

Entangled Margins: The Portrayal of Marginalized Urban Spaces in Contemporary Indian English Fiction

Discipline: English

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Abstract

The modern Indian metropolis is a site of profound contradiction, where gleaming symbols of global capital coexist with vast zones of deprivation and informality. While official cartographies and state-led urban narratives often render these marginalized spaces invisible or pathologized, contemporary Indian English fiction has emerged as a crucial counter-discourse. This review paper argues that novelists such as Arundhati Roy, Aravind Adiga, Deepa Anappara, Vikas Swarup, and Jeet Thayil employ marginalized urban spaces—slums, ghettos, wastelands, and forgotten peripheries—not merely as backdrops but as central, agentive landscapes that are inextricably entangled with the city's core. Drawing upon the spatial theories of Henri Lefebvre and Edward Soja, and contextualized by insights from Indian urban studies, this paper analyzes how these literary works function as a form of spatial critique. By foregrounding the “lived space” of the urban poor, these novels challenge the dominant “conceived space” of planners and politicians, revealing the margin as a constitutive element of the urban whole. Ultimately, this fiction acts as a form of literary resistance, mapping spatial injustice and reclaiming the narrative of the city from the bottom up.

Keywords: Urban Space, Marginalization, Indian English Fiction, Spatial Justice, Henri Lefebvre, Edward Soja, Lived Space, Thirdspace, Contemporary India

1. Introduction: The City and its Shadows

The narrative of the 21st-century Indian city is often one of aspiration and acceleration. Cities like Mumbai, Delhi, and Bangalore are celebrated as engines of economic growth, nodes in a global network of capital and technology. This dominant narrative, propagated through media, policy documents, and urban planning initiatives, presents a sanitized vision of the “world-class” city—a landscape of gated communities, corporate towers, and beautified public spaces. Yet, this vision deliberately occludes its own shadow: the sprawling slums, precarious settlements, and polluted peripheries that house a significant portion of the urban population. These are the spaces where the

costs of neoliberal urbanization are borne, yet they are systematically erased from the official map of the city.

Contemporary Indian English fiction has taken up the urgent task of charting these occluded territories. Moving beyond the postcolonial preoccupations of an earlier generation, writers like Arundhati Roy, Aravind Adiga, Deepa Anappara, Vikas Swarup, and Jeet Thayil delve into the visceral realities of the urban margin. Their novels function as counter-geographies, offering complex, humanized portrayals of spaces often reduced to statistics of poverty or crime. This paper contends that these literary representations are not just sociological documents but are sophisticated acts of spatial analysis and resistance. They demonstrate that the margin is not an anomaly to be excised but is fundamentally *entangled* with the center, produced by the same economic and political forces that create the city's wealth.

To understand this entanglement, this review will employ the theoretical lens of critical spatial theory, primarily the work of Henri Lefebvre and Edward Soja. Their frameworks help us to see space not as a neutral container for social action but as a social product, imbued with power, ideology, and conflict. By analyzing key novels through this lens, and grounding the discussion in the specific context of Indian urbanism, this paper will demonstrate how literature provides a powerful medium for understanding and contesting spatial injustice in modern India.

2. Theoretical Framework: Producing and Inhabiting Urban Space

To analyze the fictional portrayal of urban margins, we must first move beyond a purely descriptive understanding of space. Henri Lefebvre's seminal work, *The Production of Space* (1991), provides a foundational framework. Lefebvre argues that space is produced through a dialectical interplay of three dimensions, his "spatial triad":

- **Spatial Practice (Perceived Space):** This is the physical, material space of everyday life and social production. It is the network of paths, homes, and workplaces through which people navigate their daily routines. In the context of our study, this is the tangible reality of the slum—the makeshift shelters, the shared water taps, the labyrinthine alleys.
- **Representations of Space (Conceived Space):** This is the abstract space of power, conceived by planners, architects, state officials, and capitalists. It is the space of maps, master plans, zoning laws, and economic models. This "conceived space" is dominant and seeks to impose a rationalized, homogenous order on the complex realities of the city. Slums, from this perspective, are illegal encroachments to be "cleared" or "redeveloped."

- **Representational Spaces (Lived Space):** This is space as directly lived, experienced, and imagined by its inhabitants. It is laden with symbolism, memory, and affect. “Lived space” is the domain of art, imagination, and resistance, where inhabitants appropriate and redefine the spaces they occupy, often in opposition to the “conceived space.” Literature, as a form of representation, operates powerfully within this dimension, articulating the “lived” experiences that official narratives ignore.

Building on Lefebvre, geographer Edward Soja (1996) developed the concept of Thirdspace. For Soja, Thirdspace is a “radically open” and hybrid conceptualization that seeks to transcend the dualism between the material (Firstspace) and the mental (Secondspace). It is a space of “lived spatiality,” where the real and imagined, the objective and subjective, merge. Thirdspace is a site of critical exchange and resistance, a place where marginalized groups can challenge dominant spatial orders and imagine alternative ways of being. These theoretical tools are particularly potent when applied to the Indian urban context. Scholars of Indian urbanism, such as Gautam Bhan (2016) and Ravi Sundaram (2009), have highlighted how “informality” is not a temporary phase but a persistent and structural feature of the Indian city. The slum is not an exception but a key mode of urban settlement, produced by state failure, exclusionary planning, and the demands of a flexible labor market. The literary works discussed below tap directly into this reality, exploring the “lived space” of informality as a complex social world and a site of political contestation.

3. Literary Cartographies of the Margin

The selected novels offer distinct but complementary maps of India’s entangled margins, each using its unique narrative strategy to illuminate the relationship between space, power, and identity.

3.1. Arundhati Roy’s *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*: The Wasteland as Sanctuary

Arundhati Roy’s novel is a sprawling epic that finds its geographical and emotional anchor in the most marginal of spaces: a graveyard in Old Delhi. For Anjum, a hijra who has been cast out from her community, the graveyard is not a space of death but of rebirth. She establishes the *Jannat* (Paradise) Guest House among the tombstones, creating a sanctuary for the city’s outcasts—social, political, and religious minorities who have been pushed to the peripheries of the nation-state.

In Lefebvre’s terms, the graveyard is a powerful example of “lived space” being reclaimed from the city’s derelict lands. It is a space that defies the logic of the “conceived space” of urban development, which sees land only in terms of its real estate value. Roy

writes, “She lived in the graveyard like a tree. At first, she spent her days holding onto the gravestones, trying to keep her balance” (Roy, 2017, p. 53). This organic metaphor emphasizes a deep, symbiotic relationship with a space that the official city has discarded. The *Jannat* Guest House becomes a Soja-esque Thirdspace—a real and imagined location where a new, inclusive community can be forged out of shared vulnerability. By centering her narrative in this marginal space, Roy argues that true belonging and justice in modern India may only be found in the places and among the people that the state has abandoned. The graveyard is not peripheral to the story of Delhi; it is its moral and political heart.

3.2. Aravind Adiga’s *The White Tiger*: The Spatial Logic of Servitude

Aravind Adiga’s Booker Prize-winning novel offers a starkly different, though equally critical, perspective on urban marginalization. Narrated by Balram Halwai, a driver from “the Darkness” of rural Bihar, the novel maps the geography of servitude in the gleaming metropolis of Delhi and Gurgaon. Balram’s world is spatially defined by his subordinate status. He inhabits the interstitial spaces of the elite world he serves: the cramped servant’s quarters below a luxury apartment, the driver’s seat of a Honda City, the marketplaces where he runs errands. Adiga masterfully employs spatial metaphors to critique the deep-seated inequalities of the “New India.” The city is divided into “the Light” (the world of his masters) and “the Darkness” (the world of the poor). This is not just a social but a spatial binary. Balram’s existence is defined by his physical and psychological confinement within what he calls “the Rooster Coop”—a system that keeps the poor trapped by family loyalty and a fear of retribution. His violent act of murdering his master is framed as a spatial transgression, a radical breakout from this conceived and lived cage. “The coop is guarded from the inside,” he explains (Adiga, 2008, p. 176). By killing his master and escaping to Bangalore to become an entrepreneur, Balram doesn’t just change his class status; he violently reclaims space, moving from the periphery to the center. *The White Tiger* thus exposes how the glitter of the globalized city is built upon a foundation of spatial segregation and brutal exploitation.

3.3. Deepa Anappara’s *Djinn Patrol on the Purple Line* and Vikas Swarup’s *Q & A*: The Slum as a Lived World

Both Anappara’s and Swarup’s novels use the perspective of young protagonists to provide an intimate, ground-level view of slum life, challenging the monolithic and often dehumanizing “representations of space” found in media and policy. Vikas Swarup’s *Q & A* (2005), famously adapted as the film *Slumdog Millionaire*, uses a quiz show framework to narrate the life of Ram Mohammad Thomas, an orphan from

Dharavi, Asia's largest slum. Each question triggers a memory, and through these flashbacks, the reader is given a tour of the slum's complex social fabric. The slum is not merely a site of suffering; it is a place of friendship, survival, ingenuity, and community. Swarup maps the "spatial practice" of the slum, revealing it as a functioning, albeit precarious, ecosystem that official planning fails to recognize.

Deepa Anappara's *Djinn Patrol on the Purple Line* (2020) provides an even more immersive and poignant cartography of a fictional *basti* on the edge of a city. Narrated by nine-year-old Jai, the novel follows his amateur investigation when children from his neighborhood start disappearing. Through Jai's eyes, the *basti* is rendered not as a homogenous zone of poverty but as a rich tapestry of specific places: the chai stall, the garbage mounds that are also playgrounds, the railway tracks, the half-finished high-rises at its border. Anappara powerfully illustrates the concept of "lived space." For Jai and his friends, the polluted canal is a place for adventure, and the smoggy sky has its own unique beauty. However, the novel also exposes the brutal reality of spatial injustice. When the children disappear, the police are indifferent, and the state is absent. The *basti*'s marginality makes its residents disposable. The familiar "lived space" becomes a site of terror, demonstrating how the vulnerability of marginalized populations is spatially determined. The state's neglect transforms a community into a hunting ground.

3.4. Jeet Thayil's *Narcopolis*: Mapping the Subterranean City

Jeet Thayil's *Narcopolis* (2012) charts a different kind of margin: the subterranean, nocturnal world of opium dens, brothels, and back alleys of 1970s and 80s Bombay. This is a city that exists outside official time and space, a "lived space" organized around the rituals of addiction, art, and queer desire. The novel's central locale is an opium den on Shuklaji Street, a space that functions as a confessional, a community center, and a portal to an alternative reality for its diverse patrons.

Thayil's prose is hallucinatory and poetic, creating a cognitive map of a forgotten Bombay. His narrator states, "Bombay, which obliterated its own history by changing its name and surgically altering its face, is the hero or heroin of this story" (Thayil, 2012, p. 1). This personification of the city highlights the novel's project: to recover the erased histories embedded in its marginal spaces. *Narcopolis* presents a counter-narrative to the official story of Bombay as a dynamic commercial hub. It reveals a hidden city, a "Thirdspace" where identities are fluid and the dispossessed find a form of transient belonging. By mapping this underworld, Thayil resists the sanitizing process of urban development that seeks to erase such "unproductive" and "immoral" spaces from the city's landscape and memory.

4. Discussion: Literature as Spatial Resistance

Read together, these novels constitute a powerful form of spatial resistance against the hegemonic narratives of the Indian city. Their contributions can be summarized in three key ways. First, they prioritize “lived space” over “conceived space.” By immersing the reader in the sensory and emotional textures of marginalized environments, they challenge the abstract, data-driven logic of urban planners and policymakers. They replace the map of the state with a map of human experience, revealing the complexity, resilience, and agency of those who inhabit the margins.

Second, they reveal the *entanglement* of the margin and the center. Adiga’s Balram is not separate from the world of his masters; his cheap labor is what enables their luxurious lifestyle. The children in Anappara’s novel disappear at the edge of a new development, their precarity a direct consequence of the city’s uneven growth. Roy’s graveyard sanctuary is a response to the violence and exclusion produced by the mainstream nation-state. These novels insist that one cannot understand the gleaming towers of the Indian metropolis without understanding the slums and wastelands from which labor is extracted and to which human refuse is exiled.

Third, these literary works function as acts of “counter-mapping,” to borrow a term from critical cartography. They create alternative geographies that contest the power embedded in official maps. They chart the invisible social networks, the hidden histories, and the emotional landscapes that make up the real city. In doing so, they perform a crucial political act: they make the invisible visible, giving narrative form and voice to those who have been spatially and politically silenced. They articulate a powerful claim for the “right to the city,” in Lefebvre’s terms—not just the right to access urban resources, but the right for all inhabitants to shape and define the city they live in.

5. Conclusion

The portrayal of marginalized urban spaces in contemporary Indian English fiction is far more than a trend in literary realism. It is a vital intervention in the ongoing struggle over the meaning and future of the Indian city. The works of Arundhati Roy, Aravind Adiga, Deepa Anappara, Vikas Swarup, and Jeet Thayil demonstrate the unique capacity of literature to dissect and challenge the structures of spatial injustice. By applying the theoretical lenses of Lefebvre and Soja, we can appreciate these novels as sophisticated spatial analyses that expose the ideological underpinnings of urban development and give voice to the “lived” realities of the marginalized.

These entangled margins—the graveyard, the servant’s quarter, the slum, the opium den—are not footnotes to the story of modern India. As these authors compellingly argue, they are the central text. They are the spaces where the contradictions of a

nation in transition are most starkly revealed and where new forms of community and resistance are being forged. In a world where urban futures are increasingly being dictated by the logic of capital, this body of fiction serves as a powerful reminder that the city is, above all, a human creation. It offers not only a critique of the present but also the imaginative resources to envision a more just, inclusive, and humane urban existence.

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