

THRESHOLDS OF FEAR AND HOPE: SPATIAL ZONES IN GEETANJALI SHREE'S OUR CITY THAT YEAR

1 Ms. S. DIVYA,

Ph.D RESEARCH SCHOLAR, PG & RESEARCH DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH,
VELLALAR COLLEGE FOR WOMEN (AUTONOMOUS), ERODE-12, TAMILNADU, INDIA

Guided by

2 Dr. S. PUNITHA,

ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR & HEAD, PG & RESEARCH DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH (SF)
VELLALAR COLLEGE FOR WOMEN (AUTONOMOUS), ERODE-12, TAMILNADU, INDIA

Abstract : The word 'Literature' means the mirror of life, and it represents the diverse attitudes, cultures, styles, and surroundings of people, reflecting the changes and progress in society from various perspectives. One of the emerging theories in literature is spatial theory. Spatial theory examines how space, place, and their relationships affect the characterization and narration in the flow of the story. It helps to understand how physical and virtual ways form identity, understanding political and cultural meaning within the text. Geetanjali Shree's *Our City That Year* (2024) is originally written in Hindi, and it has been translated by Daisy Rockwell. The story flows in a unique, non-linear manner, and the reader gets a sense of the appearance of the unnamed narrator often. The plot is set in an unnamed city with the backdrop of communal violence between Hindus and Muslims. Shree gets the inspiration from the actions of the demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992. The main characters are Shruti, Hanif, Sharad, and Daddu. Shruti is a creative writer, wants to cover the sensation of the communal violence, but she struggles to get an idea for the initiation. Her husband, Hanif, is an academician. He is a secular person, but he is treated as an alien within his department. Sharad is a childhood friend of Hanif, and he has demonstrated his loyalty towards his friend during a critical situation, as well as exposing himself to the communal fervour. His father, Daddu, a retired professor, is a humourist and moralistic person. The plot revolves around the tension of spreading unwanted rumours, which erodes the hope of unity and instils panic and fear among innocent people. The living zone becomes under the control of observation, and familiar becomes unfamiliar, which spoils the bond within the society.

Keywords: *Third space, environment, violence, marginalization, hope.*

THRESHOLDS OF FEAR AND HOPE: SPATIAL ZONES IN GEETANJALI SHREE'S *OUR CITY THAT YEAR*

Spatial studies in literary theory examine how space, place, and the relationship between living and non-living entities affect the realities and characterization in the unfolding of the story. It helps to understand how physical and virtual ways make one's identity by recognizing the impact on social, political, and economic perspectives within the text. Geetanjali Shree's *Our City That Year* (2024) is originally written in Hindi, and it has been translated by Daisy Rockwell. The story unfolds in a unique, non-linear manner. The plot is set in an unnamed city with the backdrop of communal violence between Hindus and Muslims. Shree gets the inspiration from the actions of the demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992. Geetanjali Shree compares two different situations by introducing the character Shruti at a railway station. Due to the rain, water flows toward the tracks, where it becomes useless. In the urban space, some tensions and rumours had been created unnecessarily, where people, "...came from the neighborhood water tanks that were emptied into the street for fear they'd been poisoned" (Shree 1).

In *Our City That Year*, the reader gets a sense of the presence of the unnamed narrator often. "I am not omnipresent. I write about wherever I am, whenever. I cannot weave things together" (Shree 7). Through her mute observation, she copies everything accurately without any precision. Her way of writing helps the reader to understand the mentality of the people around her. She never stands on the side. She also expresses her doubts, fear, anger, disappointment, and humour through her writing. Her space plays a crucial role by marking her experiences and her viewpoints in the midst of communal conflicts. Geetanjali Shree portrays the daily routine of Shruti, Hanif, Sharad, and Daddu effectively.

Geetanjali Shree's *Our City That Year* encapsulates the concept of the intimacy of chaos, highlighting the interconnections that vibrate the whole society, as well as shaking even the micro-level things in society. Here, the communal clashes play a role in making the spatial changes within relationships and surroundings as well. Shruti is a creative writer, wants to cover the sensation of the communal violence, but she struggles to get an idea for the initiation.

Sometimes Shruti thinks of the story she wants to create from the perspective of an infant. "'Should I write from the perspective of a child?' Shruti asks" (Shree 6). She compares herself to Lord Ganesha's role while Vyasa was narrating the Mahabharata. Her ideas are rejected, or she gives up because of the influence of her acquaintance. This is caused by the effect of chaos, which makes her unable to express her thoughts clearly within her liminal space. Her husband, Hanif, is an academician. He works as a professor at an unnamed university. "There's a university too, with old domes occupied by pigeons" (Shree 11). He is a secular person, but he is treated as an alien in his department. They both live in Sharad's house. They used to stay in the first storey. Sharad lives with his father Daddu. Sharad is a childhood friend of Hanif, and also a professor who works in the same department. He has demonstrated his loyalty towards his friend during a critical situation, as well as exposing himself to the communal fervor.

The friendship between Sharad and Hanif is portrayed as a bond of siblings: When the sabziwallah comes to sell vegetables, he never asks Shruti who's who; he just assumes Sharad and Hanif are brothers when he sees them driving their scooters down the street,

and says, 'The brothers said for you to get some sweet potatoes.' 'Who said they were brothers?' Shruti laughs loudly. 'If they were actually brothers would they go everywhere together?' (Shree 32)

The bond between Sharad and Hanif becomes strained due to communal violence and their differing ideologies. Usually, they share food and ideas while they are residing in their home. Sharad begins to see Hanif differently. Although they live in the same house, the communal conflicts make Sharad feel alienated from his friends and family. He becomes possessive about Hanif's behavior, comparing his activities in the department to his usual jovial nature at home. "In my own home, with my father, he sits around like he's more related to him than me. He's turned me out" (Shree 378). Sometimes, they avoid each other, which creates an invisible boundary, and it forms a 'dual space' in between them. It affects the peacefulness of their lifestyle.

The concept of Henri Lefebvre's Spatial Triad underlies the story, with three categories. They are Spatial Practice (perceived space), Representations of Space (conceived space), and Representational Space (Lived space). Here, Spatial Practice represents the appearance of the physical environment. In *Our City that Year*, Geetanjali Shree portrays the architect of the unnamed city. There is a bridge that divides the city. On one side, the unnamed narrator copies everything that she is getting from the characters, and on the other side of the bridge, the riots take place between two religious groups. Due to curfew, the streets become mute. An Ashram develops, "...has already spread into the maiden by now expanding over the area of the cleared brush. There's plenty of land on all sides of the temple" (Shree 40). In university, the spatial practice highlights the experiences of irregularities, which makes Hanif mute with his close friend. Hanif loses his position as a head because of his community. Even though he is Muslim, he stands against the extremists on both sides. He expresses plurality and tries to show the damage on both sides. None understands his mentality except Shruti and Daddu. The unnamed narrator buys an ink bottle from a shop. There, the shopkeeper stares at this unnamed narrator, trying to figure out whether she is Hindu or Muslim. The communal conflicts leave the narrator afraid of the prevailing situation.

In the representations of space, a space is created by a planner or an architect based on an abstract idea. Hanif and Shruti want to create a beautiful garden in front of Daddu's home. During the curfew, Hanif prepares the land for planting many saplings with fragrant flowers. They hope many birds will visit the garden. "It should be a dense vine. Sun birds will come. The lal munia will come. The waxbill." "Only sparrows will come." "Nightingale will come!..." (Shree 31). As well, they expect madhumalti to grow soon. They enjoy the chirping of a guldem and a shrike in their garden. While seeing a chameleon, Shruti metaphorically calls it a tiny dinosaur.

Lefebvre's Representational Space denotes a realm where space is experienced through symbols, imagery, and personal or collective memories and emotions, shaping how individuals or communities interpret and relate to it. Daddu naturally has a humour sense; he always shares his childhood experiences. He sits on the divan (sofa), used to making fun of every situation. While he is laughing, the divan too moves according to the rhythm of Daddu's laughing, "the divan becomes a kite" (Shree 17). Shruti joins and enjoys the healthy atmosphere. Here, Shree uses the technique of flashback, making the character recollect their beautiful memories. Shruti shares her childhood experience where her Muslim friend brought her and her brother to see the slaughter of a goat. On seeing this, Shruti's brother got sick. Her mother then revealed that they enjoyed watching the gutting of a chicken, "...pluck the feathers and remove the skin, as though it were a game" (Shree 63). It shows that they don't feel pity for the chicken but for the goat.

Hanif and Sharad's students use the divan as a space to interact with their favorite professors. It is considered a 'third space'—a place where visitors gather in someone's home to connect and engage. Daddu shares his views on secularism, noting that people often eat at dhabas and restaurants without knowing the caste or community of the cooks and servers who prepare and serve their food. In his village, there is no separation between Hindus and Muslims. Both celebrate joint holidays and festivals. Hindus prepare halwai for their Muslim friends, and the entire village has china dishes for Muslim guests. This shows that there was much affection between Hindus and Muslims. While the riot attacks Daddu, he loses himself trying to protect Shruti from the chaotic situation. It deeply affects Daddu that he reconciles himself to muteness. The unnamed narrator, who is the only witness to the disorder, stops her narration. With these impacts on the individuals, the story ends on a note of frustration.

Thus, the story focuses on how rumours start to spread, causing a lot of tension. These rumours break down the hope that people will stay united and instead create panic and fear among innocent people. The liminal zone where they live feels like it is under surveillance, making everyone feel unsafe. Things that used to be familiar and comfortable suddenly feel strange and unknown. Because of this, the relationships and trust between people in the community begin to weaken and fall apart.

Works Cited

Shree, Geetanjali. 2024. *Our City That Year*. Penguin Hamish Hamilton India.

Lefebvre, H. 1991. *The Production of Space*. Blackwell Oxford UK & Cambridge USA.

Sriraman, Shree Thaarshini. "'Our City, That Year': The Many Tangled Happenings That Form the Psychic Context of Communalism." *Scroll.in*, 7 Sept. 2024, scroll.in/article/1072935/our-city-that-year-the-many-tangled-happenings-that-form-the-psychic-context-of-communalism.

Tiwary, Varsha. "Writing the Rupture: *Our City That Year* Is an Uncannily Universal Story With Immense Relevance Today - the Wire." *The Wire*, 12 Oct. 2024, thewire.in/books/writing-the-rupture-our-city-that-year-is-an-uncannily-universal-story-with-immense-relevance-today.

Shi, Mengdan. An Analysis of Lefebvre's the Production of Space from the Perspective of Narratology. *Open Access Library Journal*, 12: e11552. <https://doi.org/10.4236/oalib.1111552>