

Fragments Shored Against Ruins: *Defragmenting India through the Gathering Storm*

Smithi Mohan
Department of English, Government College for Women, India
Email: smithimohan@gmail.com

Received: 14/09/2023
Accepted: 26/11/2023
Published: 01/01/2024

Volume: 5 Issue: 1

How to cite this paper: Mohan, S. (2024). Fragments Shored Against Ruins: Defragmenting India through the Gathering Storm. *Journal of Critical Studies in Language and Literature*, 5(1), 12-16

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.46809/jcsll.v6i1.241>

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0). <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>



Abstract

Travel between territories which exists contemporaneously is baffling in a psychogeographical sense. What had previously been considered as movement through indifferent space seems to be movement through time, into the future or into the past. The spatial assemblages within which these figures travel each have their own temporality, a rhythm that is produced and maintained by the processes that produce and maintain the human and nonhuman elements of the territory. Therefore travel narrative manifests itself as a narrative of space and difference and consequently travel writing as a format reflects an incessant surge of new concepts, new ways of seeing and being.. In this context, I argue that such an attempt is made by Harish Nambiar in his *Defragmenting India: Riding a Bullet through the Gathering Storm*, a travelogue narrative of a motorbike trip of the author and his friend across various states. Written in the dramatic backdrop of the 2002 Godhra riots, it provides an account of the various fault lines of Indian society quivering in the temblors that the communal riots of Gujarat sent across the nation. The book maps the urban consciousness of India by juxtaposing lives, issues and situations of educated and the uneducated, craftsman and conservationist, teacher and businessman, daughters and drunks from small towns and non-metro cities of India. It thus succeeds in capturing the undercurrents that flow through the life of a nation, community, city, families and individuals, simultaneously cutting across narrow divisive borders.

Keywords: Space, Travel Narrative, Territory, Urban Consciousness, Temporality

1. Introduction

Travel narrative manifests itself as a narrative of space and difference and consequently travel writing as a format reflects an incessant surge of new concepts, new ways of seeing and being. Space performs significant and often unrecognised functions in narrative discourse. Space and place- the conceptual and the geographical- thus provides plenty of rhetorical possibilities. The term 'movement' functions at the level of physicality and operates metaphorically. Metaphor, as a linguistic device itself signifies displacement. In Greek, metaphor means both 'transport and movement'. The movement could be from one end of the globe to another, covering hemispheres, from one country to another or within the confines of one's own country. As soon as the threshold of one's doorstep is crossed, there exists a situation where one has to encounter differences and otherness'. Journey being the act of travelling from one place to another, also entails movement, movement through territorialized spaces and movement by those who choose to move and those who are moved by forces beyond their control.

This paper intertwines spatial exploration with temporal shifts, perceiving travel between territories as not just a movement through physical spaces but also as a journey across different temporalities. Spatiality carries its own unique temporality, shaped

by the ongoing processes involving both human and non-human elements within it. Narratives of travel related to contemporary India thus become narratives of space and difference, reflecting diverse perspectives and experiences that continuously generate new concepts and ways of perceiving the nation.

Through a spatial reading of Harish Nambiar's *Defragmenting India: Riding a Bullet through the Gathering Storm*, this paper tries to capture the essence of travel between contemporaneous territories within the narrative and tries to elucidate how the author navigates diverse spatial-temporal dimensions and interprets them within the rich tapestry of social and cultural contexts. Through the lens of Edward Soja's third space, it seeks to unravel the portrayal of Indian society against the backdrop of the 2002 Godhra riots, meticulously examining the fault lines, societal tensions, and conflicts that permeate different regions and socio-economic strata. By analysing the author's portrayal of urban consciousness in India, the study aims to unfold the intricate gradations of urban life, dissecting societal structures and individual experiences across varied settings, ranging from small towns to non-metro cities. Finally, it tries to uncover how the narrative emphasises the intricate web of connections between communities, cities, families, and individuals, transcending barriers of socio-economic status, culture, and geography of India.

The paper thus offers a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted layers of Indian society, as depicted within the pages of this travel narrative as the multifaceted dynamics, socio-political tensions, and the profound repercussions of communal events across diverse societal layers in India are unravelled. It also offers profound insights into the interplay of space and time and tries to illuminate their roles in shaping social experiences and perceptions. Through such an analysis, the study heightens the imperative need to transcend boundaries for a comprehensive grasp of societal structures, fostering inclusivity and nurturing social harmony. It acts as a bridge between the realms of travel literature and socio-cultural inquiry, illustrating the potency of travel narratives in disentangling societal complexities and nuances, thereby elevating and enriching both fields of study.

2. Space and Travel Narratives

We cannot think effectively about a travel narrative without thinking about the space which it tries to contain or unfold. Space is a theoretical perspective wherein human experience is understood within the space they occur. Space is not only the relative physical reality but it is more of a human experience of relations amongst objects, and, most importantly the manipulations of it. The symbolic, emotional and strategic roles of space draw attention to the environment where narrative is physically deployed while the geographical functions of space contextualize how and why our technologies, ideologies and cultural imaginations transform across different story telling platforms. Therefore one needs to distinguish between the geographical and the cultural functions of space. In forms of geography, space refers to location, distance, position, arrangement, orientation, direction and movement.

Space is a possibility of reading literature comprehensively. Since literature is an aesthetic expression of the human experience in a language, space is the locus where these human experiences take place. We may understand all kinds of human experiences represented in the literary works through a spatial perspective. An attempt to understand communal violence through spatial viewpoint demands a venture into the domains of culture, human geography, anthropology, history, theology, psychology, sociology, phenomenology etc. Space allows decoding these branches of knowledge interacting in literature while dealing with issues of communalism. Travel narratives contain spatial information—that is, information that provides insight into a specific place. Spatial information is constantly being discovered and re-discovered and interpreted and re-interpreted, and the individual travel experience is part of that great cycle of discovery. This concept can also be applied to our daily encounters with geography where texts and narratives positioned within the environment through street signs, plaques and historical markers convey or comprise part of a narrative and act in unison with their space.

3. Spatial Analysis: A Theoretical Reading

The concepts First space, Second space, and Third space are not different realities of space or even different modes of spatiality. Rather, they represent what the interpreter sees when examining space in different ways. Past representations of space are constructs and thus are products of power relationships. To interrogate those representations is to investigate the power relations that produced the constructs. In other words, the three spaces are new ways of seeing space, as well as what one finds when one sees differently.

Edward Soja in his book *Thirdspace: Journey to Los Angeles and Other Real- and-Imagined Places*, takes issue with what he regards as an imperious, historicist paradigm in which space tends to be treated as fixed, dead, undialectical and time as richness, life, and dialectic. Even though it draws upon both the material and mental spaces of perceived space and conceived space as we have mentioned earlier, it extends beyond them in scope, substance and meaning. It is simultaneously real and imagined and more. He invites us to think differently about the meaning and significance of space and those related concepts that compose and comprise the inherent spatiality of human life: place, location, locality, landscape, environment, home, city, region, territory and geography.

Soja developed the theory of Third space in which "everything comes together... subjectivity and objectivity, the abstract and the concrete, the real and the imagined, the knowable and the unimaginable, the repetitive and the differential, structure and agency, mind and body, consciousness and the unconscious, the disciplined and the trans disciplinary, everyday life and unending history." His aim is not to abandon the historicity in the modernist thought but assert the importance of historicity, sociality and spatiality in understanding social processes. As he explains, "I define Third space as an-Other way of understanding

and acting to change the spatiality of human life, a distinct mode of critical spatial awareness that is appropriate to the new scope and significance being brought about in the rebalanced trialectics of spatiality–historicality–sociality." Of particular interest to him is the way issues of class, race, gender and sexuality intersect with the spatiality of social life and with the new cultural politics of identity and difference it generates.

Third space, then, is the experience of life in the First space mediated through Second space expectations. It re-enforces the spatiality of human existence and the materiality of 'lived space' as a continuous struggle and contestation in terms of multiple identities and plural forms of human existence. The notion "third" refers to the constructing and re-constructing of identity, to the fluidity of spaces, to the space where identity is not fixed. Such is the feature of any kind of spatial existence.

4. Reading Travel Spatially

It sounds really interesting to apply such a theoretical construct in the reading of a nation state; ie, an analysis of the transition from the physical space (the geographical territory) to the imagined space (the conceptual category of nation) to the experienced space (nation as a lived experience). Drawing from Foucault and Lefebvre, Soja argues that postmodern social science must abandon the "modernist myth of linear narratives" which emphasise progressive, universal and historical anchor; and that social science must emphasise spatial studies rooted in locality and particularity through attention to human geography. As far as India is concerned, its experiments in communal violence have always contested the linear narrative of the nation state.

The lived experience emerges as the third space where nation unfolds itself not to be contained in any physical or imagined spaces, but as a space which is always open to interpretation, always flexible, vibrant, controversial and moreover radically open. The imagined space 'India', the result of the 'tryst with destiny' (from midnight August 15, 1947) therefore emerges not as a conclusion, not as a grand finale, but instead as a starting point for further exploration.

One should not forget the fact that, for such an analysis the definition of an Indian must be as a geosocial construct rather than a geographical locus. Indianness was constructed according to the intertwined principles of coloniality, ethnicity, constitutional supremacy with naivety embedded into it. Such an understanding reinserts socio-cultural history into the geographic image. The way the terms 'India' and 'Indian' are used is also connected with the political consolidation of diverse groups of people into a particular idea of Indian nation following the end of the British rule. Subsequently, the condition of 'being Indian' has been seen in terms of the political definitions at different levels. Aijaz Ahmad argues that there has never been any need in India for arousing among its inhabitants a cultural consciousness, as the people of all strata have strong cultural moorings. Thus, talking about nationalism in India has always ended up in re-discovering the essential elements of this cultural background of the Indians. Ahmad also opined that the principle of unity in India was 'civilizational' and 'historical' for many centuries before it could be encapsulated in the national form which is nothing but some 'constructs' (254). But the irony is that although initially, the idea of a homogeneous Indian nation seemed to have worked, the various ethno-religious or linguistic communities or political movements across the spectrum, have refused to subscribe to this view of an Indian nation.

India, the geographical space has been translated by many travel narratives. At the time of imperialism, India was represented by English authors with a need of authenticating their rule; moreover, it was the representation of ruled by the ruler. Hence, the early English travel writings exhibit conscious reproduction of the prejudices. With the change of time, India ceased to be the imperial colony and so ceases the need of deliberately contesting and detesting, everything and anything present in Indian society and Indian culture. Though, the travel writings witnessed a shift, still, India was represented under a guided rule of 'imperial nostalgia'. English society kept on looking at the subcontinent through imperial eyes. The separate identity of India was never set up.

By the time the travellers moved in 21st century, things changed drastically, there was an upheaval in critical theories and economies of all the countries. This changed the travellers' outlook towards the British colonies. The travellers could now be divided into two categories; one is that of historians and anthropologists, the other is that of creative writers. William Dalrymple, can be put in the first category, and this category viewed India not only through their perspective but through well researched facts and events. Dalrymple witnesses India as the history buried in ruins and his travel writings showcase his attitude of making sense of present in the light of past through ruins. The second category caters to their needs of creative writings, they present India through the series of stories, and the authenticity of these stories can always be contested. Both Naipaul and Theroux come under this category and both of them present India through series of stories either encountered by them while travelling or told to them by the natives.

Here comes the importance of a travel narrative like *Defragmenting India* by journalist writer Harish Nambiar. Harish Nambiar is a journalist with Reuters in Mumbai. He has been a mainstream English journalist in India since 1990, having begun his career with the Times of India group. He has worked with the Indian Express, the television channel CNBC, and The Telegraph, Kolkata. *Defragmenting India* is a collection of motorcycle diaries from a three-week trek with his friend Rohan India around the time of the 2002 Gujarat riots, ie, by the end of February 2002. In the course of a three week travel, Nambiar tries to deconstruct India, especially keeping in mind the heightened communal tensions following the mostly anti-Muslim Gujarat pogrom. The vast amalgam of cultures as it is, the vast geographic, ethnic and religious diversity found in India, the attempt is naturally a tall order.

5. Defragmenting India through the Gathering Storm

Defragmenting is actually a term used in software maintenance, ie, in the maintenance of file systems in a computer. It is a process that reduces the amount of fragmentation. It does this by physically organizing the contents of the mass storage device used to store files into the smallest number of connected fragments. Subtitled “Riding a Bullet through the Gathering Storm”, *Defragmenting India* is thus a candid portrait of contemporary India from the pillion of a bullet. He starts from Vapi (Mumbai) and travels through Gujarat, Nagpur, Odisha, Chhattisgarh, Bangalore and finally through Goa back to Mumbai. It is retrospective, because as a journalist, the narrator had previously been to these places and had extensively covered the 1992 Mumbai riots also. It analyses various fragmenting and defragmenting impulses in the lives of men and women by portraying 21st century India, its cities and countryside, its people and most importantly their emotions. The term emotions need to be highlighted here because the backdrop of the narration is the “gathering storm”- the 2002 Gujarat riots and the repercussions it threw across the country. In the course of his travel, he encounters the pulse of a nation in flux, not a nation which celebrated the much acclaimed ‘unity in Diversity’. Thus the third space evolves throughout as the narrator travels from one state to another mapping urban consciousness of India, by juxtaposing lives, issues and situations of educated and uneducated, craftsman and conservationist, teacher and business men, daughters and drunks from small towns a non-metro cities of India.

The narrative in its course use oral history, folklore, local legends, historical events, research papers, imaginative speculations, biographic anecdotes and graphic reportage in an elliptical and poetic narrative to weave a picture of a country in flux. Unlike travel narratives which explore and describe hitherto unknown places, *Defragmenting India* emerges as a ‘confused narrative’ which intentionally confuses homogenised versions of lived experiences. It mixes up practices gathered from different places and different sources and intersperses it at times with journalistic precision. Therefore, it is also criticised for combining a travelogue with a running social commentary, quite often with preconceived notions. At times, he was cautious not to play the role of a reporter; but at times he felt he was compelled to temporarily suspend his duties as a citizen by being a mere spectator and allowing the spaces to unfold on their own.

In an interview, Harish Nambiar said, “I was trying to paint a picture of India in transition. In 1991, the economic reforms had just begun. Ten years later, a state that had been economically at the top was bursting into riots, very costly riots”. When asked whether he travelled at the time of the Gujarat riots with the intention of bringing out a book, he said “I didn’t set out to write a book. I just landed up at a time where the riots burst. What I tried to do was get the data regarding the riots, running the theme of different communities along the route. My mission was not to ask people what they thought of the riots, because there is not much variety in terms of responses. It is exciting how each person, when you don’t mention the subject, responds or doesn’t respond to it—or even finds something else which is more important than the riots. This allowed me to build an entire picture of differences in India—it is a big animal.” The narrative is thus an attempt to lay bare the “bastardized multi-ethnic world that exists under a frayed blanket.”

There are good character sketches of Nambiar’s friends, acquaintances and strangers met on the road, which in turn opens a window into the lives of ordinary Indians living in the hinterland. He is very particular to provide the typical Indian tinge of describing a person, interpellation with the identity markers of caste, class and religion. For example, while describing his childhood friends at Vapi, (Mumbai), he says, “We grew up in a mixed neighbourhood of chemical plant workers, auto rickshaw drivers, vegetable sellers, lame carpenters and epileptic cinema ticket black marketers. He exquisitely delineates how childhood innocence rose above ‘forbidden acts of eating prasad and meat’ to meet the expectations of the grand narrative of constitutional secularism; and how beyond private bonding, the loss of innocence, the memory of recent history (pointing to the 1992 Mumbai riots) and the potential for vengeance hidden in innocence becomes problematic for an Indian citizen. He opines that to be a practising Indian, one must learn to “read the subtext” and act accordingly. The subtexts are of course, the fragments which were compelled to form a whole under the overarching narrative of anticolonial nationalism. The travelogue thus unfolds a third space where the collective unconscious still feeds on this subtext and hence there occurs a clash between the physical space, the imagined space and the lived space.

The major pull of the book is in the few chapters where Nambiar is more descriptive about the places he is in and focuses less on his own philosophical musings. For example, there is an interesting peek into Orissa and its artisans, while the contrast between a “vibrant” Gujarat (the writer’s home state) and the “backward” Orissa is very well done. The chapters on the Navayath Muslim community of Bhatkal, Karnataka, as well as on the nature of Hinduism in the modern Indian context are also informative.

He brilliantly portrays how myth gets confused with history- which in turn is a hallmark of the nation space- by bringing in the mythical figure of Kalapahad. In Odisha, beautiful old temples were being broken down in the course of the riots, and when he spoke to the people there, he discovered there was this mythological Kalapahad (Black Mountain) and all destruction is attributed to him.

The character Kalapahad turns out to be very interesting. He’s regarded as a Muslim in public memory, but as it turns out, I discovered that Kalapahad is actually a [Hindu] Brahmin. He falls in love with a Muslim girl and to marry her, he converts to Islam. Because he converts, he isn’t allowed to visit temples that he went to when he was younger. He then goes and destroys them. We see an entirely new space of distorted history and confused narratives which underlies the façade “we, the people of India.” Harish Nambiar himself said, “These are the types of stories I want, and not just how many people were killed. I wanted to develop a picture of the country and how it is developing at various paces”.

Every actor in the country has a personal story and he or she experiences everything in his or her personal way. There is the perception from the childhood friends he meet, the motorbike mechanic he encounters, the man in the hotel and all the imagined actors about whom he get a glimpse from the media coverage and newspaper reports. All of them are reminders of the fluidity of the third space. But they desperately try to keep their imagined space - the nation- together. While recording the details of places, the travel narrator, who is himself an actor, a citizen often tries to foreground the narratorial self and in so doing he not only diffuses knowledge about the outer world, but also tries to present the way in which he negotiates and interacts with the world that he encounters. The bundle of fragments that India is, a bundle of desperate people trying to snatch their piece of the pie, the underlying dire states of poverty, the power at play, the confluence of tradition and invented traditions all makes the narrative a sort of palimpsest on the imagined space. It successfully combines the fragments- the personal histories, family histories, social histories, cultural histories and national histories to defragment the imagined community - India. Thus what we find in *Defragmenting India* is an insider's perspective, an emergence from the comfortable cocoon of an innocent citizen to a 'concerned civilian' who is simultaneously privileged and cautious about the spatiality he discloses. It delves into the fluidity of the lived experience of the territorial entity India, where various identities divergently converge, while maintaining a collective national imagination.

References

- Aijaz, A. (1992). "Indian Literature: Notes towards the Definition of a Category." *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures*. Oxford University Press.
- Caspari, M. (2019). Writing Violence. *Wasafiri*, 34(3), 71–74. DOI: [10.1080/02690055.2019.1613021](https://doi.org/10.1080/02690055.2019.1613021)
- Chattarji, S., & Chakravarty, G. (Eds.). (2004). *An Anthology of Indian Prose Writing in English*. Penguin.
- Franey, L. E. (2003). *Victorian Travel Writing and Imperial Violence*. London: Palgrave Macmillan U.K.
- Habib, I. (1995). *Essays in Indian History: Towards a Marxist Perception*. Tulika Books.
- Hardy, S. (2018, August 27). Indecent Exposure – Writing violence and Resistance today. *English in Africa*, 45(2), 51. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4314/eia.v45i2.5>
- Jain, J. (Ed.). (1998). *Writers of Indian Diaspora: Theory and Practice*. Rawat Publications.
- Khilnani, S. (1997). *The Idea of India*. Penguin.
- Nambiar, H. (2012). *Defragmenting India: Riding a Bullet through the Gathering Storm*. Sage Publications.
- Soja, E. W. (2012). *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places*. Blackwell.
- Tally, R. T. Jr. (2012). *Spatiality: Routledge Critical Idiom*. Routledge.
- Westphal, B. (2011). *Geocriticism: Real and Fictional Space* (R. T. Tally Jr., Trans.). Palgrave MacMillan.
- Won, J.-I. (2019). Writing of Violence, Violence of Writing - Sony Labou Tansi's *La Vie et demie*. *Study of Humanities*, 31, 207–237. DOI: [10.31323/sh.2019.06.31.08](https://doi.org/10.31323/sh.2019.06.31.08)