and thus of the imagination.***" In response, writers like Nilanjana S. Roy are expanding the imaginative horizons of climate fiction to include those voices and experiences typically excluded from anthropocentric narratives.

Roy's *The Wildings* (2012) exemplifies this literary intervention. Set in Delhi's historic Nizamuddin neighborhood, the novel centers on a community of feral cats whose lives intersect with those of other urban animals and, peripherally, with humans referred to by the cats as "Bigfeet." Through the lens of these non-human protagonists, Roy constructs a vision of the city as a multispecies habitat shaped by



psychic communication, collective memory, and territorial struggle. The narrative pivots on the figure of Mara, a young telepathic kitten whose awakening to her powers marks a profound shift in the community's structure and resilience. As Beraal, the wise leader of the wildings, reflects,

***“The city belonged to the Bigfeet now, but we were here long before the roads, the buildings, and the roaring machines” (The Wildings, Chapter: Beraal’s Reflections).***

This perspective reorients urban history and spatial politics from a human-centric viewpoint to a shared, contested terrain.

The novel's integration of non-human agency, psychic interspecies communication, and decentralized animal governance challenges conventional narrative forms and ecological thought. Roy's felines are not anthropomorphized caricatures; rather, they are sentient beings with their own modes of cognition, emotional registers, and ethical frameworks. In doing so, *The Wildings* embodies the principles of posthumanism by dissolving rigid species hierarchies and inviting readers to imagine new modes of coexistence rooted in empathy, adaptability, and mutual care.

This paper argues that *The Wildings* functions as a critical intervention in Indian climate fiction, redefining urban ecologies as spaces of interdependence and resistance. Through its multispecies storytelling, the novel articulates an ethics of coexistence that is both literary and ecological, offering readers not only a compelling narrative but a new framework for thinking about life in a shared and contested world.

### **3. Interspecies Narratives and Animal Agency**

Nilanjana S. Roy's *The Wildings* offers a profound reorientation of narrative authority by centering the cognitive and emotional lives of non-human animals primarily a community of stray cats inhabiting Delhi's Nizamuddin area (Colombino and Giaccaria, 2021). By granting these animals complex forms of sentience, memory, and decision-making, Roy challenges long-held anthropocentric notions of narrative subjectivity and opens space for what Donna Haraway calls “becoming with” other species an epistemological and ethical framework where interdependence replaces hierarchy.

Unlike traditional animal allegories in literature, which often reduce non-human characters to symbolic extensions of human experience, *The Wildings* insists on presenting animals as autonomous agents with species-specific consciousness. The characters ***Beraal***, the wise guardian; ***Southpaw***, the playful kitten;



*Mara*, the gifted telepath are portrayed with distinct memories, affective depths, and moral dilemmas that shape the story's trajectory. Their decisions are not dictated by human intervention but emerge from intra-species dynamics, survival instincts, and emotional bonds (Nandani and Meena, 2024). For example, Beraal's decision to protect the newly emerged telepath Mara is not driven by instinct alone but by a complex moral reasoning embedded within the community's collective history:

***“She must be protected... the kind that glows cannot be left to the dark” (The Wildings, Chapter: Beraal's Vow).***

At the heart of this interspecies community lies the concept of “whispering” - a form of psychic communication that transcends spoken language and allows animals to share emotions, warnings, and visions across physical and even species boundaries. This narrative device does more than advance plot; it constructs an alternative epistemology, one that privileges affective resonance, sensory awareness, and distributed cognition (Barrett, et al., 2021). Whispering becomes a model of knowledge transmission grounded in empathy and connectivity rather than logic and linearity. As Mara's power awakens, she experiences a synesthetic flood of emotion and meaning:

***“She opened her eyes wide, and a bright orange light shot out of her mind, a stream of pure energy that pierced the night” (The Wildings, Chapter: Mara's Awakening).***

Such passages reflect a posthumanist challenge to Enlightenment models of reason, emphasizing instead the richness of non-verbal, embodied, and multispecies knowing.

Roy's portrayal of emotional expression - fear, loyalty, grief, hope defies conventional charges of anthropomorphism (Hayler and Daigle, 2023). These emotions are not imposed upon animals to humanize them but are rooted in species-specific behaviors, social organization, and lived experience. The characters' responses to trauma, displacement, and threat reveal emotional worlds as valid and intricate as those of human protagonists. Importantly, their resistance to domestication serves as a metaphor for reclaiming agency within a human-dominated environment.

***“We are not pets. We are wild, and wild must be free,” says Southpaw defiantly (The Wildings, Chapter: The Council Gathers).***

In this way, *The Wildings* redefines subjectivity through a posthumanist lens. Agency is no longer the exclusive domain of rational, language-using humans but is distributed across a community of animals



capable of strategic action, care, and governance (Smith, et al., 2023). The wildings organize councils, engage in consensus, and form ethical bonds practices that reveal an alternative civic model grounded in cooperation rather than domination. These structures resist the anthropocentric assumption that governance, memory, and morality are uniquely human traits.

Ultimately, Roy's novel stands as a significant contribution to ecocritical and posthumanist literature (K, 2021). By asserting that animals think, remember, and decide, *The Wildings* demands a broader, more inclusive definition of agency. It encourages readers to confront their own assumptions about species boundaries and to acknowledge the legitimacy of other ways of knowing and being in the world. Through this reconfiguration, Roy not only tells a compelling story but also intervenes in the ethics of climate fiction calling for a multispecies justice that recognizes the intelligence and dignity of the more-than-human world.

#### 4. Urban Landscapes and Environmental Imagination

In *The Wildings*, Nilanjana S. Roy reimagines the urban landscape of Nizamuddin not merely as a setting, but as a densely layered ecological system where human infrastructure and non-human life are in constant negotiation. Situated in the heart of Delhi, Nizamuddin becomes a vibrant, if contested, habitat for a diverse range of animal species, revealing a vision of the city as a multispecies environment marked by memory, movement, and struggle (Loh, 2022). Through the eyes and senses of the feral cats and other animals, Roy critiques the human-centric construction of urban space and presents an alternative spatial imagination one grounded in interspecies coexistence, sensory perception, and ecological entanglement.

Roy's depiction of Nizamuddin challenges the rationalist, ordered view of the city. Instead of being experienced as a grid of roads, buildings, and boundaries, the urban terrain unfolds as a network of olfactory trails, psychic signals, and sensory landscapes mapped by animals (Lorensen, 2024). The cats perceive their world through vibrations in the air, smell-trails left behind by others, and emotional echoes communicated through "whispers." This sensory cartography displaces the dominant visual and architectural logic of the city and reclaims space from the perspective of its non-human inhabitants. As Beraal explains,

***"The city speaks. You just have to learn how to listen—not with your ears, but with your fur, your claws, your whiskers" (The Wildings, Chapter: Beraal's Instructions).***



This quote foregrounds a non-anthropocentric way of navigating the urban, privileging embodied awareness over instrumental rationality.

The novel also critiques the environmental costs of unchecked urbanization. Human encroachment is not dramatized through apocalyptic spectacle but emerges through subtle, lived disruptions in the everyday life of animals: the shrinking of green cover, the loss of nesting grounds, and the intensifying presence of traffic, noise, and pollution.

*The cats' world is "shrinking and splitting" as new construction projects obliterate long-used corridors and sanctuaries (Roy, The Wildings, Chapter: Changes in the Air).*

These environmental changes mirror real-world urban degradation in rapidly expanding Indian cities, where ecological fragility is often subsumed by developmental priorities.

Roy's symbolic use of ruins and historical monuments further complicates this vision of urban space. The cats inhabit tombs, crumbling walls, and abandoned buildings, which serve not just as physical shelters but as temporal signifiers of a city built upon layers of conquest, memory, and decay (Milner and Burgmann, 2023). These structures, originally erected as markers of human achievement, are now reappropriated by non-human life, exposing the city's cyclical history of abandonment and renewal. As Southpaw remarks while gazing at a tomb overrun with vines,

*"This was someone's palace once. Now it's our playground" (The Wildings, Chapter: Ruins and Rhythms).*

The inversion of space from sovereign monument to feral refuge underscores the city's evolving ecology, where history and nature coalesce in unexpected ways.

Such urban ruins, reanimated by animal presence, function as what Anna Tsing calls "contaminated diversity" (Tsing, 2015) spaces where multispecies encounters flourish in the cracks of capitalist progress. Roy's urban jungle resists utopian naturalism or dystopian despair; it is instead a site of conflict and cohabitation, a landscape in which ecological memory and survival strategies are encoded into every ruin and alleyway. The animals' ability to adapt to these spaces signifies resilience, but also foregrounds the precarity of life under anthropogenic pressure.

Crucially, the city's human residents referred to as "Bigfeet" remain largely peripheral, sensed more as disturbances than as active characters. Their sounds know them, smells, and infrastructural effects rather



than individual identities, reinforcing the novel's critique of anthropocentric dominance (Böhm, 2024). Urban planning, from this perspective, is not neutral but violently exclusionary privileging human comfort at the cost of non-human habitability. By decentralizing the human gaze and reorienting the narrative through the animal experience, Roy invites a radical reevaluation of how cities are designed, occupied, and imagined.

Ultimately, *The Wildings* reclaims the cityscape for its non-human dwellers, portraying Nizamuddin as a living, sentient ecosystem rather than a static backdrop to human life. This ecological reimagining of urban space not only disrupts dominant narratives of progress and development but also articulates a deeply ethical proposition: that cities are not merely sites of human history but shared habitats whose future depends on multispecies sustainability and justice.

### **5. Communication, Kinship, and Resistance**

At the heart of *The Wildings* lies the concept of “whispering” a telepathic, extrasensory form of communication that binds the city's animal inhabitants into a community of shared awareness and mutual responsibility. This ability allows characters like Beraal, Mara, and Southpaw to exchange emotional impressions, environmental alerts, and memory fragments across species boundaries, enabling a form of solidarity that surpasses physical limitations or linguistic conventions (Paring, 2025). Whispering is not merely a narrative device; it operates as a model of resistance and connectivity, emphasizing the affective infrastructure upon which interspecies relationships are built.

By decentralizing spoken language and privileging sensory and psychic modes of interaction, Roy reimagines the very act of communication as an ethical force. Whispering allows for emotional transparency and collective decision-making, challenging hierarchical and authoritarian forms of control (Ikonen, 2024). As Mara learns to navigate this world, her growing ability to “listen in” not only marks her maturation but also her integration into a complex, interdependent community:

*“She heard them all at once the hum of warnings, fragments of dreams, the slow beat of comfort offered from far away” (The Wildings, Chapter: Mara’s Integration).*

This auditory collage of emotion, memory, and intention captures the fluidity of social bonds among animals, grounded in empathy rather than dominance.



Kinship in *The Wildings* operates outside the confines of biology or lineage. It is constructed through shared vulnerability, emotional intelligence, and acts of mutual care. Beraal's mentorship of Mara, the collective defense against external threats, and the community's willingness to accommodate diverse temperaments reflect a flexible, inclusive model of kinship. As scholar Rosi Braidotti (2013) asserts, ***“Posthuman relations are grounded in mutual respect, not identity.”*** Roy enacts this by allowing animals to relate through difference, not sameness. The community's cohesion is based not on instinctual loyalty but on chosen bonds, where care is performed rather than assumed.

These kin relationships also support modes of governance that emerge organically from within the animal collective. Councils are called, decisions are deliberated, and leadership rotates based on trust and wisdom rather than power (Thomsen, et al., 2021). This distributed governance contrasts sharply with the invisible but omnipresent human systems of control the “Bigfeet” who shape the urban environment with little regard for its non-human inhabitants. The wildings' community resists not through open rebellion but through sustained cooperation, memory, and quiet endurance. As one elder cat notes,

***“The way to survive is not to fight every battle but to hold on to each other, even in the shadows” (The Wildings, Chapter: Elder's Counsel).***

In this way, *The Wildings* advances a vision of resistance rooted in cohesion rather than confrontation. It critiques human dominion not with polemic but through the quiet dignity of animal agency, proposing that collective survival in the Anthropocene may depend more on attunement, empathy, and solidarity than on conquest (Price and Chao, 2023). This narrative of resistance subtle, continuous, and relational offers a compelling counter-model to the anthropocentric imagination of power.

## **6. Beyond the Human: Ethics of Coexistence**

*The Wildings* ultimately serves as a narrative experiment in ecological ethics, extending the principles of posthumanism and ecocriticism into the realm of fiction. Roy's refusal to center the human subject allows for a richer ethical imagination, where responsibility, agency, and care are distributed across species boundaries (Roscher, 2021). The novel insists on a multispecies model of justice that challenges anthropocentric hierarchies and foregrounds the fragile interdependencies that define urban life in the Anthropocene.

Posthumanist theory, as articulated by scholars such as Cary Wolfe and Rosi Braidotti, invites a rethinking of subjectivity as relational and co-constituted, rather than bounded and autonomous. Roy's feline protagonists exemplify this framework; their identities are not fixed but formed through interaction



with their environment, their peers, and the invisible presence of humans. The ethics that emerge from this relational subjectivity are grounded not in superiority or utility, but in vulnerability and reciprocity. As one character reflects,

***“It is not strength alone that keeps us alive it is knowing we need one another” (The Wildings, Chapter: Night Watch).***

Ecocritically, Roy presents the urban ecosystem as both wounded and resilient. The Nizamuddin neighborhood is portrayed as a palimpsest of human ambition and animal adaptation where ruins shelter communities, trees act as sentinels, and psychic communication knits together fragmented lives (Sayers et al., 2021). This representation urges a departure from anthropocentric environmentalism, which often privileges pristine nature over urban ecologies. Roy argues for the ethical imperative to recognize and preserve life even in damaged or transitional spaces. Her vision aligns with Val Plumwood’s concept of the “ecological self,” wherein ethical action arises from the recognition of interconnectedness rather than isolation (Plumwood, 2002).

Moreover, *The Wildings* resists apocalyptic fatalism in favor of speculative possibility. The story does not culminate in redemption or destruction but in continuity a collective commitment to adaptation and defense (Tait, 2021). The final scenes, where the community regroups and reestablishes itself after confronting threats, underscore coexistence as a living process rather than a utopian endpoint. The novel thus invites readers to imagine futures that are not post-human but more-than-human where coexistence is maintained through ongoing care, negotiation, and imagination.

This speculative dimension extends the ethical scope of the novel. It challenges readers to examine their own role within ecological systems and to reconsider justice not merely as a human concern, but as a multispecies obligation. By crafting a narrative where non-human lives matter not because they serve human interests, but because they have intrinsic value Roy articulates what Thom van Dooren (2019) describes as ***“mourning with rather than for”*** other species. It is a form of ethical engagement that calls for listening, humility, and shared responsibility.

In sum, *The Wildings* offers more than a story of urban animals; it presents a philosophical vision of coexistence shaped by mutual dependence and ecological humility (Jenkins, 2023). By decentering the human and embracing the polyphonic voices of the wild, the novel becomes a vital literary act both a critique of environmental injustice and a call for a more compassionate and inclusive ecological future.



## 7. Conclusion

Nilanjana S. Roy's *The Wildings* stands as a transformative work within contemporary Indian climate fiction, offering a literary reconfiguration of urban life that foregrounds non-human perspectives, collective agency, and ecological entanglement. Through its imaginative portrayal of animal sentience, psychic communication, and interspecies kinship, the novel redefines how readers engage with the concepts of city, species, and survival. In doing so, it not only expands the thematic boundaries of Indian fiction but also makes a significant intervention into posthumanist and ecocritical discourse.

Roy's narrative displaces the human subject from the center of environmental storytelling and replaces it with a vibrant ensemble of animal voices that articulate fear, resilience, empathy, and resistance. By constructing a world in which feral cats organize, mourn, govern, and adapt, *The Wildings* complicates simplistic binaries of wild versus domestic, human versus animal, and nature versus culture. It articulates a layered understanding of coexistence one that is messy, fragile, and profoundly political. This shift from human exceptionalism to multispecies justice signals an ethical transformation in the way environmental crises can be imagined and addressed in literature.

As a contribution to Indian climate fiction, *The Wildings* is particularly notable for its urban ecological lens. Rather than retreating to pristine or rural landscapes often associated with environmental purity, the novel situates its narrative in the polluted, noisy, and overbuilt terrain of contemporary Delhi. Here, Roy demonstrates that the city, too, is an ecological space alive with species interactions, historical memory, and contested geographies. This reconceptualization insists that climate change and ecological degradation are not peripheral issues but central to urban survival and literary representation. In this sense, *The Wildings* repositions the urban animal not as a victim of development, but as an agent of adaptation and a bearer of ecological knowledge.

More broadly, the novel offers a compelling argument for the role of fiction in reshaping environmental consciousness. It cultivates what Ursula Heise (2008) calls "*eco-cosmopolitanism*" a planetary awareness that recognizes interconnectedness across species and spaces. Roy's storytelling resensitizes readers to the lives and labors of the more-than-human world, encouraging a shift from domination to listening, from control to care. The psychic "whispering" that animates the cats' world functions not only as a fictional mechanism but as a metaphor for the kind of attunement and empathy necessary to survive in the Anthropocene.



To “*listen to the wild*,” then, is to engage with the world through humility, perception, and ethical imagination. It is to recognize that survival in urban ecosystems and by extension, on this planet depends on our ability to honor the presence, intelligence, and agency of other species. *The Wildings* does not offer easy resolutions or utopian fantasies; instead, it gestures toward coexistence as a practice of ongoing negotiation and shared vulnerability. Through this, Roy leaves readers with a quiet but urgent call: to widen the scope of our care, to reframe our ethics, and above all, to listen.

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