

## The Dystopic Vision: A Study of the Spatial Politics in E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India*

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### Abstract

This paper attempts to bracket together two extensive areas of enquiry: on the one hand what we might call the philosophy of space in the postmodern theories by Foucault, Lefebvre and Edward Soja, and on the other, the study of postcolonial space with direct reference to Bhabha and Said to locate these two mutually embracing fields in E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India*. *A Passage to India* is undoubtedly a novel of journey, both physical and ideological. Mrs. Moore and Adela's curiosity to see 'Real India' is a result of the colonialist discourse impacting upon their consciousness. It is a passage to more than India. The novel combines several post-colonialist issues theorised by Bhabha and Said as well as postmodern ones philosophised by Foucault, Lefebvre and Soja. Postmodernism and Postcolonialism go hand in hand often overlapping each other in matters of *spatialisation*. In the postmodern analyses of space or 'heterotologies,' space becomes abstract, more 'conceived' than 'perceived'. The common ground shared by both Postmodern and Postcolonial spatialisations is the in-betweenness. Bhabha's doctrine of the *Thirdspace* as a result of *Hybridity* and Lefebvre's *Lived Space* in his *Trialectics of Spatialisation* tend to intersect in matters of cultural and spatial in-betweenness. This paper will focus on the mutual contamination of these two otherwise distinct concepts reinforced by a Postmodern and Postcolonial analyses of Forster's *A Passage to India*.

**Keywords:** Postmodernism, Postcolonialism, E. M. Forster, Philosophy of Space and Spatial Politics.

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## **Introduction**

Postmodern re-evaluation and reassertion of space critique the conventional presentation of space in literature as a mere background- a backdrop; and re-present space as an active part of human existence and consciousness. With the emergence of ‘postmodern geographies’ Space was preferred to Time, abstract to concrete, and history to geography. Postmodernism and post-colonialism go hand in hand often overlapping each other in matters of spatialisation. Postcolonialism talks of ‘perceived’ spaces – for example the colonies and also conceived spaces such as the hegemonic representation of the colonies. In the postmodern analyses of space or ‘heterotologies,’ space becomes abstract, more ‘conceived’ than ‘perceived’. These two evaluations of space often overlap one another as will be discussed in later part of this paper. In Said’s *Orientalism* the Orient is a living, perceived space but his doctrine of Orientalism inadvertently makes the orient an abstraction- a hegemonic representation produced by the Occident. On the other hand, in Lefebvre’s dialectics of the ‘perceived’ and the ‘conceived’ or the ‘central’ and ‘peripheral’(Soja) the abstract space often crosses the shadow lines of perceived space and vice versa to make a cocktail of place and space. Evidently the Postcolonial and Postmodern doctrines of spatialization seem to differ from each other in matter of their focus though both of them deal with an essential ‘in-betweenness.’

## **Postmodern Concepts of Space**

The study of space both as a physical and psychological entity starts with the onset of postmodernism. The nineteenth century obsession with time and the temporal was replaced by space and the spatial as is already stated above. In the very first chapter of *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* Edward Soja seems to regret the predominance of time over space, frequently quoting from Foucault and Lefebvre: “The critical hermeneutic is still enveloped in a temporal master-narrative, in a historical but not yet comparably geographical imagination.” (11)

The heterogeneous feature of space, its power to combine in one real place several spaces undoubtedly critique the notion of space as a void which exists as its own kind. Foucault was the pioneer in this line of thought. In his lectures and especially in his interviews: ‘*Questions of Geography*’ (1980) and ‘*Space, knowledge and Power*’ (1984) Foucault disseminates his doctrine of ‘heterotopias’. He claims that the heterotopia

is capable of juxtaposing in a single real space several incompatible spaces. This Foucauldian spatialization projects space both as abstract and concrete. Foucault's theorisation of heterotopias, as we may call, is not a science but a sort of over worked and over used term that needs systematic description. Foucault describes heterotopias in terms of its characteristics like heterotopias of crisis, of deviation, of juxtaposition, etc. In the primitive societies heterotopias of crisis can be traced. There were places privileged, sacred, and forbidden for individuals who live in a state of crisis. For example the boarding school may be called heterotopias of crisis where the first manifestations of virility or puberty were supposed to take place 'elsewhere' away from home. The prison houses, retirement homes and psychiatric hospitals are the heterotopias of deviation where the normalcy of human culture, the regularity of social life is suspended on temporal basis. Again The garden where various kinds of plants are grown to make as sort of microcosm is a heterotopias of juxtaposition. Very strangely, an existing heterotopia may have functions that unfold themselves gradually with the passage of time. The example of the cemetery testifies to the ever changing characteristic of heterotopias. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century when people believed in posthumous life, the dead bodies were kept under tombs and graveyards built in the heart of the town adjacent to a church. But in the 19<sup>th</sup> century people started to doubt the very existence of the posthumous existence and every dead body was given an individual coffin and the graveyard was shifted from the centre to the periphery of the town with the on growing consciousness that the dead spreads death. Places like libraries and museums are heterotopias that are connected to the process of accumulation of time. On the contrary, festivals, carnivals are sorts of heterotopias that are interested in the temporal unlike in the eternal.

Edward Soja, the postmodern geographer brilliantly extended Foucault's concept of 'heterotopias' and Lefebvre's 'the production of space.' In his seminal works namely *The Postmodern Geographies* and *Thirdspace*. In the first chapter of *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places* (Blackwell) Soja refers to the 'extraordinary voyages of Henri Lefebvre' and his continuous vacillation between Paris and Pyrenees. Soja claims: "The center-periphery relation echoed another dialectic that threads simultaneously through Lefebvre's life and writings. This was the relation between the "conceived"(concu) and the "lived"(vecu), or as he would later describe it, between the "representations of space" and the "spaces of representation". (Soja 30)

He conceives three modes of spatial thinking: *perceived space*, *conceived space*, and *lived space*. Soja's concept of the *thirdspace* is something beyond mere physical form or mental construct, but an alternative that combines the two; 'perceived space' and 'conceived space'. Soja's conceptualisation of the 'thirdspace' significantly transgresses the binaries of spatiality and offers trialectics of spaces. 'Perceived space' or Soja's Firstspace is 'materialised', 'socially produced', and 'empirical.' It is directly sensible and can be mapped and therefore limited. This perceived space figures in our mappable geographies such as households, neighborhoods, villages, cities, and nations. Conceived space or Soja's second space is 'imagined' (as Lefebvre put it) or 'conceptualised' (Soja). The conceived space is expressed in systems of signs and symbols and operates as a centre of power and ideology. For example, the *Orientalist* representations of the eastern countries as exotica are a conceived space. To illustrate the *lived space* or *Thirdspace* Soja offers an analogy of Lefebvre's Aleph: "Lived social space, more than any other, is Lefebvre's limitless Aleph, the space of all inclusive simultaneities, perils as well as possibilities: the space of radical openness, the space of social struggle" (Soja 68) . For Lefebvre *lived space* was both distinct from *perceived space* and *conceived space*. It is an all-encompassing mode of spatial reckoning. Soja puts it as a "transcending composite of all spaces." This space is "directly lived," the space of "inhabitants" and "users," containing all other real and imagined spaces together.

### **Postcolonial Concepts of Space**

The postmodern geographies in connection with Foucault, Lefebvre, Soja and few others tend to offer *trialectics of spatiality* and thus liberate space from its monolithic structures. However, the postcolonial theorisation of space, on the other hand, provides interesting modes of analyses which often overlap the postmodern *heterotopology*. Said's *Orientalism* critiques the artificial and ideological construction spaces that are not lived but present only in the discourse of colonialism. The ideological representation of the Orient as 'other' confined within the boundaries of *stereotypes* legitimate the run of the colonising mission also produces *space* that appears only in the complex matrix of signs and symbols and dissipates politics of power. Lefebvre's *Conceived Space* bears striking similarities with what Said's calls orientalism. The binary divisions of the orientalist discourse, as pointed by Said, are questioned by Bhabha. In his *Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of*

*Colonial Discourse* Bhabha argues that in the colonialist representations the colonised subjects are always in motion between the binaries of similarity and opposition. In *The Location of Culture* (Routledge, 1994) Bhabha gives the notion of *hybridity* and the *third space* in the context of postcolonialism. Referring to those who live border lives Bhabha theorises that these people living in a transition in an in between space is always on the motion. Their transitional spatial and cultural existence is never complete in it and always undergoes change. These people are produced from a process of hybridisation erasing forever the idea of subjectivity as real, stable and complete:

But for me the importance of hybridity is not to be able to trace two original moments from which the third emerges, rather hybridity to me is the ‘third space’ which enables other positions to emerge. This third space displaces the histories that constitute it, and sets up new structures of authority, new political initiatives, which are inadequately understood through received wisdom (Rutherford, 1991: 211).

Like postmodern geographies, it seems, postcolonialism affirms a sort of in-betweenness. The preceding accumulation of the postmodernist and postcolonialist discourse of space will now help to analyse Forster’s *A passage to India* as novel that consists of the mutual contamination of Postmodern and postcolonial spatialisation. At first I shall analyse the novel under the lens of the postcolonialist spatialisation and then of the postmodern and show how these two distinct modes intersect one another.

### **The Ideal and the Real: A Passage to India and the Politics of Space**

*A Passage to India* is undoubtedly novel of journey both physical and ideological. Mrs. Moore and Adela’s curiosity to see ‘Real India’ is a result of the colonialist discourse impacting upon their consciousness. It is a passage to more than India. The novel combines several post-colonialist issues theorised by Bhabha and Said. Incidentally, Bhabha’s concept of third space in the post-colonialist discourse is closely related to his theories of *mimicry* and *hybridity*. In the colonial and postcolonial literature mimicry is seen when a member of the colonised society imitates the linguistic, cultural, political and other attitudes of the colonisers in hope of gaining access to the power of the man in

power (here the members of the society of the colonisers) whom he imitates. In this novel the most prominent example of such power-imitation (mimicry) is Mr. Amritrao. A minor character in the novel, Amritrao is a lawyer from Calcutta. A foreign educated man Amritrao is an English speaking Indian lawyer whom even the British Anglo-Indians dread because he has learned enough of the British law. Originally he is an Indian but his educational upbringing under a western roof has at once dragged him closer to the coloniser and dissociated him from the colonised, though in many ways he is loved by his people.

Hybridity refers to any mixing of east and western culture. In other words hybridity apart from its biological significance refers to a typical cultural balance between the colonizer and the colonized. Homi Bhabha initially thought of hybridity as an insurgent tool for the colonised to challenge the various forms of oppression. However, the term hybridity refers to any kind of cultural mixing or mingling between East and West. Hybridity asserts the presence of a third space – an in-between which subverts Said's binaries such as Orient/Occident, Coloniser/Colonised etc. In this novel Dr. Aziz shares a cultural fondness for European dressing. Another example of hybridity is the Bridge parties deliberately arranged for the East-West cultural encounter. There are characters in this novel like Mrs. Moore, Dr. Aziz and Mr. Fielding who belong to an in-between space. Bhabha's notion of hybridity as a spatial in-betweenness partly resembles Lefebvre's concept of the *thirdspace*.

Lefebvre's trailectics of spatialisation may be clearly traced in the context of analysing *A Passage to India*. The novel starts with a geographical description of the physical aspects of Chandrapore. The description of the *perceived spaces* – the undecorated bazaars, muddy wood and the bony incongruous outlines of Chandrapore constitutes the opening chapter: "There is no painting and scarcely any carving in the bazaars. The very wood seems to be made of mud, the inhabitants of mud moving" (Forster 9). The so-called physical aspects of the geographies of Chandrapore are sometimes overlapped by the conceived spaces. The description of the geographies of Chandrapore testifies to the fact that the perceived spaces coexist with the conceived spaces as exemplified in the following statement: "There are no bathing-steps on the river front, as the Ganges happens not to be holy there" (Forster 9).

The metaphorical description of the Marabar caves as 'fists and fingers' defamiliarises them from their real presence. The novel undoubtedly deals with a central theme- a passage to India which Mrs. Moore and Adela undertake. The India they have come to see is never found. India exists in the ideology of Mrs. Moore and Adela as a trope, a conceived space and not an actuality. The typical orientalist bias can be traced in Ronny in his nocturnal discourse with his mother. He talks about the Indians with a strangely abusive air of which he himself was unaware: 'India isn't home,' he retorted, rather rudely, but in order to silence her he had been using phrases and arguments that he had picked up from older officials, and he did not feel quite sure of himself. (Forster 34)

It is quite evident that India which Ronny is aware of is not the real India but its conceived form; a twisted and represented description of the perceived space. Very naturally, the India as conceived space is stored in the vision of the Western people in the novel which never conforms to the real India- as a perceived space. In the last paragraph of chapter three similar kind of ideological manifestation is found when Mrs. Moore went to hang her cloak on a peg: She had known this wasp or his relatives by day; they were not as English wasps, but had long yellow legs which hung down behind when they flew. Perhaps he mistook the peg for a branch- no Indian animal has any sense of an interior. Bats, rats, birds, insects will soon nest inside a house as out (Forster 34).

Mrs. Moore's attitude to the *Indianised* wasp contends directly with her attempt to reconsider Ronny's abusive description of the Indians to see whether it is true. She is incessantly caught in a vacillation regarding the true shape of the real India. Her doubting of Ronny's representation of India puts her in an ambivalent situation. The Foucauldian heterotopias like the bridge party, court room and the tennis court, the mosque, the caves and finally the temple are spaces-the embodiments of privileged discourse with its underlying ambivalences. Lefebvre in his critique of 'double illusion', as mentioned by Soja in her *Thirdspace*, talks of mutual contamination of the perceived and the conceived spaces. Such a spatial confusion may be traced when Adela entered into the Marabar caves. Mrs. Moore feels choked in the caves and Adela molested when she heard a terrifying echo: 'Boum' The sound 'Boum' traces Adela's state of spatial crisis when the perceived and conceived spaces get overlapped. The law court may be called the *Lived space* in Lefebvre's

*Trialectics* which remains distinct from the perceived India and conceived India and yet, encompasses the two.

To summarize, then, Forster`s novel can be seen as a complex matrix where postcolonial and postmodern spaces are reproduced. These spaces combine, intersect and superimpose one another in significant ways. Chandrapore, a microcosmic representative of India exists as perceived space. It`s very physical aspects are challenged by the conceived spatial ideologies of the white characters present in the novel as is already discussed above. Chandrapore exists as a perceived space in itself, as a conceived one in the ideologies of Mrs. Moore and other white characters and as a lived space dispersed among the British as well as the native characters in the novel.

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