

GEOGRAPHIES OF BELONGING: SPACE, PLACE, AND ETHNIC IDENTITY IN SELECT EASTERN HIMALAYAN NARRATIVES

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Abstract: *The Eastern Himalayas is not just an exotic geographical space but also a peopled place. It is populated by various ethnic groups who have made it their home for ages. These people have a close connect with the land that has not only sustained them but contributed substantially to their being. This region has also been witness to the dissolution of dynasties and empires, and the rise of democracies, with a fair share of conflicts, displacements and identity crises. A substantial literary output of the region like that of I. B. Rai, Madhu Gurung, Prajwal Parajuly and Chetan Raj Shrestha is engaged in representing inter alia these very issues. The intention of this work is to draw from the theoretical tenets of Maurice Lefebvre, Yi-Fu Tuan and Edward Relph to showcase the complex inter-relationship between the place and the people. The idea is also to show how the regional narratives negotiate with the sense of belonging and articulate the ethnic consciousness.*

Keywords: *Space, Place, Ethnic Identity, Eastern Himalayas, Belonging*

Introduction

The meaning of a place becomes inseparable from the stories we tell about ourselves.

-The Shadow Lines

A text-book definition of the Eastern Himalayas would refer to the eastern part of the Himalayas mountain range which stretches across several countries in South Asia, namely Nepal, India, Bhutan and Myanmar. Though relatively young they hold three of the highest peaks on the planet. It's frozen treacherous flanks loom above making one forget that it also holds a substantial part of the world's population. This has not been helped

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by the syrupy ‘culinary rhetoric’ of adventure tourism almost mirroring the opening lines from S. T. Coleridge’s poem *Kubla Khan*.

To labour the obvious, the Eastern Himalayas are a complex geography of contested histories, colonial ambitions, postcolonial states and shifting political boundaries. The singularity that marks the region makes Pramod K Nayar’s statement apposite that “land was never ‘unoccupied wildness’- it had its own history, legend and life. It had seen community and identity engraved upon it through local rituals and prayers”.¹ Thus a more balanced and nuanced point of view perhaps would be that the Eastern Himalayas are a region of breathtaking beauty but also of deep-seated trauma. The mountains have witnessed imperial aspirations, the brutality of militarization and the ravages of environmental degradation, the people of this region have been subjected to forced displacement human rights violations and cultural erasure. The hydropower projects, the dams and the highways have brought destruction to the fragile ecosystem and the communities that depend on it. It is a region where struggle for survival is a daily reality and the darkness of oppression lurks in every corner. In the aftermath of colonialism the region has also seen a barometric rise in territorial belongingness, ethnic consciousness and popular social movements.

The Eastern Himalayas encompass places like Dehradun, Darjeeling and Gangtok, hill stations of renown in the Indian hill states of Uttarakhand, West Bengal and Sikkim. This region was at onetime home to the kingdoms of Bhutan, Nepal and Sikkim, it also saw the expansion of the Gorkha and British empires and modern nation states. These places exemplify how spaces reorganized by various international, national and ethnic claims, redefine belongingness, citizenship and identity of the ethnic groups that inhabit these spaces. This once again underscores the fact that the Eastern Himalayas are more than just a picturesque mountain landscape but a lived and contested social-space. The recurring historical accidents, the constant drawing and redrawing of political boundaries in this region have destabilized hitherto stable notions of home, belonging, and identity. Ethnic groups like the Gorkhas have had their traditional community lands exposed to cartographic abuse. This has forced them to frequently negotiate their identity across overlapping frameworks of ethnicity, locality and nationhood. As a consequence space has become fundamental in understanding how identity is imagined, remembered and articulated. Writing about the region a local academic Mona Chettri says that it is a dynamic political space that warrants a movement away from generalizations, stereotypes or romantic imager. Instead any

¹ Pramod K. Nayar, *Postcolonial Literature: An Introduction* (Delhi, Pearson Longman), 2008, p.76.

conceptualization of the eastern Himalayan Borderland should entail a rigorous engagement with the political reality of the region. The borderland is a cultural and political crossroad where different forms of ‘everyday’ politics have made ethnicity and inevitable component of political discourse. As a consequence, the region merits greater scholarly attention, which acknowledges the political agency of the people from a more critical perspective.²

The Literary Response

Priyamvada Gopal an Indian-born academic at Cambridge University writes in her seminal work *The Indian English Novel* that though the Indian English novel is a heterogeneous body of fiction there are certain recurrent themes and dominant trends especially the preoccupation with both history and space.³ She is voicing for not just about sub-continental or national literatures but also for regional literatures like those emanating from the Eastern Himalayas. To explicate this convergence Gopal quotes Allan Seally who says “two writers responding to the same historical moment, they have read the same book...which is dictating...is doing the thinking... we do not write but are written”⁴.

The second decade of the new millennium suddenly saw a spurt of literary activity in the region with translations and original compositions in English. There were the translations of Indra Bahadur Rai’s novel and short stories, who hails from Darjeeling, original English compositions of prominently Chetan Raj Shrestha, Prajwal Parajuly from Sikkim and Madhu Gurung from Uttarakhand. The works and writers in particular that this paper intends to engage with require a perfunctory introduction. Madhu Gurung who hails from Dehradun, Uttarakhand is from a family steeped in the traditions of the defense forces of the nation. She has worked as a journalist, the BBC, Gates Foundation among others has three books to her credit. *An Anthology of Burmese Folktales (2012)*, another anthology of short stories titled *Tibet with my Eyes Closed (2019)* and the novel *The Keeper of Memories (2016)*. This novel of hers was shortlisted for the Shakti Bhatt First Book Award. The second work *The Light of His Clan (2016)* is by Chetan Raj Shrestha. He is a trained architect from Gangtok, Sikkim. His earlier work *The Kings Harvest* won the Tata Literature Live First Book Award in 2013. The writers enumerated above are not only strung across the Eastern Himalayas from Dehradun to Gangtok but share a common nationality, linguistic background, historical background, shared space, collective

² Mona Chettri, *Ethnicity and Democracy in the eastern Himalayan Borderlands* (Amsterdam, AUP), 2017, p. 20.

³ Priyamvada Gopal, *The Indian English Novel* (New York, OUP), 2009, p 6.

⁴ *Ibid*, p.318.

memories and ethnicity, not to mention the common creative medium of the English language. Their narratives take us on a roller-coaster ride from the North Western Frontier to Tibet, Nepal, Bhutan, into Myanmar and across the seas. They time travel in history to the regional kingdoms, the Gorkha Empire, the British Empire, the kingdom of Sikkim in the past and through to the formation of postcolonial nation states in the region to the present times. This literary space inter alia, provides for a repository by reiterating narratives, recalling memories, archiving social constructions creating in many ways a master commemorative narrative that presents as a unifying totem for the ethnic groups inhabiting this region.

As regional voices they have to potential to, “do more powerfully than historiography- bending its ear low to hear the whispers and even thoughts invoking the textures not only of thoughts but feeling and desires as well as what Rushdie’s Saleem terms memory’s truth”.⁵ By representing landscapes not simply as settings but as active participants in identity formation, Eastern Himalayan literature demonstrates how space and place function as central frameworks through which ethnic identity is constructed and negotiated. They have become an important archive of spatial memory and cultural belonging, revealing how communities articulate identity within contested geographies. Thus the article argues that in Eastern Himalayan narratives, space is not merely a physical landscape but a socially produced and experientially lived place, and those literary representations of the region function as cultural cartographies through which ethnic identity is constructed, contested, and reimagined.

It is pertinent perchance to foreground the materiality of the connect between place/space and identity at the very outset. To flesh it out, Gert T. M. Prinsloo presents a statement made by T.M. Mbeki at the adoption of *The Republic of South Africa Constitution Bill, 1996*.

I am an African.

I owe my being to the hills and the valleys, the mountains and the glades, the rivers, the deserts, the trees, the flowers, the seas and the ever-changing seasons that define the face of our native land...

A human presence among all these, a feature on the face of our native land thus defined, I know than none dare challenge me when I say: I am an African.⁶

The lyrical lines embody the passionate outpourings of a people emerging from the dark ages of apartheid. By cataloguing the geography of the newly created nation Mbeki has tried to suggest that every aspect of it has contributed in creating the African identity. By implying its organicism,

⁵ Ibid, p. 157.

⁶ GTM Prinsloo and Christl M. Maier. *Place, Space and Identity in Ancient Mediterranean World* (London, Bloomsbury), 2013, p.197-198.

there has been a deliberate attempt to fashion an emotional space and emphasize that the landscape actively participates in identity formation.

Underscoring the suggested visceral relationship between identity, belongingness and place, A. Buttimer writes that, “place is more than geographical location, it is the space where people exist as human beings. Our Sense of both personal and cultural identity is intimately bound up with place identity”⁷. Presenting place/space as synonyms, it has been humanized and the common denominator between space and the anthropos underscored.

Place is also one of the registers when M. Bulmer exhaustively defines ethnicity as, “a collectivity within a larger society having real or putative common ancestry, memories of a shared past and cultural focus on one or more symbolic elements which define the groups such kinship, religion, language, shared territory, nationality or physical appearance”.⁸ Ethnic identity, has long been conceptualized as a cultural essence passed from one generation to the next. It has undergone profound reconceptualization across the humanities and social sciences. Contemporary scholarship understands ethnicity not as a static inheritance but as a dynamic social process, one shaped through memory, mobility, political structures, everyday practices, and also space. Whether in homelands or diasporas, in borderlands in rural or urban spaces or newly created neighborhoods, people make sense of their ethnic belonging through the spatial textures of daily life. This insight is particularly crucial in studying the Nepali-speaking Gorkha communities of the Eastern Himalayan region, whose histories unfold across a mosaic of locations; Nepal, Dehradun, Sikkim, Darjeeling, Kalimpong, Kolkata, Mumbai, Bhutan, Tibet, Burma, and the global diaspora. Their identities cannot be abstracted from land, mobility, settlement, and displacement. Instead, space becomes the very medium through which identity is produced, contested, and lived.

As always theory helps us illuminate the visceral workings of things, as in here of geography and identity. Henri Lefebvre argues that space is socially produced through historical, social and political processes, the phenomenological approach of Ye-Fu Tuan and Edward Relph emphasize that a place is endowed value through lived experiences as a spatially anchored cultural system that preserves continuity over time. Together, they provide a robust foundation for analyzing how literature imagines space as a force that shapes ethnic identity.

⁷ A. Buttimer, “Home, Reach and the Sense of Place”, in *The Human Experience of Space and Place*, (ed) A Buttimer and D Seamon (London, Routledge), 1980, p.166-187.

⁸ Martin Bulmer, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, (London, Routledge), 2013, p.54.

Social production of Space

Henri Lefebvre's *The Production of Space*, first published in 1974, remains one of the most influential works on spatial theory in the modern humanities. Lefebvre dismantles the assumption that space simply exists, waiting to be filled by human action. Instead, he asserts that space is produced, that it comes into being through social and political processes. As he famously declares, '(Social) space is a (social) product...that the space thus produced also serves as a tool of thought and action; that in addition to being a means of production it is also a means of control, and hence of domination, of power...'⁹ This insight is deceptively simple yet revolutionary, for it suggests that space is always historical, ideological, and shaped by relations of power. It is not merely a geographical surface but a social fabric created by institutions, economies, cultural norms, and everyday practices. Lefebvre writes that, 'social space incorporates social actions, the actions of subjects both individual and collective who are born and who die, who suffer and who act'¹⁰. He further lays down the originary foundation of space thus;

The founding image of Greek space was a space already fully formed and carefully populated, a space in which the focal point whether that of each house or that of the polis as a whole, was ideally placed upon a well-chosen, well-situated eminence, sunlit and close to an abundant source of water. The Greek city, as a spatial and social hierarchy, utilized its meticulously defined space to bring demes, aristocratic clans, villages and groups of craftsman and traders together into the unity of the polis. At once means and end, at once knowledge and action, at once natural and political, this space was occupied by people and monuments. Its centre- the agora- served as focus as gathering-place. At the highest point of the acropolis, the temple presided over and rounded out the city's spacio-temporal space. Built in no image, the temple was simply there. It arranged and drew about itself the grid of relations within which births and deaths, adversity and good fortune, victories and defeats came about.¹¹

This approach provides a powerful tool for examining ethnic identity. If space is socially produced, then ethnicity—which manifests through shared practices, rituals, memories, and symbols—is always embedded in a spatial field. The production of ethnic identity is inseparable from the production of the spaces where communities live and enact their belonging. Lefebvre's

⁹ Henri Lefebvre. *The Production of Space*. Translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith (UK, Blackwell), 1974, p. 26.

¹⁰ Ibid, p.33.

¹¹ Ibid, p.249-250.

concept of space as socially generated therefore allows scholars to analyze how political exclusions, land relations, state policies, and urban formations shape the very possibility of ethnic consciousness. For communities whose histories are intertwined with displacement, border changes, or contested territorial belonging—as is the case with many Nepali-speaking Gorkha populations in the Eastern Himalayan region —Lefebvre’s framework becomes indispensable.

Central to Lefebvre’s project is the concept of the *spatial triad*, comprising spatial practice, representations of space, and representational spaces. This triad functions not as three separate kinds of space but as three interpenetrating dimensions of the spatial social world. Though analytically distinct, they are practically inseparable. The triad enables a layered reading of how space is materially constructed, conceptually organized, and symbolically inhabited.

Lefebvre begins with spatial practice, or *perceived space*, which he describes as the sphere of everyday routines, bodily movements, and practical actions that ensure the cohesion and continuity of social life. These practices include walking through streets, visiting markets, tending fields, participating in festivals, commuting for work to offices or tea estates, gathering in courtyards or teashops—in short, all the habitual spatial actions that reproduce social relations. He writes that spatial practice ‘embraces production and reproduction, and the particular locations and spatial sets characteristic of each social formation’.¹² Spatial practice shapes how communities organize themselves, how they interact, and how they experience proximity and distance. It determines the rhythms of daily life and the feel of living within a particular community.

For ethnic communities, spatial practice is central to cultural reproduction. The consistent performance of shared rituals in particular places, the use of common pathways or gathering sites, and the everyday maintenance of households and landscapes all contribute to a sense of shared identity. The practice of kinship rituals like –*Miteri* or the punitive rituals for adultery - *Jaari* in Indra Bahadur Rai’s short story *Jaar a True Story*; the familial rituals of installing and annual propitiation of the household deity- *Kuldevta* in Madhu Gurung’s *The Keeper of Memories*. The ritual of celebrating the eighty-fourth birth-year of a person, the matriarch’s *Chaurasi* in Prajwal Parajuly’s *Land where I Flee*, all contribute to identity formation. The mundane and the habitual constitute the texture of communal life: children listening to stories in family kitchens, elders performing rituals in courtyards, neighbors exchanging news in marketplaces, office politics, social-movements like the trade union unrest in Indra Bahadur Rai’s novel *There is a carnival Today*, the statehood

¹² Ibid, p. 33.

movement for Gorkhaland that is mentioned in Parajuly's *Land Where I Flee*. Such practices may seem unremarkable, yet they anchor ethnicity in the body and in space, giving it a lived, experiential form. In the absence of these practices—such as in situations of displacement, exile, or migration—communities often feel a sense of loss, which later becomes a force in the reconstruction of identity.

The second element of the triad, *representations of space*, refers to the conceptual and abstract dimension of spatial production: maps, plans, policies, land demarcations, census categories, zoning laws, and urban designs. These representations are created by those with political or institutional power—planners, bureaucrats, states, architects, administrators—and reflect the dominant ideology of a given society. Lefebvre notes that such representations of space are 'the conceptualized space, the space of scientists, planners, urbanists, technocratic sub-dividers and social engineers'¹³. This space is not lived directly; rather, it is imposed, projected, or legislated.

For ethnic groups, representations of space often take the form of state policies that regulate citizenship, land ownership, migration, and mobility. These representations can be inclusive or oppressive, protective or exclusionary. In the Eastern Himalayas, where borders have shifted frequently and where many Nepali-speaking Gorkha communities have been positioned as minorities or the marginalised, representations of space have played crucial roles in shaping identity. The creation of national borders between Nepal, Sikkim and India, the eviction policies in Bhutan, the bureaucratic categorization of "Gorkhas" in colonial and postcolonial India, and the regional planning of hill cities like Dehradun or Gangtok, Darjeeling or Kalimpong all belong to the sphere of conceived space. Such representations determine who is considered "local," who is entitled to land, who is granted citizenship, and who is seen as an outsider. These decisions shape the lived experience of ethnic identity by structurally embedding certain populations within or outside hegemonic narratives of belonging.

Finally, Lefebvre's third dimension, *representational spaces, or lived spaces*, captures the symbolic, imaginative, and emotional aspects of spatial experience. Representational space is 'directly lived through its associated images and symbols'.¹⁴ It is the realm of memory, myth, folklore, narratives of home, religious symbolism, emotional attachment, and personal or collective imagination. While spatial practice captures what people *do* in space, and representations of space capture how space is conceptually organized, representational space captures how space is felt, remembered,

¹³ Ibid, p. 38.

¹⁴ Ibid, p.39.

and imagined. It is the most intimate and subjective element of the triad, often resistant to institutional or state control.

Representational spaces are crucial in understanding ethnic identity. They are where communities store collective memories and where landscapes acquire symbolic meaning. A hillside may become the embodiment of ancestral heritage; a house may function as a repository of familial memory; a river may symbolize continuity across generations; a border may carry the trauma of exile. Representational spaces allow displaced communities to preserve identity even when separated from their geographical origins. They provide the emotional foundation for narratives of homeland, nostalgia, return, and cultural continuity. In literature, representational space often emerges through imagery, metaphor, sensory detail, and recollection, revealing how characters emotionally inhabit their environments or carry imagined landscapes within them.

The truck is the labourer of society; it is half of the driver's soul. For its owner, it is a small factory that earns him a living. The truck has no home, nor has it a place to rest and close its eyes. It spends the night on the roadside, occasionally sheltering in someone's courtyard. A single tent guards its life on a dark, terrifying night of slanting rain. Tomorrow, once, again, it must sustain society and civilization by transporting a one-ton load one hundred kilometers away. Each paisa multiplies tenfold every time each of the truck's four wheels turn, touching the ground. It is a slave for ten thousand.¹⁵

The metaphor of the truck drenched with emotions is Indra Bahadur Rai's representation of the plight of the Gorkhas in India. Their lack of a state within the union and treatment by the nation has informed both their belongingness and citizenship with precarity. This metaphor also represents the precarious state of the workers from the tea industry producing the world famous Darjeeling tea. They are abused, exploited, denied basic justice, yet are expected to heed the nation's call just like the truck that sustains society which they will surprisingly heed.

Summing up, Lefebvre's triad articulates a theory of space that operates simultaneously on material, conceptual, and symbolic registers. When applied to ethnic identity, this triad reveals how belonging is shaped through economic and political structures (such as land rights and citizenship policies), everyday spatial routines (such as domestic practices or communal rituals), and symbolic attachments (such as ancestral memories or imagined homelands). Identity becomes the outcome of spatial processes rather than simply a cultural inheritance. This insight is

¹⁵ Indra Bahadur Rai, *There's A Carnival Today*, translated by Manjushree Thapa (New Delhi, Speaking Tiger), 2017, p. 2.

particularly relevant for ethnic groups like the Gorkhas of the eastern Himalayas, whose identities have been shaped by colonial history, migration, displacement, or marginalization.

One of the most compelling implications of Lefebvre's framework is that it enables scholars to connect the macro and micro-level operations of identity. On the one hand, spatial identity is shaped by large-scale forces such as state policies, border formation, capitalist development, and colonial strategies. On the other hand, it is shaped by intimate, everyday experiences: the smell of a hearth, the feel of mountain air, the sound of a language spoken in domestic spaces. Lefebvre's triad allows these scales to be read together, illustrating how the global and the local, the abstract and the sensory, intersect in the formation of ethnic consciousness.

For Nepali-speaking Gorkhas across the Eastern Himalayan region, this intersection is especially visible. These communities have often lived in border regions or multiethnic environments, where spatial practice, state policy, and symbolic attachment are tightly interwoven. Hills, valleys, tea plantations, army cantonments, refugee camps, and transnational migration routes all become sites where identity is negotiated. The production of space is therefore inseparable from the production of ethnicity. Literature emerging from these communities frequently depicts characters navigating multiple spatial regimes—local landscapes of everyday life, political spaces shaped by the state, and representational spaces shaped by memory and imagination. Lefebvre's framework offers a powerful lens for interpreting these complexities.

Experience of Space

If Lefebvre provides the scaffolding for understanding how space is produced through social relations, then **Yi-Fu Tuan** allows us to enter that space phenomenologically—to understand how individuals and communities feel, inhabit, and emotionally saturate their worlds. Tuan's work bridges the experiential and the affective, offering a language to describe the textures of belonging, estrangement, attachment, and memory that define the Gorkha subjectivities dramatized in the literary texts under study. His project shifts our attention from the macro-level structures of spatial production to the micro-level encounters through which space is transformed into *place*, a distinction that becomes vital for reading Nepali-speaking communities navigating colonial and postcolonial terrains in India and beyond.

Tuan famously argues that "*place is security, space is freedom we are attached to the one and long for the other. There is no place like home*"¹⁶.

¹⁶ Yi-FuTuan, *Space and Place; The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis, UMP), 1977, p. 3.

This foundational distinction reveals that human spatial experience oscillates between the desire for protection—represented by place—and the desire for possibility—represented by space. Such oscillation is evident in the migrant, diasporic, and borderland narratives present in *Jaimaya Alone Arrived at Likhapani* a short story about Burmese-Gorkha refugees during WW II and Bhutanese refugees in Prajwal Parajuly's *No Land is her Land*, and unwittingly the East European tourist Straun meandering across the eastern Himalayas in Chetan Raj Shrestha's novella *An Open-and-Shut Case*. Their characters inhabit spaces of movement, risk, and mobility—tea gardens, military cantonments, refugee settlements, bazaars, urban settings—yet continuously seek the anchoring of place, the emotional and mnemonic stability that secures the self. Tuan's phenomenology makes visible the psychic stakes behind such negotiations: the yearning for familiar landscapes, the sensory allure of mountains and mist, the intimate knowledge of village paths, or the affective warmth of domestic interiors.

It is critical to understand Tuan not merely as a thinker of affection for landscape—although *topophilia*, his term for the emotional bond between person and place, is central to his work—but as someone who theorizes how such bonds emerge through repeated bodily practices, memories, and cultural scripts. Topophilia is not simply love of place; it is a structure of feeling shaped by the interplay of sensory experience, cultural meaning, and embodied memory. As Tuan explains, '*what begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value*¹⁷. Endowment is thus an act of narration, an act of meaning-making, a process crucial to the literary imagination. In the texts under study, characters narrativize their landscapes, turning mountains, bazaars, roads, and borders into repositories of cultural identity. Through sensory memory—smell, touch, sound—they transform the ephemeral into the enduring.

This dynamic becomes especially significant when reading **borderland and subnational identities**, such as the Indian-Nepali/Gorkha identity. These identities do not emerge in abstract; they crystallize through lived interactions with specific terrains—Darjeeling's steep slopes, Kalimpong's temperate valleys, the regimented spatiality of army life, or the liminality of refugee camps housing Tibetan exiles. Tuan's insistence on embodied experience allows us to read these spaces as experiential archives, places where cultural scripts of belonging are learned, contested, and sometimes refused. For instance, the precariousness of Gorkha identity—perpetually questioned, often asked to prove its Indianness—intensifies the stakes of place-making. To which Indra Bahadur Rai retorts;

¹⁷ Ibid, p. 6.

Here it will not be out of place to correct a misconception that still persists and which is rather deliberately fostered regarding the genesis of Indian Nepalis. Those who claim to be delvers in to the past and yet describe Indian Nepalis as ‘settlers’ or ‘immigrants’ betray their blatant ignorance of the history of the region. After the Anglos-Nepalese War, through the Treaty of Sagauli of 1816, Nepal was made to cede lakhs of square miles of Nepalese territory to the British East India Company together with the Nepali people living thereon.¹⁸

The emotional attachment to land becomes not merely nostalgic but politically charged. To love a landscape is to assert presence; to dwell is to claim recognition. Thus Janak in *There’s A carnival Today* asserts;

Darjeeling is ours and we are Darjeeling’s. All the houses and shops in the four square miles of the town, the tea plantations beyond that, and all these lands and trees, they many have once belonged to Bardhaman or Cooch Behar, and now they belong to the government or maybe the Bengalis and Marwaris will buy them and make it theirs ; and yet Darjeeling is ours. Since primaeval times, Darjeeling has belonged to those who can plough its grey and red soil and produce food. It can’t be anyone else’s. Whoever this soil gives to, that place is theirs; the rest can only live here in hope. We, the Nepalis of Darjeeling have travelled great distances along with the soil of Darjeeling, and like its trees and rivers and springs, we have in the cradle of history, been part of one peoples after another. If today someone should ask these alder and juniper trees, these swift rivers and trickling springs, ‘Where are you from?’ the answer will be, I’m from the soil that I’m of....¹⁹

This is a stellar example of what another phenomenologist Edward Relph says, “people are their places and a place is its people and however readily these may be separated in conceptual terms, in experience they are not easily differentiated”.²⁰ Talking about this placedness he writes,

The relationship between community and place is indeed a very powerful one in which each reinforces the identity of the other, and indeed in which the landscape is very much an expression of communally held beliefs and values and of interpersonal involvements. Such relationships are expressed in the landscape, which in this sense is a medium of communication in which all the elements may have messages- buildings, streets, parades, village

¹⁸ Prem Poddar and Anmole Prasad, *Gorkhas Imagined: Indra Bahadur Rai in Translation*, (Kalimpong, Mukti Prakasan), 2009, p.174-175

¹⁹ Indra Bahadur Rai, *There’s a Carnival Today*, 2107, p.170-172

²⁰ Edward Relph, *Place and Placelessness* (London, Pion), 1976, p.34.

soccer teams, all serve not only to unite communities but also to make them explicit. And the commonly experienced messages and symbols of the landscape then serve to maintain, ‘a collectively conditioned place of consciousness.’²¹

Biru, one of the characters from Madhu Gurung’s novel *The Keeper of Memories* takes the final plunge to move to Darjeeling and write a new chapter of his life,

As the toy train turned round Ghoom, Biru got his first view of the Kanchenjunga. He could well have been standing on the threshold of a postcard. The guardian mountain of Darjeeling had been playing hide and seek behind a veil of mist since he had boarded the train from Siliguri. Now the magic of the mountains unfolded one blind bend after another that the train took uphill.²²

This topophilia... encounter that is intensely personal and profoundly significant is best described in Albert Camus’ words, “millions of eyes, I knew had looked on this landscape and it was still for me the first smile of the sky. It put me outside myself in the most profound sense of the word”.²³ *If There’s A Carnival Today* opens with the serpentine uphill road that weaves by Batasay, *The Keeper of Memories* has the Khalanga Hills before the Gurung residence in Raipur, Dehradun which reminded them of the historical battles of their ancestors. The paroxysm of love for places is exemplified by a historical record from the third Punic War. A citizen of Carthage prays to the Romans, ‘spare the city which had done you no harm, but if you please, kill us, whom you have ordered to move away. In this way you will seem to vent your wrath upon men, not upon temples, gods, tombs and an innocent city’.²⁴

In one long shot a technological heritage, the DHR, the quintessential landmark- Kanchenjunga and the unmissable in the uphill journey- Batasay Loop is captured. The symbolic import of such landmarks is brought home by Tuan who says, “a homeland has its landmarks, which may be the features of high visibility and public significance, such as monuments, shrines, a hallowed battlefields or cemetery. These visible signs serve to enhance a people’s sense of identity; they encourage awareness of and loyalty to place. But a strong attachment to the homeland can emerge quite apart from any explicit concept of sacredness”.²⁵ This then brings to the fore

²¹ Ibid, p.34.

²² Madhu Gurung, *The Keeper of Memories* (Delhi, Harper Collins), 2016, p.319.

²³ Edward Relph, *Place and Placelessness*, 1976, p.37.

²⁴ Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place; The Perspective of Experience*, 1977, p. 151.

²⁵ Ibid, p.159.

what Michel Foucault in his essay “Of Other Spaces” refers to as ‘crisis heterotopia’.²⁶ A sacred space that Relph refers to as, ‘a sacred space is that of archaic religious experience; it is continuously differentiated and replete with symbols, sacred centres and meaningful objects’.²⁷

In the novel *The Light of His Clan*, by Chetan Raj Shrestha, the protagonist Kuldeep Chandanth has one important mission in his life to build a replica of the Dhod temple of Raku in Gangtok, Sikkim. As Professor Robert Black attests; ‘The temple was dedicated to Kumbura and it was reputed to have been built entirely of sandalwood. There are reports which say that the final battle against the Shah kings took place in the temple complex. Mon Gyal died in the battle and his followers burnt him on a pyre of sandalwood’.²⁸ To that effect a basement room in the ex-ministers house was filled with illegal sandalwood. Further an organization had been created for preservation and spearheading the recognition of the group as a tribe. Relph comments that, ‘for a religious person, the experience of such space is primordial, equivalent perhaps to an experience of the founding of the world, and it follows that the making of sacred objects and sacred buildings is not a task to be undertaken lightly but involves a profound and total commitment’.²⁹ Kuldeep might have other matters like unpaid contracts, marriage of his daughter or his younger son, recognition of the Chandanths as a scheduled tribe but the construction of the temple was paramount as it had profound symbolic import connected to identity issues as well as the larger belief system. Sacred spaces bound people to places which awarded identity to a community. Thus Tuan writes, ‘religion could either bind a people to place or free them from it. The worship of local gods binds a people to place’.³⁰ This binding or attachment to a place or ‘rootedness’ as Relph calls it is key in the production of identity. A much profounder understanding of the past destruction of a temple and the imperative exigency for its present construction is again expounded by Tuan as a retrieval of the belief system of the Chandanths and the erased cosmology of the Chandanths. We are told that the destruction of the Dhod temple was a ritualistic act of every conqueror from the annals of history. The destruction of the Dhod icons was tantamount to turning the Chandhanths godless, orphaned and faceless.

Conquerors did not raze a city to the ground simply out of wanton fury: in such destruction they appropriated a people’s gods by rendering them homeless, and in appropriating the gods the

²⁶ Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces”, *Diacritics*, vol. 16, no. 1986, p. 24.

²⁷ Edward Relph, *Place and Placelessness*, 1976, p. 15.

²⁸ Chetan Raj Shrestha, *The Light of his Clan* (Delhi, Speaking Tiger), 2016, p. 167.

²⁹ Edward Relph, *Place and Placelessness*, 1976, p. 15.

³⁰ Yi-FuTuan, *Space and Place; The Perspective of Experience*, 1977, p. 152.

conquerors acquired a civilization. This belief throws light on the paradox that, although the city is the embodiment of civilization, the Sumerians listed “destruction of cities” as one of the divine institutions upon which civilization is founded.³¹

Perhaps even attesting to the ironical statement made by Walter Benjamin in his *Theses on the Philosophy of History*. Kuldeep and his people be it Chandanth or Chandiths or Chandeths or Chadits who hailed from the Chyalu valley famed for its sandalwood forests and silver mines wanted through their refashioning of their material and non-material cultural artifacts envisioned Chyalu as a palimpsest in Gangtok. It is a race against turning into ‘a race of angels’.³² For similar reasons Janak’s dream in *There’s a Carnival Today*, is of having one’s own place of residence a dream that is also shared by the larger Nepali speaking Gorkha population in India. When Tuan writes about how the propitiation rituals of the local gods binds a person to the place one has to but recall how three generations of the Gorkha family in *The Keeper of Memories* were being drawn back to their ancestral hearth in Raipur by the annual rituals of the familial gods-*Kuldevta*.

Tuan’s phenomenology also foregrounds **the dialectic of rootedness and displacement**, a tension deeply resonant with migrant and diasporic narratives. For Tuan, place is often associated with pause, familiarity, and slow accumulation of meaning, while space is aligned with movement and the unknown. Diasporic subjects live in the in-between: they dwell in places that are not fully theirs yet imbued with memories of places left behind. This dual anchoring becomes visible in works like *Land Where I Flee*, where Bhutanese refugee characters inhabit provisional landscapes—settlements, camps, safe-houses—that simultaneously protect and unsettle them. Their sensory memories of Bhutan act as virtual places, internalized geographies that compete with the terrains of exile, ‘their collective anguish at the loss of their homeland far outweighed possibilities and hopes for the future’.³³ Tuan’s concept of “experienced space”—space understood not through abstract coordinates but through the lived body—helps illuminate this condition. Exile is not merely political; it is phenomenological. It reshapes the migrant’s bodily orientation to the world, altering how they move, perceive, and feel in space.

A deeper engagement with Tuan further complicates the notion of belonging by introducing the idea that places are never neutral; they are

³¹ Ibid, p.151.

³² Stuart Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora”, in *Essential Essays*, (eds.) David Morley, USA: DUP, 2018, p.226.

³³ Madhu Gurung, *The Keeper of Memories* (Delhi, Harper Collins), 2016, p.127.

saturated with **power, fear, and ambivalence**. While “topophilia” highlights attachment, Tuan also speaks of “**topophobia**”—a sense of fear, hostility, or anxiety toward certain places. This becomes crucial for reading texts that depict violence, discrimination, surveillance, or militarization. In *The Gurkha’s Daughter*, characters often encounter spaces of hostility—urban apartments where domestic workers are mistrusted, refugee camps with lecherous males, foreign landscapes where migration becomes both opportunity and risk, and villages laden with hierarchical social dynamics. Similarly, in Indra Bahadur Rai’s works, certain spaces—storm-ridden nights, liminal market squares, or terrains marked by political upheaval—evoke dread as much as familiarity. Tuan’s vocabulary allows us to articulate how landscapes become emotionally encoded with danger, humiliation, or vulnerability.

Moreover, Tuan’s theory foregrounds **scale**, reminding us that place-making operates from the scale of the body to the scale of large landscapes. A room, a kitchen, a road, a valley, and a nation can all function as places, but they do so differently. The body—its movements, habits, and sensory experiences—is the first scale through which space is known. This is particularly relevant for reading laboring bodies (tea garden workers, soldiers, domestic workers), whose relationship to space is mediated through work, discipline, and bodily constraint. As in the case of the workers of Tukvar tea estate who have to face the unjust abuse of power by the officials of the tea estate. For example, the regimented spatiality of the Gorkha soldier—parade grounds, barracks, check-points—constitutes a place of identity formation in *The Keeper of Memories*, but it is also a space of discipline, surveillance, and risk. Tuan teaches us that place is always relational: it is shaped by what the body can do, what it is forbidden from doing, and what it remembers from doing.

Conclusion

When read alongside Lefebvre, Tuan and Relph offer a phenomenological complement: where Lefebvre reveals the structural production of space through political and economic forces, Tuan exposes the lived textures of that space—how it is felt, dwelt in, remembered, feared, and loved. Together, they create a layered framework for analyzing literary representations of Nepali-speaking Gorkhas in the Eastern Himalayan region and the diaspora. The literary texts under study here mobilize this duality: structural histories of migration, militarization, and displacement intersect with deeply personal, affective experiences of landscape, home, and belonging. Tuan’s concepts therefore equip us with a vocabulary to read these embodiments with rigor and nuance.

In summa, Tuan enables this study to illuminate the **intimate geographies** of Gorkha life worlds; how individuals attach meaning to place through memory, narrative, and affect; how landscapes become symbolic anchors of culture; how displacement destabilizes the sensory certainties of home; and how fear and vulnerability reshape the phenomenology of everyday spaces. Together, the theories of Lefebvre, Tuan and Relph provide a robust architecture for analyzing the spatial, affective, political, and mnemonic dimensions of the literary representations and the connections between place and identity. Rubbing this connection in, Lucy Lippard remarks, ‘place is latitudinal and longitudinal within the maps of a person’s life. A layered location replete with human experiences and memories, place has width as well as depth’.³⁴ It deems fit to round off with what Edward Relph writes, ‘if places are indeed a fundamental aspect of man’s existence in the world, if they are sources of security and identity for individuals and for groups of people, then it is important that the means of experiencing, creating and maintaining significant places are not lost’.³⁵

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³⁴ L.R. Lippard, *Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multicentered Society* (New York, The New Press), 1997, p. 7.

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