Spatiality and the Literature of Globalization

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What does literature teach us about globalization or imagining the global? Does it make sense to speak of a “literature of globalization” or “fictions of globalization” when scholars continue in their deep disagreements about the shape and reach of global phenomena? And, if so, what would these novels, short stories, or poetry look like and what are their main concerns? The cultural analytics of space and its effects on how we read fiction, especially fiction written by minorities, is important to these questions. Global flows and the inequalities they generate affect how fiction is published, marketed, read, and taught in our universities today; therefore, they embody important portraits of globalization’s effects on social life. A novel like Shani Mootoo’s When Cereus Blooms at Night illuminates how colonial notions of space have been carried over into the world under globalization, and how those notions organize our experiences in racial, gendered, and sexual terms. Because globalization has often replaced former colonial masters with native elites, and the national borders set in place after decolonization have not disrupted colonial spatial logics, some aspects of colonialism continue to shape minority experience today.¹

Notions of space under globalization and how it affects the ways in which our bodies are legible in racial, gendered, or sexual terms, remain anchored to colonial notions of space.

The imaginary island of Lantanacamara in the novel is based on Trinidad and Tobago, formerly a British colony. Written as a letter by Tyler, the omniscient narrator, the novel’s plot is structured through the characters’ experiences as Tyler understands and interprets them. Tyler, the transgender nurse who cares for Mala, addresses the narrative to Asha, Mala’s sister who manages to escape from Lantanacamara, and also to the readers who chance upon the letter and who might know Asha “wherever she might be.”² Thus, it addresses and implicates a global readership as its intended audience. The novel begins

¹ See Masao Miyoshi’s article on how the history of colonialism sets the stage for globalization. Decolonisation at the end of WWII signals a change in the form of government, but the relations of colonialism are still present in the relationship between transnational corporations, native elites, and the poor (p. 728). The question of whether or not globalization is exactly like colonialism in all aspects is beyond the scope of this essay as it merely focuses on spatiality.

with the story of how Mala's father, Chandin Ramchandin, was adopted into the white Reverend Thoroughly's family as a child, and later is abandoned by his wife, Sarah, who absconds with Lavinia Thoroughly. The children Mala and Asha were prevented from escaping, and the rest of the novel narrates the repercussions of that interrupted flight from Chandin's home. Mala eventually becomes insane after being regularly raped by her father and subsequently abandoned by Boyie, her lover, with whom she is finally reunited at the end of the novel.

Space influences the responses to the novel in a number of different but related ways: first, the novel is taught and categorized based on geopolitics, whether consciously or otherwise; and second, critics note that questions of space are important thematics when they comment on racial, economic, and gendered differences in the novel; and finally, less obviously but no less importantly, the novel's narrative strategies reveal how social discourses surrounding racialised subjects depend on how space is divided and organised. The geopolitical concerns of globalization are mirrored in the extant criticism of the novel where the debates around Cereus Blooms at Night is symptomatic of our continued reliance on geopolitical divisions in literary studies. At various institutions, the novel is read and taught alternatively as South Asian, Caribbean, Asian-Canadian, Asian-American, diasporic, or a postcolonial novel. The umbrage that these debates sometimes provoke reveals how seriously literary critics take our national or regional assignations. They reveal not only our need and desire for clear categories, but also that these categories are often based on spatial relations. Both the desire for and the lack of clarity is symptomatic of globalization’s effects on the experience of space.

As a form of social and cultural organisation, how we navigate space embodies the structural problems of economic and social inequality. Feminist geographer Gillian Rose argues that space is the medium of social experience and it determines both our social relations and subjectivity. How we understand the