



Hills And Lakes By Satbir Chadha: Care, Consciousness, And The Fragile Architecture Of Human Bonds

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Abstract: This paper offers a critical reading of Satbir Chadha's *Hills and Lakes* (2024), situating the novel within the ethical and psychological traditions of the English domestic novel. Drawing upon E. M. Forster's theory of character and Virginia Woolf's representation of caregiving consciousness, the study examines how Chadha privileges moral attentiveness over formal complexity. The novel's episodic, picaresque structure foregrounds lived experience across multiple geographies while maintaining care as its central thematic concern. The paper argues that Satya's transformation—from nurturer to the nurtured—constitutes the novel's most significant ethical reversal, foregrounding mental health, vulnerability, and reciprocity. While the novel engages with social concerns such as terrorism, ecological degradation, and gendered precarity, it resists sensationalism through restrained diction and diary-like narration. The paper also interrogates the relative flatness of secondary characters, noting the absence of surprising psychological development as both a limitation and a deliberate ethical choice. Ultimately, the study positions *Hills and Lakes* as a compassionate realist narrative that affirms care as both sustaining force and existential burden in contemporary life.

Keywords: Ethical, Psychological, Caregiving, Consciousness, Mental wellness

1. Introduction

“Literature records the best thoughts of the best minds.”

— W. H. Hudson

W. H. Hudson's assertion that literature preserves the finest workings of the human mind provides an apt threshold to Satbir Chadha's *'Hills and Lakes'*. The novel is less concerned with dramatic ingenuity than with moral attentiveness; less invested in narrative spectacle than in the textures of lived experience. Chadha's fiction belongs to a quiet yet enduring tradition of the English novel that privileges inner weather over outward events, and ethical resonance over narrative bravura. *'Hills and Lakes'* unfolds not as a tightly orchestrated plot but as a continuum of relationships, crises, recoveries, and emotional negotiations—the highs and lows, certainties and dislocations of human life—held together by the steady consciousness of its central protagonist, Satya.

Satya initially appears as a moral fulcrum, a figure of sagacious sensibility whose emotional labour sustains family, friends, and acquaintances across continents. She nurtures, mediates, reconciles, and reassures. However, as the narrative advances, the inexorable passage of time takes its toll on her physical and mental well-being. The woman who once mothered others finds herself undone by bipolar disorder, amnesia, and bodily decline. This erosion is rendered with poignant gravity in her prayerful appeal: “Take me forward, Guruji, make me better, relieve me from the total dependence that I have to suffer” (Chadha). The moment arrests the reader through its spiritual vulnerability and existential fatigue, foregrounding suffering as lived endurance rather than spectacle.

E. M. Forster, in *Aspects of the Novel*, reminds us that fiction is fundamentally about people, and that its lasting power lies in characters who are “capable of surprising in a convincing way.” At first glance, *Hills and Lakes* appears linear, episodic, even predictable. Yet its emotional architecture rests on a slow inward movement—particularly the transformation of Satya from a nurturer of others to one who must herself be nurtured. This reversal constitutes the novel’s most affecting ethical gesture and brings into focus a fundamental truth of human existence: care, when unrelenting and unreciprocated, exacts a psychological cost.

2. Story and Plot: Episodic Realism and Picaresque Movement.

The narrative unfolds across a wide geographical and emotional canvas—from Delhi to Kerala, Nainital, Canada, Germany, Ahmedabad, and Bangalore. The novel bears an affinity with the picaresque mode, not through roguish adventure, but through its episodic structure, where each locale introduces new clusters of lives, dilemmas, and moral entanglements shaped by geography and circumstance.

Satya functions as the connective consciousness binding these episodes. Weddings, friendships, encounters with terrorism, marital discord, illness, and social injustice are not arranged for dramatic escalation. Instead, they appear as life itself often does—uneven, crowded, and ethically demanding. Chadha resists an Aristotelian arc; meaning accumulates through recurrence and relational continuity rather than through plot-driven causality.

Forster’s distinction between “story” and “plot” is instructive here. Chadha leans toward the story, trusting the reader to discern emotional causality beneath the sequence of events. The result is a diary-like intimacy, occasionally congested, but sincere in its moral intent.

3. Nature, Place, and the Moral Climate

One of the novel’s notable strengths lies in its evocation of place as an emotional catalyst. Kerala, in particular, is rendered as a space of openness and restorative calm. Satya’s reflection—“Being close to nature made all the difference to the ambience and general mood”—is not merely descriptive but philosophical (Chadha). Nature becomes a counterpoint to urban anxiety and psychic fatigue.

This sensitivity to environment aligns Chadha with a literary lineage extending from Hardy to Woolf, where landscape mirrors interior states. The later depiction of Nainital’s devastation under incessant rain is one of the novel’s most powerful metaphors. The collapsing hills parallel Satya’s psychological disintegration, suggesting that both ecological and emotional breakdowns result from pressures long ignored.

4. Characterisation: Moral Centrality and Predictable Orbits

Satya dominates the novel not through authority but through emotional availability. Her defining impulse is an almost compulsive urge to heal and reconcile—friends, family, acquaintances, even those morally compromised. In this respect, she recalls Virginia Woolf’s Mrs. Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse*, a figure who believes that human warmth can temporarily stave off fragmentation.

However, Chadha introduces a crucial divergence: Satya’s compassion is finite. It exhausts her. The onset of bipolar disorder and amnesia marks a turning point, captured succinctly in the line: “Life had taken a turn, the mother was being mothered” (Chadha). Care becomes reciprocal, unsettling familiar hierarchies of strength and vulnerability.

Yet while Satya’s arc is emotionally persuasive, many supporting characters remain static. Preeti’s tragic trajectory, culminating in suicide, renders her more emblematic than psychologically complex. The two sisters, Shamita and Vanita, remain largely unchanged, their transnational living arrangement functioning more as cultural detail than as a site of transformation. Satya’s husband is portrayed as traditional, devoted, and sincere, but without significant evolution.

Mohit and Varun, survivors of hostel trauma, are marginally more rounded. Their healing unfolds along expected lines, offering closure, no genuine surprise. Chadha privileges moral reassurance over psychological unpredictability.

5. and the Malini Ethics of Inheritance

Malini, the daughter-in-law, emerges in the latter half as a stabilising moral presence. Initially peripheral, she assumes narrative significance during Satya's illness, embodying a generational continuity of care. Her compassion is quiet and patient, suggesting that love survives not through heroic gesture but through sustained attentiveness.

This narrative shift recalls the ethical inheritance found in domestic novels such as Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day*. Chadha suggests that care is not depleted by giving; it is renewed through transmission.

The visit to Anandpur Sahib during Satya's recovery is among the novel's most poignant sequences. The gurudwara becomes a site of collective solace rather than doctrinal assertion, absorbing suffering into communal rhythm without sentimentality.

6. Themes, Diction, and Narrative Restraint

At its core, 'Hills and Lakes' is a novel about care—as virtue, burden, and moral obligation. Mental illness is treated with empathy, foregrounding amnesia, depression, delusion, and mood volatility without sensationalism. The novel also engages with broader social concerns—terrorism, deforestation, dowry deaths, familial discord—without allowing them to overshadow its ethical centre.

Chadha's diction is accessible and unpretentious. The prose privileges clarity over lyricism, aligning with the novel's moral seriousness. While secondary characters often lack psychological depth, the narrative achieves coherence through emotional recurrence rather than formal symmetry.

7. Comparative Context

In its emphasis on consciousness, caregiving, and domestic ethics, *Hills and Lakes* converses with: Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (maternal centrality and emotional cohesion), Anita Desai's domestic fiction (psychological interiority), E. M. Forster's realist humanism (ethical engagement over structural complexity). Like these works, Chadha's novel privileges moral insight over narrative surprise.

8. Conclusion

'Hills and Lakes' is not without limitations. Its narrative canvas is expansive and its reliance on Satya as the novel's moral centre sometimes strains structural balance. Several secondary characters remain ethically functional rather than psychologically surprising, and the episodic design resists dramatic escalation. Yet these very choices appear deliberate rather than inadvertent. Chadha privileges moral attentiveness over narrative ingenuity, and ethical continuity over formal complexity.

The title itself crystallises this vision. *Hills and Lakes* names the novel's governing metaphorical landscape—a moral topography shaped by ascent and absorption, effort and stillness. The "hills" of the novel correspond to phases of emotional elevation and ethical labour, where Satya's caregiving consciousness sustains families, friendships, and fractured lives across geographies. These elevated terrains offer perspective and purpose, yet demand endurance and exact a psychological toll. Conversely, the "lakes" evoke depth, reflection, and vulnerability—those phases in which Satya, undone by mental illness and memory loss, is compelled to relinquish moral authority and submit to care. Importantly, Chadha refuses to moralise either state. Elevation is not triumph, nor is stillness defeat. Instead, the novel affirms that a fully lived life must oscillate between giving and receiving, between visibility and inwardness.

The ecological collapse of Nainital's hills under relentless strain sharpens this metaphor further, suggesting that structures—emotional or environmental—that appear most stable are often the most fragile when burdened without respite. In aligning psychological disintegration with ecological breakdown, Chadha reinforces the ethical necessity of reciprocity and restraint. Care, when unreciprocated or endlessly demanded, risks becoming an instrument of erosion rather than sustenance.

In Hudson’s sense, Hills and Lakes records “the best thoughts” not as abstract ideals but as lived, tested, and sometimes exhausted practices of care. Chadha’s novel reminds us that literature need not dazzle to endure; its quiet power lies in listening attentively to the shifting rhythms of human dependency, where hills must eventually give way to lakes, and strength finds its truest meaning in surrender.

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