

Book Review: Geographical Imaginations: Literature and the 'Spatial Turn' by Indranil Acharya and Ujjwal Kumar Panda

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Indranil Acharya and Ujjwal Kumar Panda, *Geographical Imaginations: Literature and the 'Spatial Turn'* (Oxford University Press, Great Clarendon Street, Oxford, United Kingdom, 2022) (first edition), pp. xi+122, US\$ 25.88, ISBN: 978-0-19-286904-3

The publication of the book *Geographical Imaginations: Literature and the Spatial Turn* co-authored by Indranil Acharya and Ujjwal Kumar Panda is timely and significant in view of the fact that, despite the emergence of geocriticism as a modern critical framework in contemporary times, there has been little application of spatial concepts in the field of literary studies. Tracking the latest developments in geocriticism, the book straddles texts belonging to British, American, Indian English, Dalit and subaltern literatures while engaging with the romantic, the realist, the modernist, the postmodernist and the postcolonial perspectives. The depth and immediacy of the book is evinced by its sustained endeavour to navigate the depths of 'social space' and relate that fictional social space to the realities of life.

Beginning with the observation that Shakespeare's devaluation of the world-space as an empty vessel is symptomatic of Western modernity's obsession with time, history and consciousness, Anita Singh in the *Foreword* hints at the book's central concern, namely, our interaction with diverse spaces: physical and imagined, real and fictional, embodied and virtual, liminal, geographical, and the way these shape social practices, cultures and ideologies.



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According to Singh, so much importance has been lent to mindscape that place, space and setting have been made inconsequential. The book, through its sustained engagement with the problematic of space, place and geography in the context of literature, helps create broader contexts for understanding the far-reaching impact of the productions of space in literary studies and the ways in which the textual world affects the spaces outside the text.

The introduction (subtitled “Literary Geographies/Geographies of Literature”) draws attention to the fact that in literature, the physical landscape transmutes into a mindscape, which is tantamount to a making and remaking of geography. Beginning with Edward Soja’s observation about the ‘spatial turn’ and the renewed critical interest in attaching to *durée* an enduring critical human geography, the introduction cuts through vital issues starting with literature’s perennial interest with the coordinates of geography, literary criticism’s engagement with space (as evinced in the writings of Michael Foucault, Yi-Fu-Tuan, Edward Relph, D.C.D. Pocock, Robert Tally, David Harvey, Edward Relph, Derek Gregory, Nigel Thrift and others), continuing through topopoetics, namely, the postmodern tendencies in humanistic geography to turn to literature and art for understanding place as a ‘construct’ of human experience, ending with the issues of interdisciplinary methods recently adopted by literature and geography, which yielded literary cartography (as a “spatially symbolic act”) and geocriticism. The rest of the introduction dwells upon how literary geography emphasizes the spirit of a place, how literature deals with the conceptual dichotomy between what Raymond Williams calls the country and the city, and how in postcolonial times the concepts of centre and periphery as opposites within a territory have emerged.

Informed by interdisciplinary insights given by humanist geographer Yi-Fu Tuan (who popularized the concept of “sense of place”), anthropologist Setha Low (who popularized the idea of “place attachment”), environmental psychologist Fritz Steele (who defined “sense of place” as a “particular experience in a particular setting”), landscape architect John Brinckerhoff Jackson (who considered “sense of place” to be a “construct” created by habit or custom), sociologist David Hummon (who considered “sense of place” to be “people’s subjective perception about their environment”) as well as by Bertrand Westphal, Robert Tally, Fredric Jameson, D. N. Livingstone among others, the second chapter entitled “Sense of Place: Humanistic Geography, Literature, and Spatial Identity” focuses on the capacity of literature to form a distinct sense of place in the postcolonial globalized world caught in the changing scenario of cultural and social xenophobia. While exploring the sense of place in the postcolonial world, the book incorporates the ideas of Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, Jacques Derrida, Frantz Fanon, Homi K. Bhabha, Edward Soja, Henri Lefebvre, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and others. Acharya and Panda trace the emergence of the ideological politics of place in the twentieth century (that defined national places along the line of racial purity and sectarian allegiances), Nazism’s and Fascism’s exclusivist nationalism in parts of Europe, and violent political separatism in Northern Ireland, relating all of the above to the gradual politicization and culturalization of places in literature. They contend that modern British and Irish poetry responded to this obsession

with place because national identity was challenged by contemporary socio-political events more prominently than before. According to them, literature cannot grow in “atopia”; a literary text finds itself rooted in a certain territory and it is bound to reflect the geography of this place, as it exerts a lasting impression on the writer’s mind. The sociocultural dimension of the beautiful countryside in Romantic literature or the industrial cities and towns of the West in modern poetry cannot be ignored. The authors explain convincingly the way literary geography functions. Irrespective of their time and location, literary geographies tend to evoke a mapping of the narrative, because landscape represents a certain sense related to living. Indeed, this is a process that asks for a detailed study, which evinces the origin, development, and attainment of the literary “sense of place”.

Literature’s tendency to create what Yi-Fu Tuan calls “romantic geographies” is the main concern of the second chapter entitled “Literature’s Nonplaces: Making and Unmaking of Literary Place” which, while admitting that literature invests places with new dimensions by lending fresh meanings through human experience, accepts the immense variety of literary geography that ventures beyond the human habitat and its obvious social, cultural, and political connotations. According to Tuan, this creation of “romantic geographies” in literature is important because much of human life is driven by the desire to reach beyond. Although it sounds chimerical, literature creates geographies that depict nonplaces and *atopia*, or places that are not informed by human experience. What is remarkable about the book’s engagement with romantic geographies is the way it traces the depiction of unseen, remote, alien locations and people, beginning with More’s *Utopia* (1516), Sidney’s *Arcadia* (1590), Thomas Nash’s *The Unfortunate Traveller* (1594), Bacon’s *New Atlantis* (1626), continuing through Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*, Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travel* etc. and ending with the science-fiction represented by H. G. Wells’ *The Time Machine*, Jules Verne’s writings, Douglas Adams’ *The Ultimate Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*, Ray Bradbury’s *The Martian Chronicles* (1950), Barry Lopez’s *Arctic Dreams* (1986) and Hampton Sides’ *In the Kingdom of Ice* (2015).

The importance of the fourth chapter is that it engages with the postmodern place criticism that tends to refer to biogeographical concerns or the post-human tenets of plant geography and animal geography. What matters to the authors of the book is the way literature refers to the nonhuman spaces (which they call “other spaces”), which gain significance because human experiences of literary places operate on the politics of exclusion that disregards the vast occupation of earth by nonhuman beings like plants, trees, and animals. The authors mention that many recent literary texts address the decimation of the natural environment, a direct result of deterritorialization of plants and animals due to reckless human agency. As a result of human colonization of the natural world, plants and animals are gradually losing hold of their natural right to earthly territories. The book gives due importance to the deriving issue of ecocriticism. Through it, we are acquainted with the many contemporary literary texts which faithfully portray the territorial clash between human and nonhuman worlds, resulting in spatial crises for the nonhuman creatures. These ‘crises’ have been termed by the authors the

“nowhereness” of nonhuman creatures and “place-imperialism” (Acharya and Panda 18) of humans, a direct result of the havoc wreaked by industrialization. In this context, the book alludes to R. K. Narayan’s *A Tiger for Malgudi* and Jack London’s *Call of the Wild*.

While portraying marginal spaces in the fifth chapter entitled “Geography of Exclusion: Marginal Geography in Literature”, the authors contend that the centre-periphery divide is key to such studies as geographical, Marxist, cultural materialist, postcolonial, gender, spatiality etc in postcolonial times. Indeed, in the postcolonial era literature not only reflects the social, ethnic, racial, political, and economic marginality, but it also represents the manner in which the concept of spatial marginalization operates. The authors observe that, with the rise of the notion of nation-state in the age of globalization, the sense of marginal place becomes more manifest in literature. Therefore, many postcolonial texts chronicle the spatial marginalization and displacement in a larger context. Referencing Walter Christaller, the book explores the meaning of the “core-margin” binary in the context of the city, the country and the globe. Throughout the chapter, emphasis is laid on what Robert Porter calls “economic political factors” which tend to be neglected by those who prefer disciplinary purity. Having reflected upon the role of colonization and globalization in the creation of the divide, the book makes a significant survey of postcolonial literature, referencing authors like Joseph Conrad, Patrick White, Graham Greene, Aravind Adiga, Dalit autobiographies of Omprakash Valmiki, Baby Kamble, Bama among others. The authors believe that literature can play a pivotal role in exposing the factors that lead to the creation of the ‘periphery’. They also say that age-old practices like casteism or more topically dalitism in the Indian context make these marginal places more conspicuous in literature. Referring to Bama’s *Karukku* or Baby Kamble’s *Prisons We Broke*, they argue that while reading Dalit texts, it is a mistake not to take note of the issue of geographical marginalization of the Dalits that from time immemorial has shaped their lives. According to Acharya and Panda, “[t]here are episodes in all these texts, which depict the dilapidated villages on the edges of villages as the habitats of the Dalits who are forced to live on the periphery of society marked by the utter absence of social or governmental conveniences” (18).

One small limitation of the book is that it mentions but does not engage with the gendered spaces. However, the book fittingly concludes with the question of the growing relevance and inclusive nature of place-criticism in literary theory. The concluding observation by the authors that sensitivity to place-criticism assumes importance in the face of the “immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history” is suggestive of the paradigm shift from the traditional literary criticism based on time, causality and manner to the question of ‘where’, which is a significant dimension of creative imagination.