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THIRD SPACE IN KAMALA DAS' "THE WILD BOUGAINVILLEA"

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ABSTRACT

Space has become a critical constituent in the study of literary works. Henri Lefebvre's seminal work "The Production of Space" prescribes that there are three interconnected aspects of space – spatial practices, representations of space, and spatial production. In response to Lefebvre's concept of spatial production, geographer and critical theorist, Edward Soja, in his book "Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory", argues that Lefebvre's work does not "adequately address the complexity and fluidity of contemporary spatial experience". (Soja 36) Soja subsequently introduces the concept of "third space" which he defines as the space of lived experience that exists between physical space and conceptual space or the real space and the imagined space. As third spaces exist between the real space and the imagined space, they are understood as the spaces that are produced by the interplay of the real and the imagined. Such an interplay can occur in various forms of art and literature is one of them. This paper explores the poem as a third space, wherein real spaces and imagined spaces participate in an interplay. The exploration is done through Kamala Das' "The Wild Bougainvillea". This poem of anguish and longing is set in existing real spaces and the poet, through her vivid imagery, enhances the production of imagined spaces. The paper addresses the possibility of understanding the poetic third space through the poem's imagery.

Keywords: third space, poetry, spatiality, imagery, kamala

INTRODUCTION

Known for her unvarnished and often flagrant approach to poetry, Kamala Das is a celebrated poet whose works have had an impact on generations of scholars in India and beyond. Desires of the woman, peculiarities of gender, the Indian identity and much of the unpalatable sides of human nature all find a voice in Das's poems that prompted a journey of self-discovery for many readers. Kamala Das was born on 31 March, 1934 in Kerala to her mother, Nalapat Balamani Amma, a well-known Malayalam poet, and her father, V. M. Nair who was an automobile company executive and journalist. Das was brought up in Calcutta where her father's employment led their family. Das's poetry expresses strongly of her attachment to places. Apart from her connection to Calcutta, Kamala Das also spent much of her younger years at Malabar, in what she calls, the Nalapat House. In her autobiography, "My Story" (1977), Das writes prolifically about Malabar and Calcutta and how the peculiarities of each place have impacted her understanding of life and subsequently, her poetry. In describing her Nalapat home, Das gives great attention to the structure of house, its various sections – the inner courtyard,

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the portico, the snake shrine, the bathhouse, the pond – while ascribing to these spaces, history, ancestral stories and memory. (Das 11)

Spatiality has grown to become a pressing point in the scope of literary studies, especially with the onset of the ‘spatial turn’ in the 1970s. The study of space is fundamental to many subjects but it is in Literature that such concepts of space in a text, the text as a space and space as a text have developed tremendously through the years. Professor and researcher, Robert Tally Jr. addresses the relationship between literature and spatiality in his book, *Spatiality*. He acknowledges that literature is a way of mapping spaces:

In a manner of speaking, literature also functions as a form of mapping, offering its readers descriptions of places, situating them in a kind of imaginary space, and providing points of reference by which they can orient themselves and understand the world in which they live. (2)

The works of Henri Lefebvre, Michel Foucault and Edward Soja provides scholars with theoretical frameworks by which place and space is explored, examined, read and written about. To Henri Lefebvre, space is a constantly evolving social product that is shaped by the interplay of three dialectical processes: spatial practices, representations of space, and spatial production. The first dialectical process, spatial practices, refers to the ways in which people use and interact with space in their daily lives. The second dialectical process, representations of space, refers to the ways in which space is imagined, symbolized, and represented in cultural and political discourse. The third dialectical process, spatial production, refers to the ways in which space is physically produced and transformed through social and economic processes. (Lefebvre 38)

Geographer and critical theorist, Edward Soja, introduced the idea of ‘real and imagined spaces’ and the concept of ‘third space’, whereby, real spaces are the physical and tangible aspects of space, such as buildings, roads, and landscapes, while imagined space is the mental and conceptual aspects of space, such as our perceptions, beliefs, and cultural representations of space. (Soja 6) Third space, however, is not simply the combination of these two spaces but represents a new spatiality that emerges from their interaction. Third space refers to the dynamic interplay between real and imagined spaces, and the creative possibilities that emerge from their interaction. Third spaces are manifested in different forms as they are shaped by diverse cultural, social and historical contexts. Art and literature can also function as third spaces since the interplay of real and imagined spaces occurs in the ambit of their texts or canvases. As a third space, literature, in its various forms, creates meanings and perspectives that allow for the exploration of the self and all its surroundings.

The poem, owing to its literary nature, is a form of third space – the poem has the potentiality to behave as a margin wherein an interaction of the real and the imagine can occur. Critical theorist, Homi Bhabha refers to the third space as an area of “hybridity” that “creates the conditions of possibility for strategic and effective oppositional practices”. (Bhabha 37) We employ this definition to view poetry as a third space and by this understanding we observe that poetry often functions as a literary location where the oppositional practices of the real space of the world and the imagined space of the mind come together in an interplay, thus forming a third space where new perspectives can emerge.

The poem “The Wild Bougainvillea” by Kamala Das, too, brings together the real spaces of the city and the garden in dialogue with the space of the mind, where different emotions are felt.

#### **THE POEM “THE WILD BOUGAINVILLEA”**

The poem “The Wild Bougainvillea” by Kamala Das was first published in 1965 in Kamala Das’ first volume of poetry, “Summer in Calcutta”. The poem is a recollection of a time when the poet is overwhelmed with the feelings of longing and anguish that come with her yearning for a lover – “a man from another town”. The poem may be understood as an attempt to overcome the suffering of losing a lover and embrace the very experience of heartbreak.

The poet narrates the agony that appears to imprison her in a relentless state of suffering. She embarks on “long walks” in an attempt to temper the loneliness that she feels. Her explorative strolls brought the poet to encounter her world and life itself in its various forms and fashion. The poet appears to appreciate the world

for what it can offer; the distractions of her city seem to keep all emotional turbulence at bay. As she walks by the sea, the poet experiences the transient nature of life through her sightings of a decaying world. All through this saunter, the poet gradually becomes less aware of the initial anguish.

The garden of vibrant marigold and wild red bougainvillea inspire in her a new vigour for life, devoid of any longings and desires for a lover. The poem concludes on a starkly different note from that on which it began.

### THE REAL SPACE AND THE IMAGINED SPACE IN "THE WILD BOUGAINVILLEA"

Before exploring the third space of the poem, it is appropriate that an account of the dialogue between the real and the imagined is given. The poem "The Wild Bougainvillea" was published in Kamala Das' collection of poems, "Summer in Calcutta". In congruence with Edward Soja's concept of real spaces being the physical and the tangible aspects of space, the city of Calcutta can be understood as constituting the larger part of the 'real space' in this poem. Soja also refers to the real space as the 'first space' and the imagined space as the 'second space'.

An analytical reading of the poem would, however, inform that Kamala Das does not write about Calcutta as a complete whole but rather explores this real space through its component parts, hence making for more independent and smaller real spaces in the poem. The poem begins with the lines "There was a time when I/Was sad in Calcutta" – right at the outset of the poem, Kamala establishes the real space of a city. Her expression of melancholy and her association of such an emotion to the place is our first encounter with the "dialogue" between the real and the imagined space. According to Edward Soja, the imagined space is the mental and conceptual aspects of space – how space is perceived and the mental implications of space. Das' expression of melancholy through the emotive "sad" is indicative of the existence of the imagined space. The melancholic space is the first imagined space that we identify which comes in dialogue with the real space of Calcutta within a third space – the poem.

The poem "The Wild Bougainvillea" is a poem of longing and anguish. Kamala Das writes of the slow summer days when the poet persona is in great agony; she states, "Days/When even my bed gave/No rest". We are introduced to another element of the real space, the bed, and within this real space she experiences the imagined space of anguish and suffering. This interplay is important for our understanding of the poem as third space. Kamala Das continues to explore other forms of real spaces within the larger real space of Calcutta. The poet persona's attempts to relieve herself of the distress and yearning for "a man from another town" takes her on long walks on "roads I had never/Seen Before". The multitude of real spaces in the poem brings the reader to the "roads" of Calcutta. The imagined space that enters in dialogue with the roads is different from the preceding imagined spaces – in the experience of the "roads", the poet persona is no longer restless or in anguish, but rather enters a tranquil imagined space of submission and release. We identify this imagined space through her association of a "love wilted" with the long walks she took on the unknown roads. She narrates her sight of charming faces and how the world is "good" and "Packed with distractions". There appears to be a great departure from the agonizing imagined space in dialogue with the bed, to the liberating and uninhibited imagined space of the roads and the outdoors.

The sojourn in the streets of Calcutta brings the poet persona in confrontation with multiple real spaces that create the chaotic imagined spaces termed poetically by Kamala Das as "distractions". The real spaces that actuate such an imagined space of diversion and movement according to the poem are the "streets beside/The sea, where the barges/Float, their undersides rotting and the garbage/Rot, and the dead fish rot". The "streets", the "sea" and the "barges" are in dialogue with the imagined space of distraction. These distractions appear to the poet persona as diversions from the feelings of longing for her lover. The reader observes that the previous imagined space of tranquil submission and release remains.

The real spaces that the poet persona finds herself in continue to produce multiple imagined spaces. While the streets and their "night girls" and "yellow lamps" produce imagined spaces of distraction and disgust, the dilapidated nameless tombstones appear like "grotesque teeth" to her and she finds herself once again in an imagined space of distraction. This kind of imagined space seems to have suppressed the initial imagined

spaces of anguish and pain. However, the real space of the garden introduces the poet persona to another imagined space altogether – that of inspiration and a renewed energy.

The real space of the garden along with its marigolds and wild red bougainvillea seems to stand independent of the other real spaces. While the other real spaces of the bed, the streets, the sea and the cemetery have all effected imagined spaces of gloom and despondency, the garden brings in a space of stillness and composure – “The city tamed/Itself for me”. This leads the poet persona to feel liberated, entering another imagined space, different from the ones she found herself in throughout the poem. The garden, yet again, comes in dialogue with the space of the mind, creating an imagined space.

At this point in the poem, she has surrendered all yearnings for the lover, Kamala Das writes, “my hunger for a/Particular touch waned” adding that she wakes up one morning “free”.

### THE POEM AS THIRD SPACE

As we have examined the dialogue between the real and the imagined spaces, we explore the poem as a third space wherein such a dialogue occurs. As discussed earlier, the concept of "third space" is often associated with geographer and cultural theorist Edward Soja, who argued that third spaces are such spaces that are neither physical (as real spaces) or mental (as imagined spaces), but are rather a combination of the two. In a third space, the interplay of the real and imagined takes place. Shabaz Kazia, in his article “Edward Soja: Third Space” describes the third space as “the experience of life in the first space mediated through the expectations of second space.”

The poem, like other literary forms, is also a form of third space since it allows for the interplay of the real and the imagined space. In a poem the poet brings together the aspects of the real space such as a house, a tree or a street and through the usage of literary devices conveys emotion and meaning that in turn builds an imagined space in the reader’s mental faculties. The poem acts as a middle ground and while it is, in its essence, physical, it is neither the real space that is written about nor the imagined space of the mind. The poem thus behaves as a third space being neither real nor imagined but rather a point of union of the two.

Kamala Das’ “The Wild Bougainvillea” functions as a third space. As have been examined above, the poet experiences the real space of a city, its streets, a cemetery and a garden. The poet brings these real spaces into the poem through vivid descriptions and these real spaces enable the poet to convey the emotions that she feels, particularly those of anguish and longing. The poem, as a third space, provides a liminal ground where the real space of Calcutta and the imagined space of anguish come in contact.

It is, however, insufficient to only state that the poem behaves as a third space because it is a point of contact of the two spaces. The poem, in being a third space, also forms a new space altogether with qualities that neither the real spaces nor the imagined spaces have on their own. There is, in the poetic third space, a quality of uniqueness that may be explored through its metaphorical imagery. The imagery within the poem creates a space that is entirely new and unknown. While Calcutta in its summer days is a familiar space, the poet’s comparison of the slow summer days to “mourners behind a bier” produce an imagery that is entirely new, thus making the poetic third space unique – the funeral procession is neither a component of the real space of Calcutta nor of the imagined space of anguish, it is only an aspect of the third space. Similarly, the imagery of the “troubled sea” is an aspect that was initially unfamiliar to the reader but that has been made known by the third space of the poem. The poem is pervaded with imageries that distinguish the third space from the real and the imagined space.

### CONCLUSION

The concept of space in literature has been discussed and deliberated on by many cultural and spatial theorists. Henri Lefebvre propounded the concept of the spatial triad based on the process of space production; Michel Foucault built the concept of heterotopia; Edward Soja extended Lefebvre’s work by introducing the idea of the third space; Homi Bhabha too added to the conversation on third space by exploring it as a hybrid space where cultural intersections occur and create new cultural meanings and identity.

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By examining the poem as a form of third space, this paper affirms that literature, too, can behave as a space of its own. Further, through this study, a difference is drawn between the setting of a text and the space of the text, the misconception that they are one and the same often hinders the study of spaces in literature.

Kamala Das' poetry is typically imbued with strong imagery of the real spaces that she is most familiar with. The poem "The Wild Bougainvillea", however, not only cradles the real space of Calcutta but also the imagined space of both the poet and the reader.

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