Space, Geography and literature; A Geocritical Perspective

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ABSTRACT: Literature generally, during different times and especially in postmodern era has had a close affinity with the concept of space. In literature the concept of space is regarded as the physically existing environment in which an event, a story or happening occurs. A literary writer tries to give a new picture of life to the reader by combining a represented place of the real world with imaginary spaces. Sometimes representation of spaces and places are a mere copy of the real places and sometimes they are wholly imaginary in order to represent a utopian society. This issue has motivated some critics to consider the concept of place deeply. In this way Geocriticism that has came into existence by Bertrand Westphal and Robert T. Tally at the time of postmodern tries to analyse real and imaginary spaces and their relation with one another in literature and reality. Geocriticism also regards all writing as a map. This paper tries to consider the importance of the concept of space in literature based on the newly born theory of Geocriticism.

Key Words: Geocriticism; Literary cartography; Place; Westphalia; Preferentiality

INTRODUCTION

Literature as an entity which refers to both forms of written and oral form springs out from the imaginative mind of people who are talented and gifted to create stories. Richard Taylor (1981-) believes that an imaginative act is an act of writers’ imagination in selecting, ordering and interpreting life experience (Bachelard, 1994). An artistic creation whether real or imaginary consist a space which represents a reference frame. As a matter of fact, when man starts to think about the nature of space, he makes thought of it as a sort of container. In this way, each space is mutually intertwined with a place in which different material are located. In literature it is regarded as the setting, the place in which an event, a story or happening occurs and characters live and move.

When speaking of space in literature and other fields, a distinction should be made between literal and metaphorical uses of the concept. Generally, space is on the whole difficult to be understood in its literal sense. The Oxford English Dictionary defines it as “the dimensions of height, width and depth within which all things exist”. The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy defines it as “an extended manifold of several dimensions, where the number of dimensions corresponds to the number of variable magnitudes needed to specify the location in the manifold” (DiSalle, 1999); but the later definition cannot do a lot with literature and it may refers to the implementation of space in other fields of study as physics and mathematics.

The focus on the issue of space has been a challenging process by most significant intellectuals. Michel Foucault (1926-1984), for one example, insisted “the anxiety of our era has to do fundamentally with space, no doubt a great deal more than with time. Time probably appears to us only as one of the various distributive operations that are possible for the elements that are spread out in space” (Murphet, 2004). So those who live in postmodern era live more spatially while in modern time, those who were called modernist had tendency to live more temporally.

Theoretical Consideration of Space in Literature

Kantian philosophy regards time and space as the two fundamental entities that cause human experience to start working. The outcome of human experience can be regarded and recognized as a Narrative. This narrative
can be in the form of both fiction and nonfiction. In this way the definition of the story can be the sequence of events happening in a specific time and specific place. One way to give meaning to places is through literature, which proves that literary works have the power to influence reality as Yi-Fu Tuan (2002) points that “the feel of a place takes longer to acquire. It is made up of experiences, mostly fleeting an undramatic, repeated day after day and over the span of years. It is a unique blend of sights, sounds, and smells, a unique harmony of natural and artificial rhythms such as times of sunrise and sunset, of work and play. The feel of a place is registered in one’s muscles and bones”. Bertrand Westphal (2011) defines space as “a concept that encompasses the universe; it is oriented toward the infinitely large or reduced to the infinitely small, which is itself infinitely and infinitesimally vast.”

**Literature and Geocriticism**

Focusing on Postmodernism, one can refer to Geocriticism as a way of perceiving hyper spaces and real spaces, which can be regarded as a new approach in perception of place in a new sense, and altering the conventional ways of recognition. Geocriticism is a method of literary analysis that incorporates the study of geographic spaces. Geocriticism considers all writing as a map and the main point is to recognize the real and imaginary places. Bertrand Westphal argues that space is more important than time and geography more important than history. Central to Westphal’s conception of literary criticism is the conviction that it is only by emphasizing the referential force of literature that we can understand the essential function of true literary creation. “The referentiality of fiction allows it to point to a recognizable place, real or imaginary or a bit of both at once, while also transforming that place, making it part of a fictional world” (Westphal, 2011). So far in the study and analysis of literature concerning the issue of space, most of the spatial analyses were based on the individual point of view. This point of view generally is the point of the view of the narrator who can be real and who can be a fictional one. Westphal (2011) elaborates that “this is an ego-centered analysis. Since discourse on space is made to serve the discourse on the writer, who becomes the ultimate object of critical attention. Because the image of a story or the places described whether real or imaginary are born in the mind of the writer.”

Geocriticism tends to put place at the center of discussion and in this way the special referent is the basis for analysis, not the author and his or her work. So one is “free to employ a methodology that allows the space to be seen from new angle, an angle that resitues the entire field” (Westphal, 2011). By taking a Geocritical perspective we opt for plural points of view, which are located at a crossroads of distinct representations. So we focus on a place which is touched by different points of view and through these points of view the identity of a place will be related for us.

The general purpose of Geocriticism is to perceive the real and fictional spaces that we are dealing with through our life. Westphal believes that all writings can be regarded as a kind of cartography in a way that most of the realistic maps are unable to depict. In this way, through reading a fiction and focusing on the fictional places in a narrative one can understand real places. A typical geocritical study would focus on a single place e.g. Paris and then look at as many textual representations of that place as possible, putting the emphasis on the referential relationship between those texts and the place in question.

Robert T. Tally one of the adherents in Geocriticism, throughout his studies and researches on space besides focusing on the topography of space, tried to concentrates on the social and cultural aspects of space. He defines Geocriticism as a predominantly literary critical methodological “framework that focuses on the spatial representations within literary texts” while also “explor[ing] the overlapping territories of actual, physical geography and an author’s or character’s cognitive mapping in the literary text” (Tally, 2008). Drawing from Westphal’s theory of Geocriticism, Tally introduced his own concept, that of “literary cartography”. Mapping and spatial analysis applied to literature have been a long lasting research field for both authors, with Tally conceiving the author as a mapmaker and the critic as a map-reader. He uses the term “literary cartography” to describe different ways that writers use to map social spaces.

**CONCLUSION**

Space, as the central fact of the place, would appear to be a key concept in literature. Space has had a timely re-emergence in literary and cultural studies in recent years. The discourse of postmodernism has especially emphasized the importance of space, geography, and cartography, as the hyper experience of the postmodern condition calls for the orienting and reorienting efforts of mapmaking. Geocriticism as an interdisciplinary postmodern science of the literary space usually distinguishes poetic, imaginary space of literary works from real space. Westphal promotes Geocriticism as a poetics of the interactions between human spaces and literature and Tally focuses on the social and cultural aspects of space. It explores the role of interaction between the imaginary
and real spaces. A geocritical analysis examines both, and perhaps more pointedly look at the ways in which the two overlap, resist one another, or form new spatial practices altogether.

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