

Mapping Identity: A Psychogeographical Exploration of Urban Spaces in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Third and Final Continent*

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Abstract

This study applies the theory of psychogeography, and its principles in analysing Jhumpa Lahiri's story, "The Third and Final Continent". It examines the impact of metropolitan settings on the protagonist's emotional and psychological experience as he travels through Calcutta, London, and Boston. Psychogeography, propounded by the Situationist International movement, offers a theoretical structure for comprehending the influence of geographical environments on human behaviour, identity, and emotional conditions. Through an analysis of the protagonist's encounters with various metropolitan environments, the study uncovers the profound interconnection between experiences of alienation, confusion, and adaptation to the cities in which he resides. Furthermore, the study explores fundamental psychogeographical concepts including emotional mapping, the spectacle of urban life, and the reclamation of space to demonstrate how the protagonist's journey mirrors wider concepts of migration and cultural assimilation. The study also highlights the crucial influence of urban settings on the formation of individual identity and the intricate connection between geography and psychology in Lahiri's narration.

The world is becoming increasingly urban in its makeup, and it becomes important to understand how the process of urbanisation impacts the life and well-being of the human race, especially, how it makes a psychological impact on individuals. Urban environments are not merely physical spaces but are deeply intertwined with the emotional and psychological experiences of the individuals who inhabit them. The way we navigate cities, the emotions we attach to specific locations, and the sense of identity we develop within these spaces are all influenced by the urban landscapes around us. In Jhumpa Lahiri's "The Third and Final Continent", these complex interactions between place and identity are central to the protagonist's journey across Calcutta, London, and Boston. This paper aims to apply the tenets of Psychogeography to gain a deeper understanding of how these cities shape the protagonist's experience of displacement, adaptation, and self-discovery. This paper also aims to apply the principles of psychogeography, as developed by Guy Debord and the Situationist International, to analyse how the protagonist's emotional and psychological responses to these urban spaces reveal the underlying themes of migration and cultural integration.

The concept of psychogeography, introduced and popularized by the French Marxist philosopher Guy Debord in the 1950s, provides a robust framework to examine the connection between people and the urban environments they live in. Psychogeography investigates the psychological and emotional impacts of defined geographical settings, especially metropolitan landscapes, on humans. Psychogeography, as

defined by Debord, is the examination of the exact principles and particular impacts of the geographical environment, whether intentionally structured or not, on the emotions and behaviour of individuals. (Sidaway 549) This methodology highlights the active influence that urban spaces have on the formation of human experience, identity, and behaviour, often concentrating on how these environments shape perceptions and memories.

The basis of psychogeography is in its critical analysis of the isolating consequences of contemporary metropolitan settings. Debord and other Situationists contended that modern cities, characterized by their inflexible frameworks and utilitarian architectural principles, exacerbate a feeling of confusion and emotional detachment among their residents. “The Situationists contended that modern cities characterized by inflexible frameworks and utilitarian architecture exacerbate emotional detachment among residents.” (Sadler 248) The objective of psychogeography is to reveal and counteract these impacts by encouraging individuals to interact with their surroundings in more impromptu and creative processes. These behaviours, known as the “dérive” or drift, include aimlessly exploring the city without a defined objective, letting the surroundings direct one's actions and encounters. The dérive forms a fundamental aspect of psychogeography by serving as a means of re-engaging with urban environments in a manner that challenges their conventional, practical functions.

An essential principle of psychogeography is the concept of emotional mapping, in which people analyze and chart their emotional reactions to various urban settings. This technique exposes the manner in which particular regions of a city elicit particular emotions, such as disquiet, longing for the past, or excitement. Emotional mapping questions the traditional, quantitative maps of a city by prioritizing the subjective and psychological perceptions of space, rather than solely its physical arrangement. “Emotional mapping prioritizes the subjective and psychological perceptions of space over the physical arrangement” (Klettner, Huang, and Schmidt). This emphasis on the emotional fabric of the city corresponds to Debord's wider criticism of capitalism, which he perceived as diminishing human experiences to simple operations inside an economic framework. In contrast, psychogeography aims to regain the emotional and psychological aspects of urban living.

Psychogeography places significant emphasis on spatial disorientation, which refers to the phenomenon of becoming disoriented in a city as a method of liberating oneself from the inflexible and rationalised structure of urban existence. Debord and the Situationists claimed that the contemporary urban environment, characterised by its organised streets and utilitarian architecture, enforces a specific manner of existence that constrains both creativity and spontaneity. Through its embrace of disorientation, psychogeography aims to disturb this established order and create fresh opportunities for individuals to encounter the city. The act of becoming disoriented is not about perplexity, but rather about emancipation from the predetermined routes and patterns that the urban environment enforces on its residents. (Souzis 193)

Psychogeography is also profoundly implicated in the reclamation of urban environments. This entails opposing the commercialisation of urban areas and reclaiming them as locations for genuine human lived experiences. The Situationists espoused the idea of generating “situations” - intentional periods of existence designed to rekindle genuine needs and sensations within the built environment. By means of these circumstances, individuals have the opportunity to regain their autonomy within the urban environment, therefore converting areas that have been appropriated by commercial entities into sites of personal and communal importance.

An analysis of literature using psychogeography provides a distinct method for comprehending the impact of urban areas and settings on the psychological and emotional conditions of characters (Fhadilla and Wahyuni). Historical analysis of literature has traditionally examined the inner worlds of characters using different theoretical frameworks such as psychoanalysis, existentialism, or phenomenology. Nevertheless, psychogeography adds a spatial and environmental aspect to this investigation, enabling researchers to examine how characters' engagements with urban environments influence their experiences, feelings, and actions. Through an examination of the psychogeographical elements of a story, it is possible to reveal the manifestation of the city as a character, exerting influence and engaging with the human individuals within it.

Specifically, psychogeography is very suitable for examining tales that include metropolitan environments, migration, and cultural displacement. "Psychogeography is a useful framework for examining literary representations of migrant experiences in metropolitan environments like London" (D'Arcy 353). Within such narratives, individuals frequently navigate through several geographical regions, each exerting its distinct psychological influence. The notion of the *dérive*, which refers to the exploration of the city without a specific objective, can be extended to literary characters as they negotiate urban settings in manners that expose their internal struggles and emotional conditions. The urban environment assumes a role beyond being a mere setting, engaging actively in the storytelling process, influencing the characters' encounters and adding to the progression of the storyline (Childs 173).

The short story, "The Third and Final Continent" by Jhumpa Lahiri offers a significant narrative opportunity to explore the concepts of psychogeography by examining the protagonist's encounters in several urban environments, including India, England, and the United States. The narrative may be interpreted as an investigation into the impact of these varied surroundings on the protagonist's emotional condition, perception of self, and more comprehensive psychological odyssey. The analysis of the story from a psychogeography perspective reveals that the urban environments experienced by the protagonist play an active role in the narrative, influencing and being influenced by his experiences and perceptions.

The protagonist embarks on his quest from India, more precisely in the vibrant metropolis of Calcutta. The surroundings here are immediately recognisable, deeply influenced by the cultural and social conventions of his native country. From a psychogeographical perspective, Calcutta symbolises a location where the main character's sense of self is firmly established, influenced by conventional cultural norms and social systems of his childhood. His departure from Calcutta is not just a physical voyage, but also a profound emotional and psychological displacement from a place that has shaped his identity. (Pourgharib and Asl 1657) This dislocation establishes the foundation for the main character's forthcoming interactions with a story and unfamiliar urban settings, each of which presents its own distinct emotional and psychological obstacles.

Upon reaching London, the protagonist is immediately immersed in a markedly distinct metropolitan environment. London, characterised by its frigid, constricted, and impersonal atmosphere, epitomises the isolating consequences of contemporary metropolitan existence that psychogeography scrutinises. The story portrays the protagonist's living situation in London as follows: "We occupied a room with three or four people, shared a single, cold toilet, and alternated in preparing pots of egg curry, which we consumed by hand on a table covered with newspapers" (Lahiri 176). This portrayal of city life emphasises the disorienting and isolating impact of the city on the protagonist, who struggles to navigate

a physically and emotionally suffocating environment. The confined living quarters and communal areas provide less privacy and comfort, therefore exacerbating a feeling of isolation and detachment from the surrounding environment.

The sense of estrangement is intensified by the visible presence of London's metropolitan landscape. The commercialised areas of the city, characterised by their focus on materialism and efficiency, induce a feeling of bewilderment in the chief character. The tale avoids excessive emphasis on the magnificence or aesthetic appeal of London's landmarks, instead directing its attention towards the ordinary and frequently unforgiving aspects of living in a foreign metropolis. The protagonist's daily schedule, which includes attending lectures, working at the library, and preparing meals with his fellow bachelors, vividly demonstrates his endeavour to establish a sense of organisation in the chaotic and overpowering urban setting. Nevertheless, this daily pattern also strengthens the social isolation he experiences, as it is marked by a dearth of significant relationships or personal satisfaction.

I lived in London, in Finsbury Park, in a house occupied entirely by penniless Bengali bachelors like myself, at least a dozen and sometimes more, all struggling to educate and establish ourselves abroad. I attended lectures at LSE and worked at the university library to get by. (Lahiri 175)

The protagonist's encounters in London also exhibit the notion of the *dérive*, or meandering through the city, but in a more limited and less impromptu manner. The majority of his engagements with the city are utilitarian, determined by necessity rather than the pursuit of exploration or discovery. The protagonist's mobility is restricted to particular paths and places, indicating a restricted interaction with the built surroundings. The limited manifestation of *dérive* emphasises the protagonist's endeavour to establish his position within the urban landscape, as he remains on the outskirts of London's social and cultural sphere. (Vijaylaxmi 182)

The protagonist's relocation to the United States signifies a pivotal change in the storyline, both in terms of physical location and psychological experience. Boston, which serves as the backdrop for a significant portion of the narrative, introduces a story metropolitan environment accompanied by its own array of difficulties and possibilities. The protagonist's first encounter in Boston is characterized by sensory overload, as he is inundated by the cacophony, illumination, and perpetual commotion of the metropolis. The narrative effectively portrays this experience: "Car horns, loud and extended, sounded consecutively" (Lahiri 176). The protagonist's sense of disorientation is intensified by the chaotic environment, characterized by sirens and flashing lights signalling endless emergencies, and a series of buses rumbling past with their doors opening and closing with a powerful hiss, throughout the night. Such a chaotic setting further complicates his adjustment to the relentless pace of urban life in America. Car horns, shrill and prolonged, blared one after another. Sirens and flashing lights heralded endless emergencies, and a succession of buses rumbled past, their doors opening and closing with a powerful hiss, throughout the night. The noise was constantly distracting, at times suffocating. ... no one to talk to. I was too tired to pace the gloomy corridors of the YMCA in my pajamas. Instead, I sat at the desk and stared out the window. (Lahiri 177)

Nevertheless, as the main character becomes acquainted with this unfamiliar setting, his connection with the urban landscape undergoes a transformation. The relocation to Mrs. Croft's residence is a pivotal moment in the story when the main character begins to develop a deeper and more significant bond with his environment. In stark contrast to the vast sight of the metropolis outside, Mrs. Croft's home exudes an old-world elegance and enforces rigorous rituals. Through its emotional and psychological significance, this place enables the protagonist to cultivate a sense of stability and routine that was

lacking in his previous experiences. By means of his engagements with Mrs. Croft, the main character initiates the process of reclaiming a feeling of control within the metropolitan setting, therefore converting the residence into a personal sanctuary amidst the urban disorder.

The emotional mapping of London by the protagonist likewise mirrors the influence of the city's splendour on his psychological condition. The highly commercialised and impersonal character of London's urban areas intensifies his feeling of detachment. The spectacle of the city, as conceptualized by Debord, is apparent in the protagonist's little involvement with its cultural and social phenomena. Rather than establishing significant relationships or seeking comfort in the city, the protagonist's encounters with London are characterised by a feeling of detachment. His daily regimen of attending classes, working at the library, and cooking meals serves not just as a survival strategy but also as a method of dealing with the very demanding and sometimes isolating characteristics of the city.

By means of his engagements with Mrs. Croft, the main character initiates the process of reclaiming not only the physical boundaries of the residence but also his ability to exert influence within the wider metropolitan setting. The profound emotional bond he establishes with Mrs. Croft and her home signifies a radical shift from the sense of isolation he encountered in London. This expropriation of space encompasses not just the physical realm but also the emotional and psychological aspects, as the main character begins to rethink his connection with the urban environment. The residence, and consequently, the urban environment, serves as a setting where the main character can initiate the process of constructing a fresh sense of self, which reconciles his previous encounters with his current situation.

As the protagonist adapts to life with his wife, Mala, the emotional mapping of Boston undergoes further development. The new flat they relocate to symbolises a further milestone in the process of reclaiming urban space. In contrast to the temporary and impersonal arrangements of the YMCA or the inflexible framework of Mrs. Croft's house, the apartment provides a secluded and intimate environment where the main character and Mala can start constructing their life together. The narrative depicts the apartment based on the daily habits and items that occupy it -- "the bathroom basin was consistently wiped clean, our two toothbrushes positioned next to each other, a cake of Pears soap stored in the soap dish" (Lahiri 182) -- highlighting the establishment of a communal living area that is both reassuring and recognizable. This particular area, in contrast to the others, is demarcated by feelings of inclusion and safety, signifying a notable shift in the protagonist's connection with the urban environment.

The protagonist's encounters in Boston lead to a more cohesive and robust urban identity, which encompasses both his previous experiences and his current situation. This metamorphosis is not exclusive to his physical mobility within the urban environment, but also to his profound emotional and psychological involvement with its various areas. Through the process of reclaiming these spaces and imbuing them with fresh emotions and significances, the main character successfully negotiates the difficulties associated with migration, cultural displacement, and personal adjustment.

The narrative's finale, which contemplates the protagonist's enduring connection with Boston, emphasizes this metamorphosis. The city, formerly a cause of confusion and isolation, has transformed into a haven of inclusion and security: "We have acquired American citizenship, enabling us to receive Social Security benefits at the appropriate time" (Lahiri 186). Despite our occasional visits to Calcutta, we have made the deliberate choice to settle here and retire. This comment exemplifies the protagonist's complete assimilation into the metropolitan environment of Boston, where he has not only discovered a residence but also a location to establish a life and sense of self.

From a psychogeography perspective, “The Third and Final Continent” exposes the intricate relationship among spatial disorientation, the *dérive*, and the evolution of metropolitan identity. The protagonist's exploration of London and Boston exemplifies how encounters with disorientation in the city, whether it be physical or emotional, can result in story approaches to comprehending and interacting with the urban surroundings. Through the adoption of the *dérive* approach, the main character is capable of reclaiming and redefining the environments he resides in, so fundamentally altering his connection with the city and his own identity.

Jhumpa Lahiri's "The Third and Final Continent" offers a compelling narrative that, when examined through the lens of psychogeography, reveals the profound ways in which urban landscapes shape and are shaped by the emotional and psychological experiences of the protagonist. The psychogeographical journey of the protagonist, from the familiarity of Calcutta to the alienating environment of London, and finally to the evolving landscape of Boston, underscores the dynamic relationship between space, identity, and emotional response. Through the *dérive*, emotional mapping, and the reclamation of urban spaces, Lahiri's story not only portrays the protagonist's physical migration but also his gradual psychological adaptation and transformation within these urban settings.

The protagonist's experiences reflect the broader themes of displacement, cultural negotiation, and identity formation, which are central to psychogeography. The urban environments he traverses are not mere backdrops but active participants in his journey, influencing his sense of self and his interactions with the world around him. By applying the tenets of psychogeography, this analysis highlights how Lahiri masterfully intertwines the external landscapes with the internal landscapes of her characters, revealing the deep interconnectedness between place and person.

The story illustrates that the city is not just a physical space but a complex, multifaceted environment that profoundly shapes and is shaped by the lives of those who inhabit it. The protagonist's journey across continents and through different urban landscapes becomes a metaphor for the larger, ongoing process of identity formation and self-discovery in the context of migration and cultural hybridity. In doing so, “The Third and Final Continent” exemplifies the power of psychogeography to illuminate the intricate connections between place, emotion, and identity in literary narratives.

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