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The Half-Inch Himalayas: Topoanalysis and Belonging in *The House that Spoke*

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Abstract

The contradiction of Kashmir's rustic charm to the cruelty inflicted upon its land and its people due to incessant political and territorial conflicts is hauntingly evocative. That the landscape of Kashmir has often provided poetic fodder to Indian English literature as evidenced in the works of Agha Shahid Ali and Mirza Waheed to name a few, then, is not surprising. However, representations of Kashmir in children's literature remain relatively vacuous. While middle-grade children's novels like *No Guns at My Son's Funeral (2005)* by Paro Anand, *Queen of Ice (2014)* by Devika Rangachari and *The House that Spoke (2017)* by Zuni Chopra all deal with the politics of Kashmir in varying degrees and in various historical timeframes, what makes *The House that Spoke* an integral contribution is the 15-year-old writer's highly personal treatment of Kashmir's landscape. Using Gaston Bachelard's spatial criticism from *The Poetics of Space (1958)*, the article explores the intimate relationship between the young protagonist and Kashmir functioning here both as a setting in a fantasy novel and as a sanctuary topos. Through the novel, the article considers the notion of "home" as extending beyond the confines of a structure to include cityscapes and in this case, the state of Kashmir to arrive at a stable sense of place amidst vulnerability and precariousness.

Keywords: topoanalysis, home, Kashmir, spatiality, belonging

Home in Children's Literature

The notion of "home" is a much-contested space in children's literature and is often considered in a series of antitheses. Perry Nodelman and Mavis Reimer in *The Pleasures of Children's Literature* (2003) while identifying the home-away-home pattern, a prevalent trope in children's literature, also explore the constant pull between freedom/restraint, civilisation/nature and reality/fantasy that lie within and outside the home.

As for houses and its attendant *home* in children's literature, Badger's house in *Wind in the Willows,* the eponymous house from *Anne of Green Gables,* the gingerbread house in *Hansel and Gretel,* Ariel's, or rather Titan's, sea house in *The Little Mermaid* have given the readers an extensive understanding of the remarkable differences in the qualities of places that children can call home. To Jane Suzanne Caroll, "[t]he home is sanctified because it reflects, on a microcosmic level, the world as a whole" (19). Home, then, becomes a microcosmic encapsulation of one's identity since it is through the home, which acts as a primary site of formation of the self, that the child understands the world.

Ajit Anand, in an article titled "Topoanalysis and the City Space in the Literary writings of Amitava Kumar", mentions Anjali Gerua Roy's argument regarding the Kharagpur diaspora to state that a home is not just brick and mortar but essentially "subsumes those spaces where one has grown up, thus one's locality or city becomes the 'home' for the individual" (68). The idea of *home* then has extended beyond the physical structure to include landscapes both literal and metaphorical which hold experiential or phenomenological resonance to the individual. As for children, the attachment to home is perceptibly more immediate and pressing, since in modern children's literature, home is an integral *topoi*, or locus, with particular emotional significance to the characters, "taken as an outward and visible embodiment of their personality" (Carroll 23). The novel *The House that Spoke,* the literary debut of the then fifteen-year-old writer, Zuni Chopra, deals precisely with such a cavernous attachment to not just the hometown, i.e., Srinagar, but to Kashmir as a whole.

Kashmir as Literary Setting

Literature of the Valley has an enormously rich history. In fact, 'The Half-inch Himalayas' in the title is a homage to precisely this rich literary tradition and in particular to Agha Shahid Ali's evocative poetry about his homeland. In "A Postcard from Kashmir", Ali writes,

Kashmir shrinks into my mailbox,
my home a neat four by six inches.

I always loved neatness. Now I hold
the half-inch Himalayas in my hand.

This is home. (Ali, lines 1-5)

If Kashmir, not just as a physical landscape but more poignantly, as a homeland that holds the poet's intimate attachments, can be contained in a postcard for Ali, then the continuous reproductions of Kashmir, both historical and contemporary, in literature demand investigation. The Valley has a vast and rich literary tradition with important writers of the present periodically taking to the literary form to record the region's violent cultural and political landscape. For instance, Basharat Peer in his *Curfewed Night* (2008) writes of Kashmir with an empathetic realism that has not only permeated the literature that followed but has also been an influence to the fifteen-year-old writer, Zuni Chopra in writing her literary debut, *The House that Spoke.*

Ever since the Instrument of Accession to India was signed in 1947, Srestha Kar in her article titled "Negotiating the Female Identity in Times of Conflict: A Study of Two Kashmiri Women's Narratives" notes that "Kashmir remained a bone of contention between the two countries [India and Pakistan]" (264). The deployment of the military for governing only resulted in newer forms of aggression. Although tracing the history of Kashmir through literature is an important task in itself, the paper aims to delve into representations of childhoods in Kashmir which reproduce Kashmir not just as a unidimensional, lyrically scenic landscape or as being torn apart by political and cultural divisions but in its multidimensionality as a place of dwelling amidst violence, as a place that is as warm as it is unforgiving, as a home.

While children's literature has only sparsely dabbled in Kashmiri folklore, fairy-tales and historical narratives as can be seen through *The Queen of Ice* by Devika Rangachari*, The Legend of Himal Nagrai* retold by Onaiza Drabu and *Okus Bokus – A to Z for Kashmiri Children* by Onaiza Drabu with Ghazal Qadri's illustrations, fewer still represent contemporary Kashmir in its ideological polarities in a way that addresses its impact on

childhoods in the region. While both *No Guns at My Son's Funeral* by Paro Anand and *The House that Spoke* by Zuni Chopra fulfil the objective of examining sensitive themes, the latter holds greater analytical significance within the context of this paper. This is not only due to the fact that the author, Zuni Chopra, is a teenager herself, but also because her novel utilises the genre of fantasy as a profound tool to delve into the intricate fabric of life in the politically turbulent landscape of Kashmir.

Children's Literature and Political Identity

The value of fantasy, much like children's literature, in terms of addressing the politics of cultural identity, nationalism and otherness has been undermined as compared to its adult, realistic, counterpart. Recently, however, changing notions of national and cultural identity coupled with recent trends in children's literature that tackle the convoluted network of identities has led to a shift in hierarchy that locates writing for children well within the realms of both literary criticism and geopolitical studies. Kim Huynh and his colleagues in *Children and Global Conflict* (2015) take the argument further by discussing the perplexing positionalities of children in policy-making and speculate the reasons for "marginalisation and at times complete absence of children within mainstream international relations thinking" (3).

Children's literature criticism has periodically addressed a similar bias through the coloniser/colonised binary that has always already existed in children's literature as Jo-Ann Wallace in "De-Scribing *The Water-Babies:* 'The Child' in Post-Colonial Theory" posits that "an idea of the child is a necessary precondition to postcolonialism" (176) to which Ania Loomba in *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* adds as she considers the parental metaphors that pervaded the politics of imperialism so much so that "[t]he white man's burden was constructed as a parental one: that of "looking after" those who are civilisationally underdeveloped (and hence figures as children), and of disciplining them into obedience" (181). Marah Gubar in "The Hermeneutics of Recuperation" argues against the difference, or colonial, model and the deficit model in favour of what she calls a "kinship" model of childhood, premised on the notion that "children and adults are separated by differences of degree, not of kind, meaning that we should eschew difference-model discourse that depicts children as a separate species in favour of emphasizing that growth is a messy and unpredictable continuum" (454).

Children have a lot to offer in describing their experiences and their perspectives of the world, which has hitherto been overshadowed by the more pronounced and pervasive adult voice. Within the context of recent scholarship, childhood studies have begun to theorise child authorship, with Peter L Cumming in an article titled "What Children's Writing?" suggesting that "*much* children's writing will be formulaic, derivative, banal, conservative, or reactionary, in both content and form" (113). While *The House that Spoke* may be derivative in certain aspects since the current crop of children's fantasy is rife with the trope of 'the chosen one' which the novel deals heavily with, *The House that Spoke* also provides a unique representation of 'home' that is notably absent in children's literature that is written by adults. The novel also offers unique literary value as it provides a distinct phenomenological registry in documenting intimate spaces within conflicted landscapes.

Landscapes as Literary Tool

Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space* has attracted readers from architecture, psychology and literature alike primarily for his description of the oneiric house, the process of daydreaming and the dualism between inhabited space and geometrical spaces. He approaches the field neither as a literary critic nor a psychoanalyst but rather as a phenomenologist, with a keen interest in exploring the interstices of experiment and experience. To Bachelard, a space once inhabited cannot be summed up by its geometrical or architectural structure since a space transcends its position as a mere platform upon which human lives are enacted to become a participant and agent that simultaneously constructs and is constructed by identity. He famously states, "(a) house that has been experienced is not an inert box. Inhabited space transcends geometric space" (2).

The protagonist initially describes her life "in a fairy tale. Or rather, . . . in the house of a fairy tale" (Chopra 20) which supposedly derives its magic from the Chinar (Maple) Tree. Additionally, wood from the Chinar is also used in the furniture of the house which is suggested as one of the reasons for its sentience. The Chinar is a deciduous tree that features notably in and bears witness to "Kashmir's literature and politics, religion and romance" (Ashiq). The Chinar, here, is emblematic of the historical, cultural and political landscape of Kashmir as evinced in the poetic tradition of the Valley, including the writings of Ghulam Nabi Khayal, Habba Khatoon and Lalla Ded, which evokes the Chinar with nostalgic longing for the tree and for the land that it symbolises. In the novel, the motif of the Chinar tree

serves as a concrete metaphor for Kashmir, while the house symbolises the protagonist's profound connection to the region, reflecting a deeply rooted personal history that has consistently tied her to the land of her ancestors.

In her portrayal of the State of Kashmir, Zuni Chopra condenses the sprawling expanse of this region into the relatively more rigid confines of a house. Her proclivity to compress the vast expanses of Kashmir within the structured walls of a house may, in part, be influenced by her relatively tender age. As someone who only sporadically visits Kashmir due to her father's affiliations with the land, Chopra's direct experience with the region is somewhat limited. Yet, this act of distilling the expansive Kashmiri landscape into the more intimate setting of a home serves to enhance the narrative since it allows for a sense of closeness and intimacy that would otherwise be elusive.

Landscape is at once geographical and historical. Jane Suzanne Carroll in *Landscape in Children's Literature* (2012) equates landscapes to historical texts, "as deep palimpsests on which the traces of the past are still visible even when the present age is being inscribed" (4). Parallelly, memories of home, the most intimate of all landscapes, to Bachelard, "are not remembered but are rather entwined with the present", in that it is the site through which the individual constantly negotiates their identity based on their ongoing experiences (Anand 68). The house in the novel is not only a palimpsest of the protagonist's multigenerational association with Kashmir, but is also the cord that links Zoon, the protagonist, with her past in a much more palpable manner. The past seeps through the cracks into the present in the house as the sentient furniture and portraits continually remind Zoon of her lineage and destiny. The interplay of the past and the present here mirrors the current political status of Kashmir which is decidedly built on its vicissitudinous colonial and postcolonial history.

Bachelard defines topoanalysis as the "systematic psychological study of the sites of our intimate lives" (8). By extension, a house, he states, is designed in a way that appeals to "our consciousness of centrality" with verticality as a critical feature, ensured by the polarity of the attic and the cellar (39). He links the framework of human conscience through Jung's Unconscious with the structure of the house, wherein the attic is endowed with reason and judiciousness as opposed to the cellar which holds within its dark corridors discord, unfamiliarity and a primitive human fear. Chopra writes of the house as having trapped Kruhen Chay, the embodiment of the evil that is plaguing Kashmir, within the hamam, which

is an integral feature to traditional Kashmiri architecture. Sakinah et al. define the functionality of a hamam as "a room within a home in which the subfloor is hollow and is comprised of a wood-fired furnace to generate heat which is conducted through the floor, warming the space and occupants in the Hamam" (1). The hamam, here, takes the place of the cellar that keeps the cold cruelty entrapped. On the contrary, the armchair in the library, which functions as the attic, serves as a voice of reason and "fatherly" counsel, to calm and soothe her. If the house is a symbol of Kashmir, this association then reveals the humanisation of the consciousness of Kashmir that the house subsumes.

It is an impending attack on the house that lends a sense of unease in the text. The house, acting as a sanctuary topos, is sacrosanct because an inhabited space is a universe "[the home] is always a replica of the paradigmatic universe created and inhabited by the gods; hence it shares in the sanctity of the gods' work. (qtd. in Carroll 19). To continue the strain of psychoanalysis, an intrusion on the sanctity, homeliness or the "*heimlich"* of such a space is then "*unheimlich"*, the unhomely or the Uncanny that Freud explores in his 1919 essay. "The Uncanny" (3). This violation of the sanctity of the home mirrors the anxiety of the Kashmiri residents at the constant violation of their homes by external forces like India and Pakistan. The "house's entire being", as Bachelard posits, surrenders, "faithful to our being" (15) as is seen in the final struggle wherein the house and its components intuitively understand Zoon's mind in controlling but not defeating Kruhen Chay. While the child author does not politicise the novel, an anxiety for the state of events pervades the narrative in spite of its fictive and fantastical veil.

Agency and Guardianship

Shanti Razdan, as a single parent, chooses to keep Zoon unaware of the fact that the family plans to move away from Srinagar, for their safety among other reasons. It is only when the buyers are to come that Zoon figures out that the house, the child's "first universe" to Bachelard, is to be sold (45). While adult paternalism, here, cannot be deemed oppressive by definition, it informs the pattern of adult-child relations within the novel and by extension, culturally as well wherein as Tamar Shapiro states, "To treat someone like a child, is, roughly, to treat her as if her life is not quite her own to lead and as if her choices are not quite her own to make" (qtd. in Gubar 8). Zoon, however, is positioned as an active

stakeholder and participant as she demands, “Ma, I don’t care. I know everything you’re saying may be valid. But I had a right to be told. IT’S MY HOME TOO!” (47).

United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) states that “[e]very child has the right to be listened to and to have their opinions taken seriously when decisions are being made about their lives” (qtd. in Haring 6). Additionally, Albert Bandura, a social cognitivist, in “Towards a Psychology of Human Agency” defines having agency as “to influence intentionally one's functioning and life circumstance” (164). When Zoon is not given the agency to participate in practical decisions in the family, the novel utilises Zoon’s intimate connection with the house to negotiate unequal power dynamics and to help her assert her position in the world through her position as Guardian whereby she is able to take control and transform the narrative.

Children in global conflict are conventionally portrayed as victims but on the contrary, conflict-affected children are often seen to “care for themselves, each other and for adults”, which in Trauma Studies is called parentification, wherein the child and parent swap roles, with the child providing emotional or physical support to a parent or guardian. While the novel contains evidence of Zoon being such a carer as she is one of the many children who have lost one or both their parents to the continuous riots in Kashmir, the agency that Chopra displays in constructing Zoon’s identity through the house and through Kashmir holds more relevance to the paper.

The novel ends in a collective grieving for the loss endured, not just to Zoon but to the families around her, with Zoon mourning the passing of her grandmother, who was the previous Guardian. She says, “I had loved Tathi more than I would ever know. I loved her still, and I always would. But I was also a Guardian. Kashmir needed me” (217), which cements resilience despite loss, an innate sentiment to life in Kashmir. Through topoanalytical elements in the novel such as the links between the human consciousness with the edifice of a house and the preternatural nature of *home*, a unique sense of identity that is deeply rooted in and indebted to Kashmir emerges. Chopra etches out a unique selfhood for a child who is not merely a passive receptacle, but an active participant, a selfhood that is neither defined by lack nor by difference from adulthood. The narrative demonstrates the capacity of children’s literature to challenge conventional representations and redefines the

concept of home to incorporate an empathetic and responsible attitude toward one's place in the world.

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