

Writing Space and Body: The Postcolonial Intersections of Spatial Politics in Kazuo Ishiguro's *A Pale View of Hills*

Abhilash Kaushik & Merry Baruah Bora

Abstract

The postcolonial notion of space is, more often than not, a contested one. A significant concern in relation to the idea of postcolonial spatiality is its fluidity. What it does is that it renders the schema of comprehending the body of an individual a blurred and a bit fragile one. The notion of postcolonial space has moved way ahead than only confining itself to indicating physical spaces. Kazuo Ishiguro's debut novel, *A Pale View of Hills*, perfectly vindicates the fact that postcolonial notion of space is rightly a fluid one with no fixity being seen in terms of boundaries and demarcations. This paper attempts to locate the fluctuating scenario of body and the physical spaces which regulates the presence of the central character, Etsuko, in the novel. Moreover, the paper also tries to delve deep into the different intersections of space and its nuances in the novel by adhering to the methodology of critical textual analysis of the novel.

Keywords: Body; Fluidity; Intersection; Postcolonial; Space.

The studies related to the intricacies of space in the contemporary academic circle have gained tremendous prominence. The modern day critical writings have always been the product of overlapping issues and ideas which percolate down to the domain of literary negotiation. The fluidity of different theoretical ideas is one of the primary reasons which greatly facilitates the basic process of blurred lines of demarcation. The inextricably intertwined presence of various different theoretical entities intersects simultaneously thereby making the process of studying space a strenuous one. The depictions related to the body and self of individuals have found considerable manifestations in today's scholarship which unravel the otherwise masked attributes. In relation to postcolonial studies, the portrayal

of different kinds of boundary-less spaces is utter significant as the theory itself seems to be without a specific coherent position with different spaces amalgamating together. Reiterating this, in the foreword to *Postcolonial Spaces: The politics of Place in Contemporary Culture*, Edward Soja has remarked that postcolonial studies, as a branch, has always been spatial in nature. As he argues, there is an inclination of the theory towards the off-shoots of human geography as well. What significantly concerns this particular research is the fluctuating position of individual bodies aligning together with fluid spatial locations. It can be observed that in any kind of less concretised spatiality, the self of an individual appears to be the product of the situations more than being a specific entity. The idea of space in today's domain of literary studies has extended to indicating mental, cultural and also, sometimes, historical spaces as well. In this regard, the spatiality also becomes directly linked with a tendency of a humanist viewpoint because the trespassing nature of space is understood only through "sensation, perception, and conception" (Tuan, p. 388).

Kazuo Ishiguro's *A Pale View of Hills* does not transgress spaces nor does it compel characters to fit into one specific role to present themselves. The readers can find a captivating presentation of both physical and mental spaces to be interconnected with the narration of the text. The presentation of space forms to be indispensable in the writings by Ishiguro which becomes clear in his remark, "I don't say men and women are identical, and obviously I would not have the same emotions as many men. We all come from very different places" (Groes, p. 251). *A Pale View of Hills* primarily concerns itself with joining the otherwise fragmented dots of various events of the Second World War associated with the primary character, Etsuko. It is seen that Etsuko, the old widow, is caught between her authentic position as an individual and different images of the past which engulf her present like a labyrinth. Living her present life in England after abandoning her first husband, Jiro, in Japan, the novel showcases how the mental space of Etsuko moves to and fro alongside the various physical places of war-adorned Nagasaki.

Ishiguro very tactfully brings in multiple tales in the novel which indicates the fluidity of even narrative boundaries alongside physical boundaries. The novel adverts on its way with Etsuko living with her first husband, Jiro, in Nagasaki and is carrying their elder daughter, Keiko. Ishiguro describes the period saying "there was fighting in Korea; and also American soldiers were as numerous as ever" (*A Pale View of Hills*, p. 11). The physical setting of Nagasaki swiftly changes to countryside in England in the overlapping second tale concerning the life of Etsuko, a widow, then,

retrospecting the suicide of her elder daughter, Keiko. If it was loss and grief that shadowed the life of Etsuko in England, it was also the absence of her authentic position of the body that further bogged her down in considerable measures. Ishiguro makes the readers grasp that the past events of the character regulate the present as they spill over both in her mind and in the narration as well. Regarding the blurry nature of the different incidents of the past, Etsuko also hints at the idea that those events can also transform different spaces into flexible ones when she remarks:

It is possible that my memory of these events will have grown hazy with time, that things did not happen in quite the way they come back to me today. (*A Pale View of Hills*, p. 41)

Memory, I realize, can be an unreliable thing; often it is heavily coloured by the circumstances in which one remembers, and no doubt this applies to certain of the recollections I have gathered here. (*A Pale View of Hills*, p. 156)

The participation of Etsuko in the multidimensional narratives of the novel greatly substantiates the idea that she was devoid of a concrete position of her self. Also, what is surprising is that there is never the culmination of any kind of complete self-introspection which she makes regarding her past in Nagasaki while living in England. In other words, the presentation of incomplete introspection is a proper indication of fluidity of mental space which Etsuko seems to illustrate in the novel. The visit of her younger daughter, Niki, along with her English husband when Etsuko was reminiscing the untimely death of her British husband, Mr. Sheringham, is one such notable example. In other words, a particular event does not find complete expression as there is the overlapping scenario of another one which makes the previous event incomplete. The advent of Niki and her husband in a way hindered the reminiscence of Etsuko who could not fully mourn the death of her husband. In the words of Salman Rushdie:

It may be argued that the past is a country from which we have all emigrated, that its loss is part of our common humanity. Which seems to be self-evidently true; but I suggest that the writer who is out-of-country and even out-of-language may experience this loss in an intensified form. It is made more concrete for him by the physical fact of discontinuity, of his present being in a different place from his past, of his being "elsewhere." (Rushdie, p. 56)

The 'physical fact of discontinuity' which Rushdie talks about was inevi-

tably present in the novel with Etsuko struggling a great deal to establish a concrete sense of her self in England. The displacement from Nagasaki to England also plays pivotal role in the formation of fluid spaces in the mind of Etsuko as along with the physical space, her mental space also found an alteration. This also indicates the changing nuances of postcolonial writings in the modern-day world where the physical setting is seen to be in direct connection with the location of the body of an individual. In the hindsight, the connection between the physical space and the mental location of an individual also proves that the postcolonial idea of space is more conceived by individuals. It is not something which is vividly present in the open to be perceived easily, but always becomes a product of human ways of comprehending. Edward Soja remarks in relation to the importance of space in modern day writings by saying, "The critical hermeneutic is still enveloped in a temporal master-narrative, in a historical but not yet comparably geographical imagination." (Soja, p. 11)

Etsuko, along with her daughter, Niki, in England, was always in a flux as there were haunting scenes which enveloped their present living. The character of Sachiko also played a significant role in making Etsuko oscillate between her present and the past. The traumatised relationship with Sachiko's daughter, Mariko, echoed the lack of concerns which Etsuko showed for her daughter, Keiko, before the latter committed suicide. So, it can also be interpreted that the tale of Sachiko provided Etsuko with the platform to reconstruct her own tale with her daughter. This also, at the same time, clarifies that the narrations seem to overlap from one medium to another thereby rendering the body to be not stable but dependent on a source to be carried forward. The body of Etsuko, in the novel, becomes a symbol where the traits of the cultural intricacies have been inscribed which find themselves in alignment with the physical spaces. Thus, the body becomes a vivid symbol which is also the carrier of the realities associated with the broader truths of the society. The presence of different non-specific and fluid tales of both Etsuko and Sachiko was integral to the idea of novel as stated by Ishiguro in an interview with Gregory Mason:

What I intended was this: because it's really Etsuko talking about herself, and possibly that somebody else, Sachiko, existed or did not exist, the meanings that Etsuko imputes to the life of Sachiko are obviously the meanings that are relevant to her (Etsuko's) own life. Whatever the facts were about what happened to Sachiko and her daughter, they are of interest to Etsuko now because she can use them to talk about herself. (Mason, p. 337)

The overlapping nature of spatial locations in relation to the to and fro movement from Nagasaki to England also reiterates that the narrative of the novel is both disorganised and fluctuating. Although the narrative falls in line with any kind of postmodern writing in terms of its fragmentation of the plot, it also paves the way for Ishiguro to frame the tale to be in the nature of a pendulum. As it is, the issue of moving away from their native places has a proper bearing on the lives of the two daughters, Keiko and Mariko, along with their parents. In the same vein, it can also be said that positioning the two daughters as proper individuals was one of the pertinent problems as they never specifically belonged to a particular physical location. It was seen that the lives of the two young daughters were devoid of any kind of love or affection and they were floundering between their concrete identity and the concealed relegated position. To further substantiate, although the tale revolves around the fluctuating physical locations in the life of Etsuko and her daughters, it can be surmised that the two daughters are representatives of fluid bodies. It was seen that instead of Mariko, Etsuko uttered the name of Keiko at the end of the novel after dealing with the story of Sachiko. According to Edgar and Sedgwick:

the understanding of the body develops in cultural studies through the recognition of the body as a site of meaning . . . The body is not simply there, as a brute fact of nature, but is incorporated into nature. The body is indeed a key site at which culture and cultural identity is expressed and articulated . . . It is through the body that individuals can conform to or resist the cultural expectations imposed upon them . . . Analysis of the body can therefore increasingly see it as a product of social constraint and construction . . . or of the languages and discourses . . . (Edgar and Sedgwick, p. 47)

Regarding physical locations, it also needs to be stated that the idea of 'West' or England, in the novel, was a long cherished one in the mind of Etsuko. She gleefully expresses her viewpoints regarding England to her daughter Niki and those are ample proofs that England had long developed in her mind even before physically landing there. This brings to the forefront the idea of abstract space which Ishiguro subtly depicts. As she says, "So truly like England out here; how so truly like England everything looked; I always imagined England would be and I was so pleased" (*A Pale View of Hills*, p. 182). Strikingly enough, the intersections of abstract places alongside the physical ones was also seen in the life of Sachiko as well. She expresses her childhood dream of visiting America when she says:

When I was young, I used to dream I'd go to America one day, that I'd go there and become a film actress. My mother used to laugh at me. But my father told me if I learnt my English well enough, I could easily become a business girl. (*A Pale View of Hills*, p. 109)

The explication of different spatial politics in terms of characters and locations aligning together also reiterates the process of globalisation. Generally, in a globalised scenario, spatiality tends to lose its meaning with various thematic strands and trends overlapping with one another. Re-asserting one specific spatial location in the novel would appear to be a reductionist mechanism because the previous life of Etsuko in Nagasaki was as important as the present life in England. Also, the daughter of Sachiko is equally important as the daughter of Etsuko when it comes to understanding the dualities of identity which both suffer from as a result of displacement from their native lands. John Clarke makes a very pertinent remark regarding the changed nuances of the rudimentary understanding of 'spatialisation' in the present century as he says:

The western nation state was also a welfare state, a space of normalizing individual life conduct (Max Weber) to regulate everyday life in regard to specific temporal scales. To accept that normalizing time-space promises even the working citizens and their families an amount of aid in needed situations – even in very different amounts regarding to the different welfare state models. That promise of an integrational nation-space is under siege in the context of the emergence of the new spatial alignments. To substitute that missing new spaces being in demand: the community-space is coming back in. Small inclusive spaces (districts, neighborhoods, families) are called to substitute the former nation as a welfare state-space. (Clarke, p. 57)

One of the significant attributes of the story in the novel is its way of delineation. If on one side there is the troubled tale of Etsuko, then, on the other side, there is the tale of the visit of her younger daughter, Niki, to England. Her visit surely acts as the way through which a lot of memories related to the past life of Etsuko in Japan flashes back instantly in her mind. Thus, the overlapping spatial images become even more vivid as a result of Niki's visit which acts no less than a frame story in Etsuko's life. A careful observation also brings to limelight that the visit of Niki pushes further the otherwise main story of the sad and guilty state of Etsuko regarding the suicide of Keiko. Ishiguro makes all these tales appear in such

a way that the readers unnoticeably become a part of all the tales although they never make conscious attempt in order to comprehend the different events. The different tales appear to be important episodes in the lives of the characters but these episodes are of paramount importance in showcasing how the attributes of space are fluid in nature.

Right throughout the narration of the plot of the novel, there is an engulfing note of melancholy which regulates the life of Etsuko. The readers can't but only sympathise with Etsuko who, after surviving the bomb blast in Nagasaki, had seen numerous stages of trauma and suffering in her life. The different spatial locations which play significant roles in the life of Etsuko also resemble the very life of Ishiguro himself who is also an immigrant from Japan which C. Cheng pertinently remarks by saying, "Ishiguro weaves strands of personal displacement and nostalgia seamlessly into stories of others' lives instead of his own" (Cheng, p. 18). The novel also depicts the structured importance of different spaces in relation to the role played in the lives of different characters. It was seen that America was perceived as something absolutely exotic and way better than Japan which was war-torn at that very point. Not only Etsuko, who clings onto her second husband, Sheringham, in order to be a part of English culture but also her friend, Sachiko, hinges on her boyfriend, Frank, to reside in America.

It was also worth-noticing that there was a vivid change in personality as well in the life of Etsuko along with the change in spatial location in England. During her initial life in Japan, she was seen as someone who was meek and docile without having any real authoritative stand of herself. However, her life in England was completely different as "she enjoys the status of an independent woman" (Drag, p. 95). It was seen that Jiro, Etsuko's first husband, also prevented her from going out of the home and one fine day when Etsuko finally went out, she remarked, "that was the first time I had crossed to the far side of the river" (*A Pale View of Hills*, p. 40). Even Niki, her younger daughter, supports her mother's decision of leaving Jiro who epitomised tyranny and oppression at the utmost level. Niki stated that most of the women in Japan always lied under the clutch of the male figures of a family as their voices were never heard and they were made to live a life of subordination and relegation. "My motives for leaving Japan were justifiable" (*A Pale View of Hills*, p. 91) was what Etsuko said when she left her husband in Japan and went to England.

The role of different places in the novel is also seen in the determination of destiny of the characters to a considerable extent. Etsuko lands some kind

of support to her second husband, Sheringham, in front of Niki when the latter makes the point that he, as a step-father, could have played his role much better for the betterment of Keiko's life. To this, Etsuko states:

Your father was rather idealistic at times... In those days, you see, he really believed we could give her a happy life over here... But you see, Niki, I knew all along. I knew all along she would not be happy over here. But I decided to bring her just the same. (*A Pale View of Hills*, p. 175-176)

The very attributes of the different spatial locations in the novel also find manifestations in the inherent position of Ishiguro as someone who had an oscillating state of living between Japan and England. In one of the notable interviews with Kenzaburo Oe, Ishiguro explains his own sense of "homelessness" when he remarks:

My very lack of authority and lack of knowledge about Japan, I think, forced me into a position of using my imagination, and also of thinking of myself as a kind of homeless writer. I had no obvious social role, because I wasn't a very English Englishman, and I wasn't a very Japanese either. (Kenzaburo, p. 115)

In the broader realm of postcolonial studies, the intricacies of space find a changed meaning in the present-day world. It can easily be observed that space, more than the different physical locations, becomes something which gets created through the process of narration in fictions. The space, thus, gets enacted more than something which is inherent. The trajectory, then, becomes a pretty much linear one with multiple spaces becoming one thereby portraying the blurry lines of demarcation. In the words of the notable geographer of human studies, Doreen Massey:

one of the effects of modernity was the establishment of a particular power/knowledge relation which was mirrored in a geography that was also a geography of power (the colonial powers/ the colonised spaces) – a power-geometry of intersecting trajectories. (Massey, p. 64)

The novel perfectly substantiates the above comment that the various spatial locations depicted in the plot become dominant sites of both the production and contestation of stable positions of individuals. Moreover, it also has to be stated that the younger generations never actually got perturbed by the different physical locations as both Keiko and Mariko, the two daughters of Etsuko and Sachiko respectively, were seen to be floun-

dering between their authentic identity and the imposed one. In the same vein, the fluid nature of human bodies become evident when, towards the end, both Keiko and Mariko become one individual in the narration of Etsuko. There is the situation of the fading away of individual identity of the two young girls as they get converted to creatures with identities which are misplaced.

In the words of Sara Upstone, “the right to space must be seen as key to the very real, often violent, material effects of colonisation” (Upstone, p. 4). This is a clear reiteration of the fact that literature is the domain where spaces get produced and reproduced and postcolonial studies come to its aid as geographies of human beings have always been one of the integral components of the nuances of it. Thus, postcolonial studies and postcolonial studies associated with space lead to the creation of different spaces which, as Henri Lefebvre would say, create problems for the study associated with spatiality in general. There is the emergence of something called as the imagined and created space alongside the presence of real and concretised space which lead to the problematisation of the idea of subjectivity associated with human beings. All these create a maze of lived experiences of human beings coming out from which seem almost improbable which find vindication in the words below by Edward Soja:

postcolonial studies in general and postcolonial spatial studies in particular have continued to be split in two different discursive worlds. One world thrives on spatial metaphors like mapping, location, cartography, and landscape, works primarily with fictional literatures, and excels at literate textual analysis; the other often tends to sublimate its overtly spatial emphasis, eschews metaphorical flair, and strives for solid materialist exposition of real politics and oppression. (Soja, p. 10)

The different kinds of physical locations which the text depicts also play very important roles in making the readers grasp the numerous abstract spaces along with the different physical spaces which too get manifested, albeit unseen, in the text. These abstract spaces never account for any kind of influences in the lives of the central characters but are quite handy when it comes to studying their roles in the general comprehension of the text. These are the spaces and areas which enable the readers in order to move beyond the general idea of text as a cultural artefact to the text as the hub of articulation and depiction of multiple spaces. According to Lefebvre, “when codes worked up from literary texts are applied to spaces – to urban spaces, say – we remain, as may easily be shown, on the purely

descriptive level" (Lefebvre, p. 7). Ishiguro, in the text, tries to depict how human bodies get entangled in the blurry lines of spatiality which can only be described and whose sensation can only be felt.

The very fact that the physical locations of Nagasaki initially and England towards the later part of the novel become mere locations and the primary site of the entire narrative becomes the mind and memory of Etsuko brings in staggering thoughtful reiterations. It can, then, be said that physical locations in the text remain as mere entities without playing significant factors which again bring to limelight that physical settings are never "key to the work" (Jaggi, p. 160) in Ishiguro's fictions. It is Etsuko who becomes the controller of events in the text and even the dreadful scenes of the bomb blast in Nagasaki find expression in her mouth more than the depiction by Ishiguro. In this regard, it becomes evident that Ishiguro also tries to paint a somewhat concrete image of the physical land of Nagasaki through the process of his narration although not making his intentions deliberately known to the readers. Thus, there is a process of the creation and construction of physical space which amalgamate with the mental space of Etsuko in order to give the former a proper shape and structure.

The process of the creation of the physical spaces of Nagasaki can also be studied as one of the important aspects in the life of Etsuko who, as a survivor of the war, has tried to reconstruct both historical and physical spaces. Ishiguro states that Etsuko dwelled in "area to the east of the city" (*A Pale View of Hills*, p. 11) which itself was in tatters and was close to the ruins without having any kind of specific structure. The ruins and the wastes which Etsuko talked about in her broken and fragmented narration of whatever was in her mind in relation to Nagasaki could also be coupled with the general dead bodies and remnants of the war. Even Etsuko's life in England was devoid of a specific geographical sense of place. Nowhere in the novel do we find the name of the location of Etsuko in England or the exact location. She herself said that the place she lived in was "so truly like England" (*A Pale View of Hills*, p. 182) which brings in the inference that it was not the exact England. Moreover, like her old memory which has "grown hazy with time" (*A Pale View of Hills*, p. 41), her vision in England was blocked by shades of dark clouds and fog which is a further indication of the entire obscurity of the narration. The entire process of narration by Etsuko "begin to weave back and forth through time and levels of consciousness until they gain symbolic but shifting meaning" (Forsythe, p. 102).

A greater sense of hinting at the otherwise concealed truths in the lives

of the characters can also be seen in the conversations between Niki and Etsuko when the former visited her mother in England. It also has to be stated that Etsuko always had in her mind that her act of discarding her former husband, Jiro, and leaving Japan had, in one way or the other, led to the suicide of their daughter, Keiko. Even Niki's visit to England can also be regarded as an attempt in order to mend the broken states of their bodies in the form of stitching a proper communication but this never actually happened. Thus, if on one side there was a lack of concretised physical location and blurring spatial lines, on the other side, there were bodies which were prone to repression and inherent trauma leading to distress of the highest kind. There is again a fragile depiction of the nature of their bodies which do not find stability in terms of terms authentic position. Niki talks to her mother about the sense of repression which she had in her mind as she says:

"I had a dream last night," I said.

"I think it might be to do with the quiet. I'm not used to it being so quiet at night."

"I dreamt about that little girl. The one we were watching yesterday. The little girl in the park."

"I can sleep right through traffic, but I've forgotten what it's like, sleeping in the quiet." (*A Pale View of Hills*, p. 55)

To sum up, *A Pale View of Hills* captivatingly highlights the delicate layers of both physical locations and mental positioning of individuals. Reading at a surface level makes the novel appear to be a non-coherent tale of past memories and fragmented present, but deep down the intricate presence of previous events, it is the fluidity of body which finds a true representation. The idea of home also finds an altogether altered meaning in the novel with both Etsuko and her daughter struggling to come to terms with the country of England. It was the traumatised past of war-affected Nagasaki which was at the helm in their minds thereby preventing a serene present. To make the notion of identity and fluctuating self very clear, the thought of Etsuko regarding selling her house towards the end of the novel is a notable testimony. It was seen that Etsuko opined the house to be containing memories of her daughter, Keiko, and other traumatised events of her past life in Nagasaki. She says to her younger daughter, Niki, "Perhaps I

should sell the house now. The house is no longer a home [for Etsuko] and is haunted by the memories of Keiko and the past” (Lewis, p. 31).

Although ideas like home and spatial locations find altered meaning in the novel, the positioning and presentation of bodies of individuals align with the same. The characters, precisely, swing between the fluid locations of a particular place while living in the other and thus, their selves succumb to the politics of modern day globalised spatiality. In a nutshell, the novel uncovers the ramifications associated with the postcolonial idea of space to be trespassing onto the domain of not only the selves of the individuals but also onto the domain of narration. The text, then, achieves a nuanced telling of the entities involving space, spatiality, self, identity within the larger rubric of a globalised world which prevents one from reaching an innocent understanding of individual’s fate while leading one, in the process, towards multiple possibilities in terms of meaning and appreciation. The individual body, in this regard, becomes what the eminent critic, Susan Bordo, remarks, “The body is not only a text of culture. It is also . . . a practical, direct locus of social control . . . through seemingly trivial routines, rules and practices, culture is ‘made body’ . . .” (Bordo, p. 2362).

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