



Scrutinising Space and Structure in Silk and Steel by Stephen Alter

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Abstract

Stephen Alter's Silk and Steel captures historical ruptures and entanglements of colonial India in a compellingly accurate, but heart-wrenching narrative. However, the geographical spaces within the novel—ranging from colonial residencies to Mughal ruins—serve the purposes of narrative more than ambiance; they are codes for ideological expression. This paper analyses these spaces within the novel in terms of their structure using two spatial disciplines—Michel Foucault's spatial scholarship and Edward Soja's third space—as theoretical lenses. These spaces are enclosures of identity, trauma, and resistance. The protagonist Augustine's mixed-race identity is pivotal in this exploration; as he journeys through fractured spaces, his movements map his enclosure within an in-between space. Physical settings of architectural forms, military quarters, and fractured cityscapes are codes for imperial anxieties about ambiguous bodies and spatial disorder. In terms of structure, Alter's narrative is non-linear, mirroring spatial instability in the story world. Through textual analysis, theoretical framing, and interpretation, this paper contributes to the under-explored world of Stephen Alter's fiction, where I posit spatial structure as an enclosure and exploration of identity, colonial surveillance, and narrative resistance. This paper responds to the lacuna in existing literature, which has tended to prioritize thematic and character analysis over a rigorous theoretical engagement with spatial configuration. I conclude by framing Alter's narrative architecture in terms of political cartographies of empire, where spaces themselves become enclosures of power, transition, and conflict.

Keywords: spatial theory, postcolonialism, Stephen Alter, colonial architecture, narrative structure

Introduction

Stephen Alter's *Silk and Steel* is a richly drawn story of espionage, cultural hybridity, and shifting loyalties and identities during the decline of the Mughal Empire and rise of British rule. His protagonist, an Eurasian named Augustine, is a figure in a colonial society that not only recognizes racial, political, and cultural hierarchies but also marginalizes or essentializes mixed racial and cultural identity. Augustine's dual parentage and cultural location place him in a "in-between" space where his sense

of self, loyalties, and agency are always at issue and up for renegotiation. But perhaps more strikingly, beyond the historical range of the novel's concerns is how Alter uses space and narrative structure to articulate many of these issues. This paper will argue that the novel can be read in part as a kind of sophisticated mapping of power, resistance, and subjectivity. Beginning with a discussion of how the text foregrounds its own spatial and structural logic, I argue that Edward Soja's concept of thirdspace, Michel Foucault's ideas about spatial discipline and



power, and several tenets of postcolonial criticism help articulate the text's own spatial logic that simultaneously contains and resists colonial power while also revealing Augustine's own interior and exterior negotiations of identity.

Alter's rendering of colonial India is not simply a setting for the action of the novel; it is also an important thematic and ideological concern. The spaces in which Augustine travels—decaying Mughal havelis, imposing British residences, battlefields, prisons, and even intimate domestic interiors—are sites where identity, power, and memory are at stake. The haveli, with its often labyrinthine and shadowed spaces, is a locus not only of a claimed cultural heritage that is passing away but also of the psyche of a colonial subject trapped in multiple layers of historical memory. British spaces, by contrast, are often hierarchical, oppressive, and technologically imposing, and they reveal the spatial and disciplinary surveillance apparatuses of empire. As Foucault argues in *Discipline and Punish*, "space is fundamental in any exercise of power" (141), and Alter is savvy to this spatial logic and deploys it with narrative end.

The novel's deployment of Soja's third space is most helpful in comprehending Augustine's subjectivity. According to Soja, third space is the convergence of real and imagined geographies and human subjectivities and space with the physical and psychological worlds. When Augustine's movements take him beyond geographic relocation, he is transporting with him psychological and cultural alienation. When he moves about British administrative halls or Mughal ruins, he is traversing spaces that are at once geographically real, spaces of memory, and sites of ideological battle. His anxieties, feelings of ambivalence, and moments of agency are spatially mediated. A corridor that warps in an unnatural way or a courtyard that makes him feel cut off psychologically becomes a text that is more than itself—a cipher for colonial tension and lack of fixed hybrid identity. Through such spatial encounters, Alter lets the reader witness the spatial and existential impacts of colonial control.

Not surprisingly, narrative structure is closely linked to spatial representation. Alter uses a nonlinear narrative and inserts letters, journal entries,

and memories among the main narrative, reflecting Augustine's disjointed sense of history and self. Like his story, the narrative is fragmented and nonlinear. Memory, as it is played out in flashbacks and fragmented narrative sequences, is also intertwined with lived space, creating layers of subjective experience that challenge linear historiography. The novel's structure as an agent of meaning helps readers apprehend both temporal and spatial realities. Narrative threads are interwoven and architectural references are made prevalent, story and setting are inextricably linked, and the spatial dynamics of colonial power relations and personal identity are foregrounded.

Colonial buildings in *Silk and Steel* are doubly significant. Grand buildings made of steel are reminders of the arrogance of the empire and its technology and bureaucracy; the ruined Mughal palaces are tokens of a lost golden age and the independence of the Indians. Like the pictures in my head these symbolic meanings have more than aesthetic significance. They are ideological. The empire's grand buildings are instruments and symbols of control, while ruined Mughal estates are spaces of loss, memory, and historical trauma associated with vanquished cultures. As Smitha Verma observes, "Alter builds a cartography of power with bricks and bodies" (10). If space is real and symbolic of social and political hierarchies, then the colonial gaze is concerned with what is visible, ordered, and hierarchical. The gaze, however, is also concerned with spaces of resistance, ambiguity, and hybrid experience.

Textual evidence also supports this spatial reading. When Augustine returns to his mother's homeland, he encounters a house that is "in fact a house of secrets, doors that would not budge and corridors that turned in on themselves as though to conceal the truth" (Alter 47). The house is literally a labyrinth, but it also symbolizes psychological entrapment, memory, and the inaccessible knowledge of cultural heritage. Similarly, prison spaces—sterile, echoey, and hierarchically organized—reflect the British obsession with surveillance and spatial control, and the internalization of discipline by the colonized subject. These spatialized metaphors support Foucault's claims about power and architecture: the



design of space itself functions as a mechanism of social control and psychic shaping.

Postcolonial theory enriches this spatial analysis by contextualizing Augustine's experience within the ideological matrix of hybridity and in-betweenness. Homi Bhabha's formulation of the colonial subject as "in-between" deconstructs essentialist cultural binaries and illuminates Augustine's subject position (Bhabha 56). His itinerancy through space of power, decay, and domesticity also exposes the liminality of that position: Augustine is neither colonizer nor colonized, Indian nor British. The spatial dynamics of the novel—movement through space, the blurring of private and political space, the navigation of architectural space—highlight the precarious status of the subject and reinforce the claim that the material environment shapes and reflects the instability of hybrid identity.

Reviews of secondary literature sometimes engage with these themes, though few reviews emphasize historical fidelity or narrative tension in order to notice the spatial and structural innovation of the novel. Kirkus Reviews, for instance, praises the novel as "a tense, terrific tale of empire and espionage" (418), but fails to mention the geography of the novel or the spatial symbolism. In *Orientalism*, however, Edward Said develops the concept of "imaginative geography" (7) that resonates strongly with the approach taken by Alter: the mapped spaces of the novel do not only signify geographical locations, but also express the colonial fixation with dividing, organizing, and controlling space—both land and subject. The navigation of space, therefore, provides an index of colonial epistemology and illustrates the ideological work performed by spatial organization.

Furthermore, space metaphors also extend to the representation of historical change. Augustine's path parallels the loss of colonial power: lined, ordered spaces become ruins, once-mighty fortifications fall. In the final chapters of the novel, the physical image of fallen buildings and advancing ruin dramatize the impermanence of empire and suggest cyclical ideas of history. In many ways, Alter's awareness of spatial symbolism turns buildings, streets, and landscapes into historical memory and ideological spaces of struggle. Buildings no longer stand as

passive backdrop, but as active forces in the novel dramatizing characters' agency, resistance, and negotiation of identity. In this way, the novel positions space not as passive setting but as dynamic interactive force in the experience of colonial modernity.

The complexity of *Silk and Steel* is in part a result of the relationship between spatial logic and character psychology. Augustine's experience in each of these locations shows how space and geography can limit, enable, or reflect human action. Courtyards, corridors, and administrative halls are not neutral. They have power, feeling, and memory. Indeed, the text reveals to us that colonial space is never benign. It disciplines, it watches, it narrates and in this way it helps formulate the subjectivity of those who live within it. At the same time, each of the hybridized spaces—Augustine's mother's house, culturally ambiguous spaces, and so on—are not locked into a fixed logic. We see glimmers of agency and resistance in each of them. This dialectic of control and resistance is crucial to understanding Alter's historical, psychological, and political spatial construction and so opens up for a rich secondary reading of colonial India.

Furthermore, Alter's treatment of landscape—both natural and constructed—highlights the ideological significance of the novel's engagement with surveillance and empire. Open fields, rivers, and battle sites are sites of visibility, exposure, and strategic calculation. They reflect military and political concerns. Indeed, the novel often juxtaposes these open surveilled spaces against enclosed, labyrinthine interiors. This space game reveals Augustine in situations of being visible or concealed, insider and outsider. In this sense it reveals the dramatizing dimension of identity in colonial India.

Because of its subtle use of space and narrative strategy as well as hybridity, *Silk Steel* draws attention to the ideas about ideology in geography and architecture. Augustin's route on these spaces as well as how he deals with psychological and social forces is part of the context in which the reader negotiates the ideas about power, memory, and identity in the novel. Indeed, the text itself dramatizes literary space as a house of meaning



where colonial power is not only presented but also contested through experience of those who live in it.

Conclusion

While analysing *Silk and Steel* through the prism of spatial theory and narrative structure, I have demonstrated how Stephen Alter creates a composite, meaningful geography which underscores the psychic, cultural and historical dislocations of colonial India. The spaces in which Augustine resides - the crumbling Mughal palaces to the surveillance-charged British residencies - are no longer relegated as passive backdrop; rather, they are seen to influence and be influenced by the ideological forces of hybridity, power and resistance. Through the application of the spatial discipline concepts from Foucault's spatial discipline and Soja's thirdspace, this paper has demonstrated how the spatial dynamics of the novel are potent forces in the creation of narrative and thematic meaning. Methodologically, this paper has utilised a qualitative approach grounded in a close reading of the text. The spatial theory and postcolonial criticism which has been applied has assisted in the development of a meaningful understanding of how structural and spatial concerns combine to create a politically resonant, aesthetically meaningful narrative. The research gap which this paper has addressed can be seen in the relative critical neglect of space and structure in existing reviews and essays of *Silk and Steel*. A significant proportion

of existing reviews and essays have touched upon plot, character and historical background but have neglected to acknowledge the potent role which geography and narrative architecture plays in the creation of meaning within the text. This paper has sought to address this omission by analysing how spatial combinations contribute to the construction of colonial power and subjectivity.

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