

# LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

## ‘Kew’rious Gardens: Of Literary Isolations, Mobility, and Curiosity in Virginia Woolf’s

### ‘Kew Gardens’

Gaana Jayagopalan

Christ University, Bangalore

[gaanaj.25@gmail.com](mailto:gaanaj.25@gmail.com)

---

As I write this, with the Covid-19 pandemic having altered the landscape of education, learners and course instructors are isolated from the physical classroom space in India. However, the academic community at large has been making substantial efforts to ensure conversations with learners are sustained. This isolation has provided an opportune moment for teachers of literature like me to reflect on the tropes of space, movement, and (im)mobility.

Teaching a course for the second-year undergraduate students called ‘Narratives of Mobility’ in a University in Bangalore, India, at a time when isolation has become the new normal could not have been more pertinent to reflect on space and mobility<sup>1</sup>. A course built around negotiating the strength of mobility as a framework to understand narrative spatialities in literary texts has now emerged to be a far more important exercise of mobility in imagination and literary isolation. What appeared increasingly challenging for the cohort as well as me, was to reiterate the necessity of engaging with the mobility framework within literary contexts, so as to enable a more nuanced understanding of (im)mobility.

What do spatial, motile tropes do to literary texts? Why are they deployed as thematics and topicalities of literary works? How do these introduce larger social, political and cultural debates into our reading practices? In re-reading Virginia Woolf’s ‘Kew Gardens’ (Woolf 1997) published in 1919, this personal reflection charts the strength of traversing different narrative spaces that a text draws onto itself as its coordinates. What does it mean for Woolf to write a short story that provides a montage of movements in the story set in the Kew Gardens? How do we as readers, although isolated ourselves, traverse the different

coordinates of the long cultural history of the Kew and anchor them back into Woolf's narrative space? What does this sort of an imaginary traversal do to our capacities to imagine?

These questions proved to be important for the course to reimagine mobility within narrative time and narrative space in newer forms. Our engagement with mobility in narratives began to gain newer dimensions especially when placed against mobilities that are outside the narrative spatial frames of the narrative in question. These are mobilities that are not explicitly stated available in the text, but have sedimented in the background of the text's narrative space. In such a scenario, although immobile, isolated, and trapped in virtual grid-lives for a classroom, we had to ensure our narrative imaginations as readers are robustly mobile.

### Conceptual Frames

Space in narrative enables a more complex engagement than narrative setting. It moves beyond a reductive association of space with frame settings. Sheila Hones clarifies this as an important direction where 'text and space, fiction and location, might be understood as inseparable and co-productive' (Hones 2011: 686). Hones' work builds on integrating emerging trends in geography and spatial theory with literary geographies. Her work is informed by two significant points: one, that the work of fiction is an event in time and space, and two, that spatial geographies of literature are constituted by real-world spaces (Hones 2014).

Hones observes: 'fiction can usefully be understood as a geographical event, a dynamic unfolding collaboration happening in time and space' (Hones 2014: 32). This is important here because this engagement with time and space as collaborative in reading process became increasingly evident in our shared virtual classroom spaces, characterized by an immobility. As an academic community, we were drawn to consider that an imaginary mapping of mobility of this kind also helps locate our own positions of (im)mobility today, illuminating the strength of combing other spatial mobilities in our reading practices. In such a context our reading practices characterized by curiosity and an imaginative mobility framed around isolation becomes *a shared imaginary of mobility in virtual classrooms, and an embodied one at that*<sup>2</sup>.

### Locating Woolf's 'Kew Gardens'

Virginia Woolf's 'Kew Gardens' is a short story in the *Monday or Tuesday* collection. The narrative space of the story is set in Kew Gardens and the narrator provides the reader with snippets of movement and conversations of various visitors at the Kew on a sunny July morning. However, there never fully is a sense of a wholesome plot, or a clear characterization in the story. The Kew Gardens function not merely as a setting, but as one that enhances our reading of Woolf's modernist text with a nuanced understanding of having deployed the Kew over other gardens as the setting for the story. In attributing the Kew in the story with a narrative space, Woolf's narrative weaves the institution of Kew across time, ever since its inception. This illustrated for us that our reading practices slipped from the text, outside of its immediate narrative boundary. Reading Woolf's 'Kew Gardens' this way also helped

establish the narrative strategies of stream of consciousness and fragmented narrative structure, characteristic of modernist writing, alongside the Empire's disintegration around the world<sup>3</sup>. Woolf, we concluded, located the disintegrating Empire within the fractured, heterotopic Kew, and introduced fleeting Londoners who move in and out of their reveries and epiphanies in the space alongside a snail trying to avoid being trampled upon by aimless Londoners' feet. Woolf's empathetic focalization on a non-human actor in the snail is also, we observed, a subtle move that critiques the anthropocentric foundations of modernity in general, and the Empire in particular.

### Curiosity and the Kew Gardens

Shelly Saguaro examines the role of gardens in the works of select modernist writers, including Woolf, in her *Garden Plots* (Saguaro 2006). She contends that the garden is simply not a garden but is in fact positioned in close relation to imports and exports of specimens in the gardens like the Kew, an institution in and of itself. I have argued elsewhere that the imperial contexts which facilitated the movement of plant specimens between South Asia, specifically China, and Britain, and the imperial cosmopolitan power wielded by institutions like the Kew in the early heydays of colonialism (Jayagopalan 2020). When Woolf's plot in the short fiction is spliced on this time-space of Kew's cultural history and the political economy of the Empire, it becomes clear that the Kew is not a just a space that Woolf happened to choose as the setting or the story space, but as a storyworld that calls our attention to what Saguaro observes is a move by someone highly 'conscious of a time of transition and hiatus, literary and otherwise' (Saguaro 2006: 11). She remarks:

Kew needs to be considered in the context of British political history, particularly in the nineteenth century and in its early twentieth century upheaval. It is a context in which Woolf's own radical aesthetic must be situated. In the history of botanical imperialism and its effects ... Kew is, literally, a monument. At the time the story was written, Kew Gardens represents, on the one hand, all that was integral to the British colonialism. Particularly in its Victorian heyday, and equally, on the other, the Empire's probable dissolution, and certainly its severe modification. The story is both written and set during the time of the First World war ... Kew Gardens functions as a metonymy for complex, ideological and historical determinants. (Saguaro 2006: 11)

Drawing from this, when Woolf's work is placed in the foreground of Kew and its history and political economy, we learn the space is not stable and fixed, characterized only by fleeting movements, but is 'a contingent dimension produced by fictional action and interaction, something generated out of story-internal events, narrative techniques, and text-reader dynamics' (Hones 2011: 687). Hones summarises M-L Ryan's 5 hierarchical levels of narrative space (687). Ryan, Hones observes, delineates the five levels of narrative space as follows: 1) 'spatial frames' as those specific locations that are constituent of a narratives actions; 2) 'setting' as the relatively stable 'socio-historico-geographical environment' where an action

takes place; 3) 'story space' as the space made up by the thoughts and actions of characters; 4) 'story world' as the literary imaginary that the reader conjures on reading with their real-world knowledge and experience, and 5) the 'narrative world' as inclusive not only of the text-at-hand, but also the immersive world orders like dreams, fantasies, beliefs, fears and speculations of characters (687). This 'charting of the narrative world' clearly draws the reader to explore and yoke onto their reading practices variegated spatial frames that inform the literary geographies of the narrative.

### **Charting Literary Geographies**

Contrary to Woolf's idea in her essay 'Literary Geography' that materialities of the world must be ignored and instead characters' inner lives must be foregrounded, Andrew Thacker has revisited this idea to illustrate how Woolf is extremely sensitive to social spaces and materialities in understanding human characters (Thacker 2016: 411). By locating London centrally in most of her works, Woolf's claim, Thacker argues, will need to be read more closely. He says: 'Woolf's approach is more than simply a realist attempt to map certain locations within London; instead, it demonstrates a complex intertwining of material spaces with a thematics of power and an exploration of how geography and space shapes and informs human character' (411-12).

Drawing from this line of thought, the Kew in Woolf's 'Gardens' is one coded with Britishness and the remnants of several centuries of violence, now representing a visual aesthetic spectacle. The lilies in the garden, or the passing reference to tea, or the pagoda-style architecture transplanted from China are all embedded within the discourse of violence that the Kew Gardens conserve. The Kew emerged through our mapping as a space of the Empire's contestable representations of the world, made possible through the mobility of plants across oceanic spaces over several trips and over several centuries, making their way into the Kew (Mackay 1996).

This delineation is specifically useful to re-read Woolf's 'Kew Gardens' as it enables what Susan Stanford Friedman (Friedman 1993) proposes – the text and the context, the reader and the writer, all in a 'fluid relational approach' of time and space coordinates in a narrative, which she terms 'spatialization'. Therefore, a reader with the geographical knowledge reconstructs Woolf's Kew very differently, being conscious of the mobility enabled within the coordinates of the Kew's history in terms of both time and space. This sort of reading—one that foregrounds and contextualizes spatialities—will yield a refreshed look at the Kew, as well as Woolf's 'Kew'. The primary line of thought pursued in this reflection is connecting the spatial representation in Virginia Woolf's Kew Gardens to the more variegated politico-cultural plot of the Kew Gardens and the resultant network of interrelations and site of constant production. By foregrounding mobility within the text, and also the mobility that characterizes the Kew Gardens as an institution through the mobility of plant specimens, Woolf splices its history onto her narrative space. This creates a thick frame that leads us to read Woolf's text as not merely a modernist narrative strategy informed by

the stream of consciousness technique, but one that draws up the dissipating Empire of the twentieth century and its fractured being.

Alongside the fleeting movements like ‘figures of these men and women straggled past the flower-bed with a curiously irregular movement’ (Woolf 1996: 26), Woolf provides the snail with an elaborate mobility and a consciousness. Combining her aerial and ground-view focalization, she says:

In the oval flower bed, the snail ... began to labour over the crumbs of loose earth which broke away and rolled down as it passed over them. It appeared to have a definite goal in front of it. ... Before he had decided whether to circumvent the arched tent of a dead leaf or to breast it there came past the bed the feet of other human beings. (Woolf 1996: 27)

By snipping the movements of the people in the story, and instead, giving a view of the snail and providing it with a consciousness, Woolf alerts a sharp reader to the anthropocentric world that the Empire itself has brought us into: this is a world that, at the time of Woolf’s writing, has just concluded a World War having torn the world apart, while also fighting resistance to imperial rule in other parts of the world. The snail being focalized far more than any of the human characters who are just fleeting in and out of the narrative space, what remains static is the Kew, a garden result of centuries of epistemological violence that has manifested itself into the travesties of the twentieth century.

Sheila Hones attributes to fiction the ability to analyse a well-grounded story internal narrative space that ‘would also allow for the understanding of narrative texts as emergent spatial events’ (Hones 2011: 688). By drawing us readers into the plane of the Kew and its cultural history which remains in the background, our symbolic mobility across these literary and culturalscapes become deeply imaginative, yet intrinsically sociocultural. Tania Zittoun remarks: ‘What nourishes the imagination, and the resources people draw on are social and cultural: the books they have access to, the social representations they may draw upon, the semiotic systems they master are sociocultural in nature’ (Zittoun 2020: 7). Zittoun argues that our spheres of experiencing spaces may be proximal, where the subject’s embodied presence is framed in a here-and-now, or may be distal, ‘when a person is experiencing something partly or fully detached from the embodied and materially here-and-now’ (7). Thus, although the learner is physically distant from the teacher, a movement in one’s process of imagination enables the closing of this distance characterized by immobility, with mobile spaces that widen the horizons of literary geographies. The image below (Figure 1) enables us to comprehend the dichotomies of mobile/immobile, real/imagined mobilities that the isolated community of readership in the virtual classroom is undertaking in these literary isolations.

General

in Kew Gardens

What is the story about?

- Memories
- Movement-memories-temporality-frequent
- "Indefiniteness" randomness
- Not a single thing
- No clear narrative end
- Garden itself-inherently about the people IN THE GARDEN
- Romanticises the garden
- Heterotopia
- Visual power-ground-level perspective with the snail-British aesthetic
- Nature
- omniscient narrator
- Human-centric narration
- War

Plot?

visuality in writing - Imagism-poetry: television-cinema

Culture of the spectacle — Kew

Instances of colonial material culture

- Chinese context - tea
- flower specimens

radical aesthetic-modernist impression-garden-human-creature-fusion

mobility across texts: intertextuality

Kew = microcosm of Urban London = apparitions = Wasteland = metonymy

Plot: piece of land = Kew = fragmented representation of the world: GARDEN PLOTS

Heterotopia: realities within reality

Joyce-Eliot-Pound-recurring modernist themes

This fusion of animals and plants and humans: ecocritical reading modernist frame anthropocentric views of the world textual aesthetic critique of normal anthropocentric views

Gerard Genette

Wayne Booth

Seeing England

- identity crisis
- ERASURE
- Map

1) How does the short story fit within the contours of your course? Movement of people; movement of ideas; memory and movement; time and movement; creatures and movement; Garden itself a result of mobility; within the space, there is mobility; absent-presence of mobility

2) What different kinds of mobilities can you map here in the text? Mobility of a worldview, a philosophy; British aesthetic and its influence; mobility is captured even in the narrative strategy

3) How can you read and locate instances of colonial material culture in the text?

4) How important is the background of the Kew for your reading of the text?

Figure 1. Screenshot of the whiteboard that helped us chart the various mobilities within the narrative space, as also outside of it, in our virtual classroom. This is an illustration of a *shared imaginary* that propels us to locate spatiality in narratives across various vectors in our contemporary conditions, leading to experiencing texts anew.

Thus, here we have the fictional space generated by the narrative, compounded by the unending connections of botanical imperialism. Reading this story of modernism in the background of British imperialism—an idea not explicitly stated in the story but only alluded to by the setting—inaugurated new spatial engagements in this exercise of re-reading the story. With the external mobilities of plant transfers never once mentioned, but implied simply by creating the Kew as the narrative's primary setting, the implicit mobility in the history of the Kew cannot be missed. Our literary isolations and virtual classrooms have also transformed our collective ability to chart newer narrative imaginaries and literary geographies that are embodied, although conserved digitally.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This course is a part of the course requirements for the second-year BA English (Honours) students at CHRIST (Deemed to be University) in Bangalore, India. The course addresses various aspects of mobility of people, objects, cultural artefacts, and languages, inspired by the mobilities turn in humanities (Merriman and Pearce 2017) and literature. I would like to thank my students for being supportive and encouraging in my attempts to help them widen their spatial imaginaries during this pandemic teaching.

<sup>2</sup> What I want to highlight here is not that all learners engage in the same kind of mobility in such traversals. They are also characterized by those who are in their own reveries, like the old man in Woolf's story, an imagined mobility equally significant to consider the literary isolation.

<sup>3</sup> Note that the story is set in the beginning of the twentieth century characterized both by the First World War, as well as a crumbling Empire facing resistance in the colonies. In *Liquidation of the Empire*, Roy Douglas outlines various reasons for the decline of the British Empire. In the immediate aftermath of the outbreak of the War in 1914, Douglas observes how rising anticolonial sentiments in Ireland and India had a serious influence on the decline of the Empire. He says: 'In June 1917, Austen Chamberlain, Secretary of State for India in Lloyd George's Coalition Government expressed what the Cabinet minutes described as 'grave anxiety' about the 'rapidity with which things were moving in India' (Douglas 2002: 6). Douglas observes how Chamberlain felt an urgent need to publicly declare that the British government's aim was to enable self-government rule in India.

## Works Cited

- Douglas, R. (2002) *Liquidation of Empire: The Decline of the British Empire*. Palgrave Macmillan: UK.
- Friedman, S. S. (1993) 'Spatialization: A Strategy for Reading Narrative', *Narrative*, 1(1), pp. 12-23.
- Hones, S. (2011) 'Literary geography: Setting and narrative space.' *Social and Cultural Geography*, 12(7), pp. 685-699.
- Hones, S. (2014) *Literary Geographies: Narrative World in Let the Great World Spin*. Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Jayagopalan, G. (2020) 'At the Interface of Colonial Knowing and Unknowing: A Critical Reading of the Golden Camellia in Amitav Ghosh's *River of Smoke*.' *South Asian Review*, pp. 1-13.
- Mackay, D. (1996) 'Agents of Empire: The Banksian Collectors and Evaluation of New Lands.' In Miller, D. P. and Reill, P. H. (eds) *Visions of Empire: Voyages, Botany, and Representations of Nature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 38-56.
- Merriman, P. and Pearce, L. (2017) 'Mobility and the Humanities.' *Mobilities*, 12(4), pp. 493-508.
- Saguaro, S. (2006) *Garden Plots: The Politics and Poetics of Gardens*. Hampshire: Ashgate.
- Thacker, A. (2016) 'Woolf and Geography.' In Berman, J. (ed) *A Companion to Virginia Woolf*. Wiley Blackwell, pp. 411-425.
- Woolf, V. (1997) 'Kew Gardens.' In *Monday or Tuesday: Eight Stories*. Doverthrift, pp. 26-30.
- Zittoun, T. (2020) 'Imagination in people and societies on the move: A sociocultural psychology perspective.' *Culture and Psychology*, 26(4), pp. 654-675.