# Authoring the Map in Ankush Saikia's *The Girl from Nongrim Hills*

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**OPEN ACCESS**

Volume: 11

Special Issue: 2

Month: June

Year: 2024

E-ISSN: 2582-0397

P-ISSN: 2321-788X

Impact Factor: 3.025

Citation:
Kalpana, H. "Authoring the Map in Ankush Saikia's *The Girl from Nongrim Hills*." *Shanlax International Journal of Arts, Science and Humanities,* vol. 11, no. S2, 2024, pp. 53–60.

DOI:
https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.12606205

**Abstract**
*The article attempts to explore and investigate how spatial dimensions participate within a novel to configure a map. The premise is not that the author attempts this consciously as the purpose of the author, especially in a thriller is more devoted to action. Given the fact that the written text in the words of Barthes is no longer that of the author, it is the choice of the reader to re-view the mapping within the text. The implied reading of the text is endeavoured to delineate how the novel in this case, a thriller, skilfully allows a colonial town in the far Northeast to manoeuvre its settings to achieve not just a better status but also allow to re-build cultural and social identities. The article has introduced various spatial theories to provide a context before trying a close reading of the novel. One of the objectives is also to query certain postulates such as the nature of marginalisation, the trope of the local vs global, the map of exotic tourist place and the relation to the modern, the nature of conflict and the construction of culture and identity. A key idea in the analysis is that settings had always been part of fiction and yet it was not read nor investigated as providing diverse meanings. With the advent of literary geographies and cultural geographies, the nature of settings has become more diverse and has provided nuances to comprehend varied mappings such as social, cultural, historical, aesthetic, exotic, marginal and so on.*

**Keywords: Map, Space, The Girl from Nongrim Hills, Identity, Culture**

According to the dictionary definition, geography is "the study of the physical features of the earth and its atmosphere, and of human activity as it affects and is affected by these, including the distribution of populations and resources and political and economic activities" (OUP). It also refers to the arrangement of places and physical features. Literary texts may not have been aware of the physical features. Nevertheless, they have always utilised the backdrop/setting to represent physical features and their connections to human beings, especially in fictional works. This sense of mapping is well explained by Denis Cosgrove in his work, *Mappings*. Cosgrove thinks mapping is not just a measure but a measure connecting "people, place or times" (Introduction). He further states that mappings could be "spiritual, political or moral" and thinks that it includes the "remembered, imagined or projected" environments. Edward Soja, similarly, recognises three spaces: spatial practices termed as first space, representations of space

labelled as second space and spaces of representation, or the space of 'othering' termed third space (Soja, 1996). He argues that the boundaries between these spaces are blurred, and each intersects and relates to one another.

Similarly, Foucault suggests that space is intrinsically connected to humans and their relations. "Space, Foucault argues, has a history in Western culture, and it is always closely bound to our experience of time." (qtd Sundrajat). Foucault discusses not only divergence in spaces but also thinks that modern spaces have become heterogeneous. Reading Foucault's idea, Sundrajat states,

> He [Foucault] indicates that there has been a shift from a space of binary oppositions, of the open and closed, private and public, sacred and profane. Thus, the homogeneity of space, or at least the dialectical interrelation of spaces, has been eroded. In its place is a system which creates a heterogeneous landscape. Foucault's concept of the site has shifted the understanding of space from delineating its unique property to analysing its positioning in a web of divergent spaces. Foucault argues that we are no longer living in a world of time that moves forward but in networks of places opening onto one another, yet unable to be reduced to one another or superimposed upon each other.(29)

To explain the notion of divergence, Foucault uses the word heterotopia and delineates various topologies such as gardens, museums, and cemeteries. Furthermore, Foucault connects space also with knowledge and discourse. Hence in his extrapolation of the clinic, he thinks that the structures of knowledge create two spaces, namely that of the doctor and the patient, and creates a class configuration whereby knowledge is connected to power and non-knowledge to non-power. Using this backdrop of Foucault, Lefebvre comments and argues that,

> Thus, Michel Foucault can calmly assert that 'knowledge [savoir] is also the space in which the subject may take up a position and speak of the objects with which he deals in his discourse'. Foucault never explains what space it is that he is referring to, nor how it bridges the gap between the theoretical (and epistemological) realm and the practical one, between mental and social, between the space of the philosophers and the space of people who deal with material things. The scientific attitude, understood as the application of 'epistemological' thinking to acquired knowledge, is assumed to be 'structurally' linked to the spatial sphere. This connection, presumed to be self-evident from the point of view of scientific discourse, is never conceptualised. Blithely indifferent to the charge of circular thinking, that discourse sets up an opposition between the status of space and the status of the 'subject', between the thinking 'I' and the object thought about. (1991, 3-4).

Lefebvre describes his trope of spatial markers using terms such as perceived space, conceived space and lived space. Perceived space, he explains is a reference to how we perceive the world through our senses, while conceived space denotes how we understand space through our knowledge. This knowledge, Lefebvre explains, is a mixture of understanding and ideology' (p. 41). Lived space discusses the meaning that we attribute to space. In this way, the three aspects of space "mirrors the same dialectical relation between, and similar roles of, the natural, mental and social realities of space". Therefore, Lefebvre postulates that space is social.

To a large extent, the ideas of Soja, Lefebvre and Foucault helped scholars review literary works from the backdrop of representations, power structures and hegemonic aspects. Later theorists such as Denis Cosgrove, Alan Bradshaw and Stephen Brown and Robert Tally have begun to move away from the polemics of knowledge and power and begun to discuss space as a mark of the narrative and as to how it is, in a way, a form of mental map that connects humans to a locale. These critics are again interestingly engaged in dealing with two labels: literary geographies and cultural geographies. Similarly, the actual geographers have recognised the relationship of maps and cartographies to literary texts: "Geographers have long viewed the literary text as of great

documentary value. They emphasise plot and scenic description over the form and structure of the literary work. However, these encounters attempt to illuminate various representations of space – geographically and geometrically – within the literary text." (Mustafa, 2019).

To further these discussions, a close reading of Ankush Saikia's text, *The Girl from Nongrim Hills*, is undertaken to understand the following facets:

- How a marginalized space in a country is configured as the centre.
- How does the local move into the global?
- How does the mapping of a region as serene and exotic change?
- How is culture and identity re-written using the backdrop of spatial mapping.
- How the mapping of the region also provides maps of conflict and violence.

This article uses the above queries to delineate how mapping of a region leads to different contexts. Through a close reading of the text, I would like to reveal how the novel attempts to provide contexts, represent through actions the geographical terrain, the blending of the real and fictional spaces, the historicity of the space, and the of the land and the people.

*The Girl from Nongrim Hills* is set in the idyllic, pleasant, serene abode of the Khasis, the town of Shillong. The protagonist of the novel, Bok, is a guitarist in a local band in Shillong. The story at the beginning tells us how Bok's brother Kitdor unwittingly makes a pact with arms dealers to procure a consignment for them. Unfortunately, Kitdor's plans are foiled when the money gets stolen in Nagaland. The arms dealers now begin to hound him for the money and threaten him with his life. In desperation, Kitdor turns to Bok for help. Unable to see his brother and his brother's family in ruins, he agrees to help him. However, Bok is also in a dilemma regarding raising the needed fifty lakh of rupees. While contemplating this issue, he encounters Christine, a mysterious and strange woman who offers her help and devices a plan to raise the money. Bok agrees to her plot of confronting two politicians and relieving them of the money that they may use for some underhand dealings. The strategy employed is successful, and Bok manages to take away the money, but after he hands it to Christine, he finds that she disappears. The rest of the plot revolves around how Bok hunts for Christine to recover the money. Unfortunately, by the time the novel ends, Kitdor is killed, and Bok uses the money to set up a recording studio.

Most of the novel's reviews have appreciated the work and highlighted the setting of Shillong and the Northeast. Anjum Hasan's blurb on the back cover of the book states that it is a "compelling thriller" describing "contemporary Shillong as well as depicting "power and money games in North East India". Lalitha Subramanian, in her review in *Deccan Herald*, calls it a "Northeast noir" and states that the "dark and detailed thriller takes the reader on a languorous yet compelling ride through Shillong's steep roads and squishy maidans, Tibetan eateries and colonial clubs, Assam-type houses sheltering simple, hardworking parents and faded old hotels harbouring femme Fatales" (?). She further remarks that "it is a world of slow corruption and decay going together with militancy, guns, politicians, mining-mafia, rock bands, extortionists" and labels it as "the whole Northeastern Syria". Soumyadip Choudhury in his review is enamoured by the place setting and states, "As a Shillongite, it felt like taking a ride through the city roads in a drizzle that refuses to stop. Saikia also makes it a point to highlight the city's many landmarks".

Although most of the book reviews discuss the backdrop of Shillong and connect it to the culture of the Northeast, the fact is that the Northeast finds a tiny place in debates and discussions related to Indian Writing in English. This is substantiated by Prasanta Das in his article, "Anthology Making, The Nation and the Shillong poets", when he mentions two significant reasons for the omission of Northeast poets. The first instance is that the Anglo-American world dominates Indian English poetry, and Das reminds us that although poets such as Ngangom and Nongkynrih are students of English literature and some are also English teachers, they are dismissive of the Anglo-American tradition: "The poets they feel close to are the political ones like Pablo Neruda, Czeslaw

Milosz, Mahmoud Darwish, and Yehuda Amichai who by choice or circumstance (or both) voice the anguish and aspirations of their land and its people" (20). A second reason is an unfamiliarity with the topics/themes that the writers discuss:

> Ngangom, Kharmawp-lang, and Nongkynrih feel obligated to write about the crucial contemporary problems of their region. They write about terrorism, insurgency, human rights abuses, environmental and ecological concerns, erosion of tribal values, and the corrupt politician-businessman-bureaucrat nexus. This gives their work a distinct identity within Indian English poetry but also makes it different. (20)

Although referring to the Northeast poets, Das' statements can be taken as an instance to review why the Northeast writing, primarily written in English, is not part of the mainstream explorations.

Coming back to the question of the location in *The Girl from Nongrim Hills*, one of the critical aspects is that space in the novel is both real and imagined. The physical geographical space is interconnected to the mental, and cultural constructions, for Saikia, uses the novel's setting in Shillong to provide a means of participation and identity. This idea of space as a social product is enumerated by Lefebvre:

> Space is social: it involves assigning more or less appropriated places to the social relations of reproduction, namely, the biophysiological relations between the sexes, the ages, the specified organisation of the family, and to the relations of production, namely, the division of labour and its organisation.
>
> The past has left its marks, its inscriptions, but space is always a present space, a current totality, with its links and connections to action. The production and the product are inseparable sides of one process. (186)

Lefebvre's idea that space is produced becomes the novel's turning point as the story places it in the realm of a crime thriller. The genre of the crime thriller depends on spatial markers, as the scene and setting of the crime become related inherently to the plot of the story. Normatively, crime and violence are located within a territory, and the thriller needs to use geography to enhance the suspense and curiosity of the reader. The Girl from Nongrim Hills uses space variously to elucidate it as a remark on morals and values, as a tool of culture, as a reflection of history, as a critique of tourism and as a marker of social relations, and class struggles and power.

The novel's fictional space becomes discursive and turns out to be a position that, besides discussing military insurgency, violence, and corruption, debates the loss of values in the nation. At various points in the novel, the city's decay and degeneration are connected to the loss of human values. Bok discusses how his parents had come from a stage of hardship. They had been trained to 'waste not, want not' and as they had been raised in hardship, -- "they had acquired a lifelong habit of frugality and common sense." (60) Similarly, at the beginning of the story, Bok discusses the change in the city:

> The middle-class town was turning into a rich city. The power lines strung out along the electric posts on either side of the road caught Bok's eye. Strangely, he had never noticed them: they crisscrossed every street in the city…That was how it was nowadays. When he had been in school, there were only Ambassadors and Fiats and jeeps around town, and it was common knowledge as to which car was owned by whom from which locality. (42)

He also reveals his own discomfort when he sees the labourers employed by his friend for construction work. "The sight of the labourers at the back of the truck had disturbed him-the way they had stood there uncomplainingly in the rain like cows or goats" (62). This statement about the city's change indicates how cruelty and corruption enter the city. In the novel, Bok is depicted as kind and sympathetic and a man conscious of his duty. There are many instances in the novel

to reveal this, his taking over the shop as a dutiful son when his parents are busy (5), his feeling of sympathy for the boy who sells picture books (125), and his inability to kill (221).

Through its narration, the novel explains the Khasis' lives by telling us about families and their livelihoods, small eating spaces, people who inhabit the city, the youngsters who now perceive a different life, and the way of life. Saikia narrates the meeting of Kitdor and Bok in a small tin shack to have tea: "They went into one, where Kitdor greeted the young, tired-looking woman in a drab jiansem sitting behind the glass-fronted case with its assortment of curries and chutneys" (48). Similarly, we are informed in the narrative about the Polo ground and the football matches (106), about Sohra, the heartland of the Khasis (151), and about music from Elvis to Eagles to Lobo (89) and other cultural markers. Correspondingly, the novel references varied lifestyles by telling us about Bok's Naga friend, Asang and Assamese friend, Dhruba, and different Khasi friends and relatives. Bok and his friends recollected their younger days when their parents had to make do with the money they had: "They were old enough to remember the drab austerity of the pre-liberations years, unlike the teenagers in stovepipe jeans and birds nest hairdos walking around who had probably watched MTV and drunk Coke as schoolchildren" (15). These allusions mark many cultural patterns of the region.

The transformation of Shillong is explained by noting how colonialism and history play a significant role in changing the nature of the city. The historical background of Shillong explains how a small village became the new civil state of the Khasi and Jaintia hills with the advent of the British. Shillong was chosen as the capital when Assam was developed as the Chief Commander's province. The novel discusses the British past in the opening chapter when the narrator begins the story at the Shillong Club and deliberates about its colonial antecedents:

> The Club, too, was of the colonial times, initially set up to serve the administrators of a town of a few thousand people. A critical town, though, one from whose pine tree-fringed bungalows the British had administered their interests in today's North-East India. To one side of the Club's parking lot (accessed from the main entrance), beside the busy road that went down to Police Bazar, was a pyramidal structure of stone blocks known as the Williams Memorial, put up in honour of Major T.J. Williams, an executive engineer of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills in the nineteenth century. The British had long gone, leaving the Northeast a part of India. (1)

Such discussions in the novel depict how Shillong, the small, peaceful place, has become a commercial capitalistic city wherein the lives of humans too have changed, with an urge to be part of the modern pace of life and a desire for material wealth. The Girl from Nongrim Hills explores the change from a rustic space to an urban space by repeatedly reviewing varied changes in the landscape; It highlights the shift from a village to the city, the change from tradition to modernity, and from colony to nation. Saikia uses the tourist backdrop to present the reader with a virtual tour of geography and culture. Shillong is/was labelled as the Scotland of the East, and it is picturesque and draws innumerable tourists. It is a city of plurality and diversity and, additionally, is viewed as a city that is a mixture of Western and Eastern traditions. The novel begins with this mix of cultures when it states that the composition of the city itself was now a stew of tribals and plains dwellers and had given rise to a style of spoken English and Hindi, a culture equal parts rock music and Hindi film songs. (2)

Saikia draws our attention to the notion of tourism and critiques the same. He wishes to point out that although Shillong is a tourist location, the culture and tradition of the tribes are hardly known to others. He wants us to reflect on the fact that the Khasis are a quiet, peaceful community, that their primary staple food is rice, that they follow a matrilineal family system, that the betel nut or 'kwai' is held sacred and is part of the cultural rituals and they are good at weaving cane mats, and so on.

The novel embodies space as not only a set of social relationships but more so as a space with value. This is illustrated by the image of the minister, Nobelson. For Nobelson and his set of politicians, the terrain of Shillong is a source of money. The story reveals that Nobelson, an Independent MLA in the Meghalaya Assembly, owns several coal mines in the West Khasi district. (58). Nobelson wishes to join a national political party for the next elections to serve his people better (59). Later, he mentions that although he is part of a Nationalist party, he has not gained anything. He relates how the technology of mining in western countries has hit his business:

> That is what I am talking about. You people do not know anything. There are ships coming into Mumbai and Kolkata nowadays, ships with 70k, 80 k, 100k tonnes of coal. From South Africa, America, Australia, fully mechanised mines, with their own railway system and everything. And us with our rat - hole mines, where children go down to take the coal. Obviously, their prices will be cheaper. I haven't got a single new order in the past month. (138)

Nobelson brings into the novel the sense of power that a minister possesses when he mentions that being a politician, he knows people through whom he can get his work done (199). The novel constantly reminds us of how individuals such as Bok and Kitdor are forever at the mercy of the powerful—be it the militants/ministers or/the army. This aspect can be explained by Lefebvre's statement, "Economic space subordinates time, whereas political space eradicates it, because it is threatening to exist power relations. The primacy of the economic, and still more, of the political, leads to the supremacy of space over time." (191)

The novel's utilisation of spatial arrangement allows the productiveness of meaning. The question is how Saikia's novel set in Shillong marks it as a novel of the Northeast. The novel is seen as a palimpsest of Shillong because it uses the setting as a historical space and a real space of the present. For example, the novel's beginning, set in the Shillong club, discusses both the historicity as well as the present: "The small town had gradually turned into a city of a few lakhs, and now, with each passing year, more vehicles, people, and high-rise construction added to the growing sense of congestion" (1). The sense of place in the novel works both as a visual and a lived reality. The lived reality of the various places in Shillong simultaneously extends the geographical references on the map of Shillong. Hence, the attempt to name the places in Shillong: "He had just crossed the café he had been in a while ago, and now he went on ahead and instead of the Jacob's ladder route he had intended to take, chose the road that wound down from the Don Bosco point towards Stephen Hall. The persistent drizzle had turned to rain by the time Bok reached the department's office in lower Lachumiere." (47).

The novel, furthermore, is a space of consumption, for the readers consume the varied spaces and the action associated with them. Throughout the novel, we meander through homes, shops, public spaces, and mansions. The novel utilises geography assimilating the landscape as texts and establishing relations between humans and living environment, landscape, and population. Thus, when Bok reveals that "from behind the house one had a fine view of Malki, Dhanketi and above them, Upper Lachumiere", he also mentions that "it was a sprawling corrective landscape now" (61), indicating the sense of loss of the beauty of the land. Geography is also used as a marker of locations throughout the novel. There are several illustrations to substantiate this aspect. Two examples are cited here; "Half an hour later, Bok was driving down the steep incline from New Colony that came out near Polo Bazar. In the distance, he could see parts of Shiyap and Lankarding and Nongmynsong, concrete houses spreading outwards from the city's old limits" (65). "On their left passed Ward's Lake, or Nan Pollok, with the white wooden bridge spanning it" (154). The exploitation of place names enables to not only locate the spaces in Shillong but provides the markers for a sense of belonging to the characters.

By the time the novel ends, Bok realises that "Whatever one said, there was money here in the North East, one only had to know how to look for it" (114) and further states that "here in the Northeast the law did not always win—that privilege was claimed only by those who survived" (223). Saikia not only uses spatial metaphors of Shillong but by locating Bok within this setting, he presents Bok's participation as a voyeur of crime. At the same time, the novel also makes the protagonist question himself: "Now that it was all over, a wave of sadness washed over him. His brother, Tenzing, Dobrich and his three men –what had they all died for? And Christine or whatever her actual name was—two bullet wounds and now lying there unconscious. What had he turned into a murderer for? The money in the bag lying at his feet?" (223)

The novel ends by allowing Bok to have a sense of catharsis by narrating the complete story to Daisy, and after the narration is over, they sit together. Bok, at that moment, feels rejuvenated: "Sitting beside her on the hard wooden bench listening to their pastor delivering the sermon, he had felt as though the sun had shown itself again in his life" (228). The novel moves from the Northeast into the national space as Bok asks Daisy if she wants to go to Goa. Thus, *The Girl from Nongrim Hills* is a powerful novel that presents the new man of the Northeast who re-values his hometown while pondering over the corruption and violence that has crept into the Northeast and seems to think of crossing borders to see new life. In the process, Bok moves beyond a Khasi identity to a human identity. A key point here is the sadness he feels for Christine's death. The Urban space and its struggle enable him to become a survivor, a man who knows how to deal with relationships and develop inclusiveness. To conclude, one can draw on Bok's words to explain how Bok, the Northeast man feels a sense of humaneness:

> The ultimate futility of his efforts weighed heavily on Bok. Instead of going around shooting people and snatching money, he had not lifted a finger to save his brother; things would still be the same. Was it meant to be a sort of metaphor for life itself? ...The fragility of human life seemed incapable of standing up to the complexity of the world outside. Every little thing he did seemed to him an enormous effort… (208).

In response to the earlier queries, one can say that Saikia through the novel, skilfully maps how the margins move to the centre, how the local is transformed into the global, how the exotic is replaced with the everyday, how culture is rewritten and how conflict and violence are mapped to make the reader aware of the polemics of corruption and space. As the article was an attempt to see how a map could be constructed to represent a host of dimensions connected to human habitat, I would like to draw attention to the fact that the novel by its deliberations brought in culture and materiality into focus. Similarly, using the construct of the Northeast, the writer managed to connect varied systems of meaning. These aspects can be best explained by Denis Cosgrove,

> The first is the complex, accretion of cultural engagements with the world that surround and underpin the authoring of a map, that is, treating the map as a determined cultural outcome. The second is the insertion of the map, once produced into various circuits of use, exchange and meaning: that is the map as an element of material culture. It is attention to these sets of questions which is implied by the term mapping any map. Any map may thus be regarded as a hinge around which pivot whole systems of meaning, both prior and subsequent to its technical and mechanical production." (9)

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