



# **MODERNISM** *AND* **POSTMODERNISM**

REFLECTIONS AND SPECULATIONS

VOLUME-I

EDITORS

DR. ABUL FOYES MD MALIK

DR. DIPAK KUMAR DOLEY



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○ Post Modernism and Post Structuralism Thinkers' Philosophical Movement: An Analysis • Anil Konwar	179
○ Jollywood and Postmodernism (An Assamese Film Study on Psychological Trauma and Postmodernism) • Anindita Hazarika	183
○ Conflicting Identification or Hybrid Identity: <i>My Beautiful Laundrette</i> • Pranamika Das	187
○ Realism and Its Implication to Education • Anangahana Das	192
○ Globalization and Its Impact on Environment: Opportunity and Challenges • Ranjan Das	196
○ Postmodernism and Education • Barnali Saikia	200
○ Negotiating an Escape in an Alternate Reality: A Thematic study of Tennessee Williams' <i>The Glass Menagerie</i> • Barsha Dutta Kalita	203
○ COVID-19 and Its Global Impact • Swarnali Basumatary	207
○ Critical Positions on Modernism and Post Modernism • Sukanya Mukherjee	214
○ Economic Globalization: Performance of Recent Indian Foreign Trade • Nomu Pawe	218
○ Importance of Intangible Cultural Heritage within Postmodern Reality: Discerning the Folk Culture of the Deori Community residing in Assam • Atrayee Kashyap	222
○ Rewriting <i>Robinson Crusoe</i> as a Postcolonial Text: an exploration of postmodernism in J.M. Coetzee's <i>Foe</i> • Trishmita Borah	228
○ Hasreality Become Hysterical? : A Study of the Representation Of Realism in <i>White Teeth</i> • Gautami Bharali	233
○ Women, Home and Pandemic • Dr. Neetu Kumari Gupta	237
○ Studying Postmodern Immigrants : A Thematic Analysis of Hanif Kureishi's <i>My Beautiful Laundrette</i> • Swati Chakraborty	240
○ Modernism and Postmodernism in Cinema • Ashik Ikbal	244
○ Exploring Margaret Atwood's <i>The Handmaid's Tale</i> as a 'Feminist Dystopia' in the Light of a Postmodern Society • Orisha Gogoi	248
○ Era of Globalization and Its Impact on North-East India • Rinashree Khound	252
○ Postmodernism and its challenges to History: Michael Foucault's perspective • Geetashree Gogoi	256
○ Towards A Postmodernist Poetics: A Study of Beat Poetry and Advent of Literary Postmodernism • Abhijit Sarmah	260
○ A Study on Husserl's Thought on Phenomenology • Miss Korishmita Borgohain	266
○ Analyzing the existential crisis in Anita Desai's novel <i>In Custody</i> • Richa Gogoi	270
✓ Negotiating the Notion of Space in Peter Carey's <i>Illywhacker</i> : A Postmodern Perspective • Anjan Saikia	273
○ Modernism in the Kherai Festival of the Bodos • Tapashi Hajowary	279



# Negotiating the Notion of Space in Peter Carey's *Illywhacker*: A Postmodern Perspective

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## Introduction:

In the Postmodern discourse, the notion of 'space' has occupied a central position for its thematic and conceptual importance. This specialty of space in postmodern geography lies in the fact that none of the approaches before the postmodern geographers dealt with the spatial turn and negotiations in a systematic manner. Hence postmodern geography is credited to have pinpointed the spatial turn evolved basically after the 1970s and paved the way for rethinking of the concept of space and its inseparable relation to place.

Peter Carey is an Australian English novelist of great repute. Carey is widely considered as one of the most recognized Australian writers in English. He had been conferred to the Booker prize for *Oscar and Lucinda* in 1988 and for *True History of the Kelly Gang* in 2000. Carey's novels have prominently focused upon the issues of place and space in Australia and their ramifications. In fact, his novels can be reckoned as a fictional biography of Australia. Carey's exploration of the wide-ranging issues of the nation of Australia can be traced on his novels namely *Bliss* (1981), *Illywhacker* (1985), *Oscar and Lucinda* (1988), *The Tax Inspector* (1991), *The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith* (1994), *Jack Maggs* (1997), *True History of the Kelly Gang* (2000), *My Life as a Fake* (2003), *His Illegal Self* (2008), *Parrot and Olivier in America* (2009), *The Chemistry of Tears* (2012), *Amnesia* (2014), and *A Long Way from Home* (2017).

## Objective:

The basic objective of the article is to critically appropriate the idea of space from the postmodern perspective in the Australian contexts through the meticulous reading of Peter Carey's one of the seminal novels titled *Illywhacker*. The article delves deep into the spatial dilemma and anxiety in the nation of Australia and showcases the ramifications on the basis of the reading of *Illywhacker*.

## Research Methodology:

In the article, analytical method is applied to negotiate the spatial dilemma and anxiety in Australia on the basis of the reading of the chosen text. In this process, both the primary and secondary data are used to deal with and substantiate the aspects. The text chosen for the study has served as the primary source of information while the secondary data are taken from edited books, essays, and other such similar sources.

Postmodern geography has insisted on the spatial turns and brought into fore the inextricable relation of space and place. In fact, place and space have innumerable and varied impacts in shaping human experiences, existence, psychology, identity, actions, and subjective responses. Citing the importance of space in postmodern philosophy and the necessity to investigate upon this extensively, Foucault remarked in the essay "Of Other Spaces" that "The Present epoch will perhaps be above all the epoch of space (22). Importantly, Edward Soja in *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical*



*Social Theory* also strongly suggests that space has re-emerged as a powerful area of discussion in the postmodern epoch, and created "more critically revealing ways of looking at the combination of time and space, history and geography, period and region, sequence and simultaneity" (2, Soja). Space and spatiality, according to Soja, can be recognized simultaneously as a social product or outcome and a shaping force in social life.

Thus space, its turns, dynamics, malleability, and fungible ness became subjects of wide discussions and proliferations during the 1970s and thereafter. Henri Lefebvre, a French social theorist and philosopher, provided influential interpretations in respect of space and spatiality in his socio-geographical studies and analyses. In *The Production of Space*, he made discernible attempts to deliberate upon the concept of space in an extensive manner. His powerful insights and illustrations hugely impacted the contemporary notion of space and spatiality and brought into light the relation of space to place and locale in postmodern geography.

To Lefebvre, space is of multiple types including social, "religio-political" (35, Lefebvre), "own spaces" (35, Lefebvre), "abstract space" (49, Lefebvre), "absolute space" (48, Lefebvre), "historical space" (48, Lefebvre), and so on. The entire process of space production and reproduction, according to him, results in certain kinds of knowledge. Interestingly, Lefebvre observed that the processes and productions of space also incorporate "a politics of space" (60, Lefebvre) and this politics of space "goes beyond politics inasmuch as it presupposes a critical analysis of all spatial politics as of all politics in general" (60, Lefebvre).

The contexts of the place and space are intricately linked to the very existence of the Australian people. In fact, the spatial contexts of the island-continent of Australia and the issue of national origin have become the central areas of investigation in Australian literature. Henceforth, the literary cartographic depictions of the spatial contestations and anxieties in Australian literature have become crucial to unfold the geo-critical and the other aspects of the Australian landscape including spatial contestations.

Hence the issues of the history, geography, space and spatial contestations have immense importance in the context of Australia. Simply speaking, the spatial dynamics and instabilities have made the Australian landscape a hotbed of discussion in literature and cultural narratives. Significantly, the novels of Carey bear manifestations of these crucial issues being confronted by Australia and her subjects as well. Carey's depiction of the territorial and spatial contestations in Australia in his novels offers wide scopes to enquire into historical realities. In fact, Carey has dexterously displayed through his narratives the implications of the spatial and *patial* aspects in moulding the Australian myths, culture, identity, and nationalism. Hence in Australia, the proximities between the physical place and the formation of identity in national, communal and individual terms are extremely important. Therefore, the spatial and landscape representations along with details of the subjects, their actions, identity, and culture have acquired great significance in the novels of Carey. In the context of such a backdrop, the reading of Carey's *Illywhacker* poses huge significance.

The story of the convict settlement in Australia and the consequent instabilities goes back to the arrival of the first fleet from Britain in 1788. The first fleet was comprised of 1066 people and eleven vessels. During the marathon voyage lasted over eight months, the vessels started the journey from Portsmouth, a southern English naval town and finally reached at the north shore of Botany Bay in New South Wales on January 18, 1788. This



arrival and settlement of the British in the last quarter of the eighteenth century brought tremendous and far reaching changes in the lives of the Aborigines. The Aborigines became fragile in their own habitation and struggled constantly for their subsistence after the settlement of the British.

Interestingly, from the beginning of their arrival in Australia, the British settlers claimed that the island continent was empty before their landing. They evolved the rhetoric of *terra nullius* which literally meant 'empty land'. Sven Lindqvist defines *terra nullius*: Terra nullius. From the Latin *terra*, earth, ground, land, and *nullius*, no one's. Thus: no one's land, land not belonging to anybody. Or at any rate, not to anybody that counts. (3)

Even after the revelation of the presence of Aborigines in the island continent, the British settlers claimed their ownership over the continent by promoting the rhetoric of *terra nullius* and citing the lack of any customary laws, regulations, and order before their arrival. This false claim of ownership continued till the coming of high court's Mabo judgment in the year 1992. Interestingly, the Mabo judgment provided legal recognition to the Aborigines in respect of the ownership and possession of the ancestral lands. Commenting on the white rhetoric of *terra nullius*, Sven Lindqvist states that "in Australia this meant legitimizing the British invasion and its accompanying acts of dispossession and the destruction of indigenous society" (4).

In his second novel *Illywhacker*, Carey delves deep into the twentieth century Australian history through the family saga of Herbert Badgery. The novel is also full of different sub-narratives, and all these sub-narratives have brought into light the views of such characters as Jack McGrath, Leah Goldstein, Molly, Herbert's son Charles etc. However, it needs to be stated that Herbert remains the central figure and dominates the narrative in spite of the presence of numerous other sub-narratives.

The novel looks into the issues connected to the territory of Australia and provides crucial inputs about the spatial contestations. The novel begins with an epigram from Mark Twain's *More Tramps Abroad* (1897) which is worth quoting here in the context of the spatial contestations and instabilities in Australia:

Australian history is almost always picturesque; indeed, it is so curious and strange, that it is itself the chiefest novelty the country has to offer and so it pushes the other novelties into second and third place. It does not read like history, but like the most beautiful lies; and all of a fresh new sort, no mouldy old stale ones. It is full of surprises and adventures, the incongruities, and contradictions, and incredibilities; but they are all true, they all happened. (Mark Twain, *More Tramps Abroad*, London, 1897)

As stated in the novel, Herbert, a man of 139 years, was born in the year 1886. Importantly, these facts regarding the birth and age of Herbert point out clearly that the present narrative takes things into account up to the year 2025. In fact, through his postmodern playfulness and unreliability of storytelling, Herbert constantly makes the readers self-conscious to ponder over the authenticity/ inauthenticity of *terra nullius* in Australian history.

The conversations between Herbert and Leah have constantly portrayed the Australian realities and the continued spatial anxieties. Herbert, the protagonist, is a man



of British origin, and therefore, in a conversation between Leah and Herbert, Leah once says that "I am not attacking you personally"; rather "I am attempting to analyse the history of this country" (230, *Illywhacker*). In another conversation of theirs, Leah exposes Herbert's recurrent urge of settling down in Australia and warns by reminding him that "This is not your place and never can be" (307, *Illywhacker*). Interestingly, Herbert reacts by saying that "It is public land" (307, *Illywhacker*). Leah immediately reacts that "You think you can put up some shanty and that makes it your place, but you can't, and it never will be" (307, *Illywhacker*). Reacting further to the words and denials of Herbert, Leah says:

"Forget what we did. The matter is obvious. The land is stolen. The whole country is stolen. The whole nation is based on a lie which is that it was not already occupied when the British came here. If it is anybody's place it is the blacks'. Does it look like your place? Does it feel like your place? Can't you see, even the trees have nothing to do with you." (307)

Leah again emphasizes that the White Australians do not have any belongingness in Australia. Outlining that, Leah says to Herbert in another conversation:

...I can stay still anywhere. It is not a country where you can rest. It is a black man's country: sharp stones, rocks, sticks, bull ants, flies. We can only move around it like tourists. The blackfeller can rest but we must keep moving... (323, *Illywhacker*)

Thus Leah lucidly points out the whites' stealing of the land from the blacks. All these have blatantly exposed the politics of the British Whites and their illegal occupation of the land of Australia in the name of *terra nullius*. Exposing the false claims of the Whites over the land and the hypocrisy around the craftily circulated propaganda of the *terra nullius*, Leah Goldstein also refers to the exploration of gold and calls the exploration of gold as "the curse of this country" (229, *Illywhacker*). Leah narrates:

"It is gold"... "that has led ordinary working men and women into terrible delusion; it has made them think that they can be the exception to ordinary working men and women all through history; it has made them think that all they need is luck. They have been blinded by gold. They have imagined that all they need to do is drive their pick into the right spot in the ground and they will be another Hannan-they'll be bosses themselves. It has corrupted them. It has been the same with land. Men who spent their lives suffering from the ruling classes went out and stole land from its real owners... There has been no history here". (229, *Illywhacker*)

Thus Leah Goldstein reminds Herbert that the history of Australia is filled with lies only. She even reminds Herbert how their pioneers demolished the culture of the natives to authenticate their presence:

...was not the people, but the landscape and its roads, red, yellow, white, ochre, mustard, dun, Madeira, maize, the raw optimistic tracks that cut the arteries of an ancient culture before a new one had been born. (553, *Illywhacker*)

Hence "The role of lies in popular perceptions of the Australian political fabric" (488, *Illywhacker*) has been accentuated in the novel to demystify the Whites' claims over the land in the name of *terra nullius*. Such revelations have clearly showed the various



underpinnings behind the politics of space and the spatial contestations in Australian society. Importantly, the novel also shows the spatial instability, anxiety and aloneness of the White Australians through the confessions of Herbert in private:

...as carefully as she exposed these nervous systems of her own; I was much affected and stepped down from my drum, with my own confession tumbling from me. I admitted I could not read and that the landscape had, indeed, always seemed alien to me, that it made, in many lights, melancholy and homesick for something else, that I preferred a small window in a house, and so on" (308).

Such realizations of Herbert have symbolized the inner insecurity and alienation of the settler British in Australia. Thus the spatial instabilities in Australia have pushed the people onto inside prisons. Besides, these spatial dilemmas, insecurities and contestations have pushed both the natives and the settler British into a zone of no space. Ironically, the same Herbert once told Leah with impudence that "This is my country", not "yours" (307, *Illywhacker*).

The novel further divulges the spatial instabilities, lies, myths, and the falsity of the rhetoric of *terra nullius*. Herbert while in prison has gone through a fictional history book namely *History of Australia* by M.V. Anderson. Interestingly, the invention of the history book within the framework of the novel is a novelistic technique to explore the issues of the national origin and spatial instabilities in Australia. The opening paragraph of Anderson's book demonstrates the lies in Australian history and the consequent spatial anxieties:

Our forefathers were all great liars. They lied about the lands they selected and the cattle they owned. They lied about their backgrounds and the percentage of their wives. However, it is their first lie that is the most impressive for being so monumental, i.e. that the continent, at the time of first settlement, was said to be occupied but not cultivated and by that simple device they were able to give the legal owners short shrift and, when they objected, to use the musket or poison flour, and to do so with a clear conscience. (456, *Illywhacker*)

All these references have exquisitely pinpointed the lies in Australian history and the consequent spatial anxieties. Through these utterances, the novel questions the very rhetoric of *terra nullius* and deconstructs the politics of space in the Australian landscape. This politics of space in Australia has severely affected the people in all spheres of their lives including private and public.

### Conclusion:

Above all, the novel clearly displays how the spatial instabilities in Australia have resulted in inevitable anxieties as well as conflicts between the Whites and the Aboriginals. Thus the politics of space in Australia as showed here in the novel has subjected both the Whites and the Aboriginals to anxieties, spacelessness, traumatic experiences, and humiliations as well. Such spatial anxieties have made the lives of the Australians especially the natives harrowing and destabilizing.



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