

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Spatial Geographies of the Subaltern in Contemporary Indian Fiction: A Study

Dr. Rajiv N. Aherkar

Associate Professor & Head, Department of English, Late Sow S. S. Mundhe College, Gangakhed,
Dist. Parbhani-431514, MS, India;

rajivaherkar@gmail.com

Accepted version published on July 1, 2026

 <https://doi.org/10.26572/ghr2601512>

ABSTRACT

Physical space in literature functions not merely as a neutral background but as an active agent that enforces cultural and socio-economic hierarchies. This paper argues that marginalised characters in contemporary Indian fiction utilise, subvert, and reclaim oppressive architectural spaces to challenge cultural hegemony. While current academic literature frequently focuses on how post-2000 Anglophone Indian novels deconstruct the dominant cultural narratives, research often treats marginalisation strictly as a social or economic condition. It rarely examines marginalisation as a geographical or architectural reality. This study investigates the spatial dimensions of subaltern oppression. The paper examines Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* (2008) to explore class disparity and capitalist confinement. It analyses Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* (2008) to understand mythological revisionism and patriarchal architectural control. It studies Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017) to interpret marginalised identities and spatial politics. Through a comparative approach grounded in post-colonial and spatial theory, this research answers how marginalised characters transform spaces from palatial estates to urban graveyards into sites of subaltern agency.

Keywords: Subaltern, Spatiality, Architectural Confinement, Indian Anglophone Fiction, Heterotopia

FULL RESEARCH PAPER

Introduction

The physical environments that characters inhabit in literature are deeply political. Buildings, city streets, and homes are constructed deliberately to maintain specific power structures. In post-colonial literature, these architectural boundaries serve as physical manifestations of social divides. Contemporary Indian fiction frequently addresses the stark inequalities that define modern Indian society, especially the divide between the privileged centre and the marginalised periphery. However, a significant gap remains in the current academic discourse. Research often treats marginalisation as a social or economic condition, but rarely as a strictly geographical or architectural one. The spatial dimensions of poverty, gender inequality, and social exclusion provide a critical lens for understanding how power operates on a physical level.

This paper argues that marginalised characters in contemporary Indian fiction navigate, subvert, and reclaim oppressive architectural spaces to challenge cultural hegemony and forge subaltern agency. To support this thesis, this study examines three distinct novels that portray different facets of Indian culture. Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* (2008) exposes the spatial realities of class disparity and globalised capitalism. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* (2008) reimagines ancient mythology to highlight the architectural constraints placed upon women by patriarchal structures. Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017) maps the spatial politics of marginalised identities and nationalistic violence.

These texts collectively demonstrate that subaltern rebellion is fundamentally tied to the reclamation of space. By analysing Balram's claustrophobic driver's seat and basement quarters in *The White Tiger*, Draupadi's restrictive royal palaces in *The Palace of Illusions*, and Anjum's reclamation of a graveyard as a sanctuary in *The Ministry for the Most Unhappy*, this paper addresses a vital research question. It asks how marginalised characters in post-2000 Indian literature utilise or subvert spatial architecture to challenge cultural hegemony. The analysis will move from the theoretical foundations of spatial politics to specific textual examinations, culminating in a comparative synthesis of how these distinct cultural narratives address the geography of oppression.

Theoretical Framework

To effectively analyse the role of space in these novels, it is necessary to establish a theoretical framework grounded in spatial philosophy and post-colonial

studies. The intersection of these two fields provides the tools to understand how architecture enforces social hierarchies.

Henri Lefebvre's seminal work, *The Production of Space* (1991), serves as the primary spatial foundation for this research. Lefebvre argues that space is not naturally occurring but is socially produced by the ruling classes to maintain their dominance. He asserts that capitalist societies design environments that reflect and reproduce their economic systems. In this context, the physical layout of a city or a home is a deliberate construction meant to keep the working classes separated from the elite. Sara Upstone applies this concept directly to post-colonial literature in *Spatial Politics in the Postcolonial Novel* (2009). Upstone notes that colonial powers historically used spatial boundaries to control indigenous populations, and post-colonial governments continue to use similar architectural strategies to marginalise the poor.

Michel Foucault provides a secondary spatial lens through his concept of "heterotopias" (Foucault 1984). Foucault describes heterotopias as counter-sites. These are spaces that exist outside of normal societal rules, where individuals who deviate from the accepted norms are placed or choose to gather. Unlike utopias, which are fundamentally unreal, heterotopias are real physical places that mirror, distort, or invert the standard spaces of society. Examples include prisons, asylums, and cemeteries. This concept is crucial for understanding how marginalised characters create sanctuaries in spaces that mainstream society abandons or fears.

The concept of the subaltern must be defined. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's influential essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988) questions whether individuals at the lowest tiers of society have the agency to make their voices heard within dominant power structures. Ranajit Guha, a founding member of the Subaltern Studies Group, previously defined the subaltern as the demographic mass excluded from the hierarchy of power (Guha 1982). Homi K. Bhabha further emphasises that the social presence of these oppressed groups is crucial to the self-definition of the majority group (Bhabha 1994). By combining Spivak's understanding of silenced voices with Lefebvre's spatial theory, this paper interprets architectural confinement as a physical method of silencing the subaltern voice. Reclaiming space, therefore, becomes the primary method for the subaltern to speak.

The Architecture of Capitalism: Confinement in *The White Tiger*

Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* provides a brutal examination of how globalised capitalism produces spaces of extreme inequality. The novel is structured as a series of letters written by Balram Halwai, an entrepreneur who escaped rural

poverty through violence. Adiga divides the spatial geography of India into two distinct realms. As Balram explains early in the narrative, "India is two countries in one: an India of Light, and an India of Darkness" (Adiga 14). The "Light" represents coastal, urban, and globally connected cities such as Bangalore and New Delhi. In contrast, the "Darkness" represents the rural, feudal interior of the country where the lower castes are trapped in generational servitude.

This macro-geographical divide is replicated on a micro-architectural level throughout the novel. When Balram moves to New Delhi to work as a driver for a wealthy family, the architecture of their apartment building strictly enforces class hierarchies. The wealthy employers live in a luxurious penthouse apartment high above the city's pollution and noise. This vertical elevation physically separates them from the realities of poverty. In stark contrast, Balram and the other servants are forced to live in dark, cramped, and mosquito-infested basement quarters. The physical descent into the basement mirrors the social degradation of the servant class. This spatial segregation ensures that the subaltern remains invisible to the elite unless their labour is required.

Furthermore, Balram experiences a unique form of mobile confinement in his employer's Honda City. The automobile functions as a glass bubble that allows the wealthy to navigate the polluted streets of New Delhi without interacting with the poverty outside. For Balram, the driver's seat is a space of extreme restriction. He is physically close to his masters, overhearing their most intimate conversations, yet he is separated from them by an invisible but impenetrable social barrier. The car's architecture reinforces his servile identity. He is permitted to exist in the city's wealthy spaces only as long as he remains confined behind the steering wheel.

Adiga introduces a powerful metaphor for this spatial conditioning through the "Rooster Coop". Balram visits a market in Old Delhi and observes chickens trapped in wire-mesh cages. He notes that the birds can see the butchered remains of other chickens, yet they do not attempt to escape. Balram connects this physical trap to the psychological trap of the Indian underclass. He states, "The very same thing is done with humans in this country" (Adiga 173). The Rooster Coop is an invisible architectural structure maintained by traditional family values and systemic violence. It is a mental space that prevents the poor from rebelling, even when the physical doors are unlocked. Balram's ultimate rebellion requires him to violently shatter this spatial conditioning. He murders his employer to steal money and relocate to Bangalore. By usurping the master's wealth, Balram forces his way out of the basement and into the penthouse, violently reclaiming his right to inhabit the spaces of the "Light".

Gendered Spatiality: The Palatial Prison in *The Palace of Illusions*

While Adiga focuses on class mobility, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni examines the spatial marginalisation of women within traditional patriarchal systems. *The Palace of Illusions* reimagines the ancient Indian epic, the *Mahabharata*, from the perspective of Draupadi (also known as Panchaali). Divakaruni uses architectural spaces to illustrate how ancient Indian statecraft severely restricted female agency.

From her childhood, Draupadi is confined to the *zenana*, the inner quarters of her father's palace. The *zenana* is a highly controlled architectural space designed specifically to isolate women from the political and public affairs of the court. While the male characters are permitted to roam freely, train in open fields, and participate in political councils, Draupadi is expected to remain hidden. Her physical movements are restricted to domestic architecture. Martin Coward notes that buildings bring new networks of relationships into existence, constituting the world as people know it (Coward 429). The architecture of the *zenana* constitutes a world where women are powerless observers of history. Draupadi deeply resents this spatial segregation. She desires to learn about statecraft and war, but her environment dictates that her only purpose is to marry and support male warriors.

The central architectural motif of the novel is the Maya Sabha, the Palace of Illusions. This magical structure is built for Draupadi and her five husbands by a demon architect. It is described as a marvel of engineering, a space that defies the natural laws of physics. Draupadi expresses her awe of the structure, stating, "Above us our palace waits, the only one I've ever needed. Its walls are space, its floor is sky, its centre everywhere" (Divakaruni 165). For a brief period, this palace represents Draupadi's ultimate empowerment. It is her domain, and she rules over it with immense pride. The floors are designed to look like water, and the pools of water are designed to look like solid floors.

However, this magnificent architecture ultimately becomes the catalyst for her downfall. When a rival king, Duryodhana, visits the palace, he is tricked by the architectural illusions and falls into a pool of water. Draupadi laughs at his humiliation. This single event, occurring within the specific spatial dynamics of the Maya Sabha, triggers a chain of vengeance that leads to a catastrophic war. The palace, which initially symbolised her freedom, effectively becomes a gilded prison that ties her to a legacy of violence and loss. The architecture feeds human pride and manipulation, reflecting the patriarchal obsession with dominance and control.

Following the loss of their kingdom, Draupadi and her husbands are forced into exile in the forest. The forest represents a radical shift in spatial reality. It is an open, chaotic environment where the rigid architectural rules of the palace no longer apply. In the forest, Draupadi experiences a harsh but genuine freedom. She is stripped of her royal comforts, but she is also removed from the suffocating expectations of the *zenana*. The natural environment suspends traditional gender roles, allowing her to survive alongside her husbands as an equal rather than a protected asset. Divakaruni demonstrates that patriarchal power relies heavily on constructed architectural boundaries; when those buildings are removed, the social hierarchies begin to collapse.

Subverting Dead Space: The Graveyard as Sanctuary in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*

Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* offers the most profound example of marginalised bodies reclaiming unwanted spaces. The novel traces the lives of India's most vulnerable populations, including transgender individuals, Dalits, orphans, and religious minorities. Roy's work heavily utilises the concept of heterotopias to show how the subaltern survives in a nation that actively seeks to erase them.

The narrative centres on Anjum, a *hijra* (transgender woman) who initially lives in the *Khwabgah* (the House of Dreams). The *Khwabgah* is a traditional sanctuary for the transgender community in Old Delhi. It is a protected space, but it is also a bounded one. It keeps the *hijra* community safe by keeping them segregated from the rest of the city. The residents are permitted to leave only for specific occasions, such as blessing newborns or performing at weddings. While it offers shelter, the *Khwabgah* ultimately functions as a spatial quarantine, reinforcing their marginal status.

After surviving a horrific religious massacre in Gujarat, Anjum experiences severe trauma and can no longer tolerate the confined safety of the *Khwabgah*. She chooses to relocate to a city graveyard. The cemetery is the ultimate Foucauldian heterotopia. It is a space dedicated to death, a place that mainstream society ignores or fears. However, Anjum subverts the intended function of this architecture. She moves into the graveyard and literally sets up her home among the tombstones. Roy writes, "She lived in the graveyard like a tree. At dawn she saw the crows off and welcomed the bats home" (Roy 63).

Anjum gradually transforms this space of death into a thriving, inclusive sanctuary for the living. She builds the *Jannat* (Paradise) Guest House by enclosing the graves within the walls of new rooms. She refuses to pave over the dead, instead integrating them into the architecture of her new home. This act of spatial reclamation is deeply subversive. Anjum takes a piece of land that the capitalist city deems worthless and turns it into a refuge for society's outcasts. Soon, the graveyard is populated by a diverse group of marginalised people with nowhere else to go. Anjum describes their shared condition, stating, "Once you have fallen off the edge like all of us have... you will never stop falling. And as you fall you will hold on to other falling people" (Roy 84). The graveyard becomes a community of falling people holding onto each other.

Roy contrasts the organic, compassionate architecture of the graveyard with the rigid, violent spaces maintained by the state. The novel shifts its focus to the militarised zones of Kashmir, where the government uses spatial control to suppress political dissent. The architecture of the state includes torture centres, military checkpoints, and surveillance towers. These are spaces designed to inflict pain and enforce obedience. By placing the graveyard in direct opposition to these militarised zones, Roy highlights the difference between spaces of oppression and spaces of resistance. Anjum's graveyard is a profound architectural rebellion. It proves that even the most disenfranchised individuals can create spaces of life and love within a landscape dominated by violence and exclusion.

Comparative Synthesis

Bringing these three novels into direct conversation reveals a complex picture of how contemporary Indian literature addresses the spatial dimensions of oppression. While Adiga, Divakaruni, and Roy write in vastly different styles and genres, they all identify architectural confinement as a primary tool for maintaining cultural hegemony. In all three texts, physical boundaries are used to enforce silence. Balram's basement keeps the poor out of sight, Draupadi's *zenana* removes women from political discourse, and the state's militarised zones in Kashmir suppress religious and political minorities. The ruling classes construct these spaces to ensure that the subaltern cannot challenge the established order. The architecture is designed to make marginalisation feel natural and inescapable.

However, the novels differ significantly in how the protagonists choose to rebel against these spatial constraints. Balram Halwai's rebellion in *The White Tiger* is fundamentally violent and individualistic. He does not seek to dismantle the capitalist

structure; rather, he murders his master so that he can take his place at the top of the hierarchy. Balram escapes the basement, but he leaves the oppressive system intact for others to suffer. His spatial victory is achieved through moral compromise.

Conversely, Draupadi's relationship with space in *The Palace of Illusions* is characterised by tragedy and realisation. She attempts to claim power through the magnificent architecture of the Maya Sabha, but she learns that physical structures built on pride and illusion ultimately lead to destruction. Her true liberation from spatial confinement only occurs when she loses her palace and enters the unstructured space of the forest. Divakaruni suggests that feminist empowerment cannot be achieved simply by taking over patriarchal spaces; it requires existing entirely outside those traditional boundaries.

Anjum's rebellion in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* represents the most constructive and communal approach to spatial resistance. Unlike Balram, Anjum does not use violence to usurp the elite's spaces. Unlike Draupadi, she does not rely on magical structures or royal wealth. Instead, Anjum takes the most neglected, unwanted space in the city and repurposes it through acts of care and inclusion. She builds a heterotopia that openly welcomes everyone rejected by mainstream society. Her architectural rebellion challenges the hegemony not by fighting it directly, but by rendering it irrelevant within the borders of her sanctuary. Together, these novels illustrate the shifting cultural landscape of 21st-century India. They demonstrate that the struggles for class mobility, gender equality, and human rights are intimately tied to the right to occupy physical space. The subaltern cannot simply demand to be heard; they must first break out of the basements, palaces, and quarantine zones that keep them hidden from the world.

Conclusion

Physical space in literature is never purely decorative. It is a carefully constructed geography that dictates who holds power and who remains powerless. This paper has argued that marginalised characters in contemporary Indian fiction navigate, subvert, and reclaim oppressive architectural spaces to challenge cultural hegemony and forge subaltern agency. Through a detailed examination of *The White Tiger*, *The Palace of Illusions*, and *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, it becomes clear that architectural confinement is a primary mechanism for enforcing social, economic, and gendered hierarchies.

Aravind Adiga highlights how the architecture of global capitalism physically traps the rural poor in basements and driver's seats, conditioning them to accept their

marginalisation. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni exposes the patriarchal foundations of royal palaces, demonstrating how domestic architecture has historically been used to isolate women from public influence. Arundhati Roy provides a powerful vision of spatial resistance, showing how the most vulnerable members of society can reclaim spaces of death and turn them into thriving communities of survival. Reading Indian literature through an architectural lens greatly expands our understanding of power dynamics in the Global South. It shifts the focus from abstract social theories to the tangible realities of brick, concrete, and locked doors. The subaltern experience is defined not only by a lack of wealth or rights but by a severe lack of spatial freedom.

References

- Bond, C. D. "Representations of Law and Race Revisited: An Updated Survey of Recent American Film." *Seattle Journal for Social Justice*, vol. 18, no. 2, 2020, pp. 415–43.
- Cross. Season 1, created by Ben Watkins, performance by Aldis Hodge, Amazon Prime Video, 2024.
- Cross. Season 2, created by Ben Watkins, performance by Aldis Hodge, Amazon Prime Video, 2026.
- Chalaby, Jean K. "Global Streamers: Placing the Transnational at the Heart of TV Culture." *Journal of Digital Media & Policy*, vol. 13, no. 2, 2022, pp. 223–41, https://doi.org/10.1386/jdmp_00083_1.
- . "Streaming Giants and the Global Shift: Building Value Chains and Remapping Trade Flows." *Journal of Communication*, vol. 75, no. 2, 2024, pp. 112–30, <https://doi.org/10.1093/joc/jqae040>.
- Lockett, A. L. *The Double Bind of Institutional Surveillance: Alternative Histories of Systemic Power in the Black Press*. 2021. Pennsylvania State University, Doctoral dissertation.
- Patterson, James. *Alex Cross Series*. Little, Brown and Company, 1993–present.
- Petruska, Karen, and Faye Woods. "Travelling without a Passport: 'Original' Streaming Content in the Transatlantic Distribution Ecosystem." *Transatlantic Television*

Drama: Industries, Programs and Fans, edited by Michele Hilmes et al., Oxford UP, 2019, pp. 49–68, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190663124.003.0004>.

Watkins, Ben, creator. *Cross*. Amazon MGM Studios, Paramount Television Studios, and Skydance Television, 2024–2026.

Wyatt, Justin. "The Life Cycle of *Transparent*: Envisioning Queer Space, Time and Business Practice." *Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media*, no. 16, 2019, pp. 80–96, <https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.16.06>.

Publisher's Note: *The author(s) are solely responsible for the content, accuracy of data, and any instances of copyright infringement. Global Humanities Review and its publisher disclaim all responsibility for such matters. Publisher remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.*
