

**MOUNTAINS AS A SPACE OF OTHERNESS:****FELUDA IN THE MOUNTAIN TERRAIN****Aheli Chaudhuri**Independent Researcher, Department of English, University of  
Delhi.**DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18775474>****ABSTRACT:**

Mountains as a space have been explored in various forms of literature, either through a realist lens to portray living conditions or through a romanticised lens that highlights the otherness of the mountain terrain. In the context of detective fiction featuring Feluda set in the mountain terrain, Ray manipulates the image of the mountain through the lens of a city dweller. The urban curiosity and the sense of otherness in the binary of populated, commercialised plains and the scarcely inhabited mountain play a pivotal role. The proposed paper aims to study the detective fictions of the Feluda series set in the mountains through the lens of ecocriticism and the otherness of mountain terrain.

**KEYWORDS:**

mountains, otherness of terrain, urban-rural divide, detective fiction, ecocriticism.

**Introduction**

The character of the “detective” functions as an authorial figure who attempts to uncover the story of the crime. In doing so, the “case” becomes a story about making a story (Thoms, 98). When this figure tries to navigate the marginalised hilly locale, he/she further alienates the other characters living there. The element of mountain as locale has been very significant in gothic forms of literature. Particularly, the mystery novels produced by Indian authors have exploited the mountain terrains in various ways. For instance, Sarath Kumar’s English mystery novel exploits the

mountainous region to create the plot of adventure, while writers writing in various Indian languages like Hindi and Bangla, have used mountain for various aspects of the plot concerning their narrative of mystery and adventure. As Davis claims in his book “The Geopolitics of the Melting Mountains” (2023), the Himalaya is often presented as peripheral, a remote area, or as a “frontier”. This may be obvious to the visitor, but it is not the case for the people living there. The construction of the region as a frontier through colonial cartography and post-colonial state-making has been vital to the region’s politics. This has fabricated the political identity of the dwellers of the space, creating a narrative of identity marked by a threshold between the outside world and the integral space of the locale. This threshold becomes the third space, further marginalising the locale and the people, flora and fauna of the space. “The history of state-making in the region was informed by colonial understandings of mountains as ‘natural borders’ and of Himalayan peoples as insufficiently ‘advanced’ to govern their own affairs” (Davis, 2023). This infantilization of the dwellers of the Himalayas finds its reflection in the literature of the respective nations sharing their boundaries in the Himalayas.

### **Literature Review**

Spatial studies examine how space is socially produced, contested, and represented across disciplines, moving beyond static notions of geography to highlight dynamic relations between practices, environments, and cultural imaginaries. Henri Lefebvre’s “production of space” frames spatiality as a triadic interplay of practice, representation, and lived experience, while Edward Soja’s “third space” emphasizes hybridity and simultaneity. Doreen Massey advances a relational view of place as constantly under construction within global networks, and Michel Foucault’s heterotopias reveal spaces of otherness that expose disciplinary architectures. Michel de Certeau’s strategies and tactics show how everyday practices rewrite urban plans, and Homi Bhabha’s postcolonial “third space” situates spatiality within cultural hybridity and identity negotiation. Literary

geography and urban cultural studies extend these frameworks to narrative and media, mapping hierarchies, mobility, and surveillance, while recent work in infrastructure, digital spatialities, and environmental humanities foregrounds logistical architectures, planetary scales, and nonhuman agencies. Together, these strands converge on the idea that space is relational, layered, and ethically charged, shaping visibility, movement, and voice. The spatial analysis of the locales in various novels, including imaginary ones, has been examined. The rural locales exploited by Agatha Christie have been studied as well. Yet, the locales and the spatial narrative of Indian detective fiction need to be examined; thus, understanding the relationship between the detective, narrator, and the space of function will also help in understanding its impact and the influence of the representation on readers. One of the most famous series of Indian detective fiction is the Feluda series, created by Satyajit Ray.

The scholarship on Satyajit Ray's Feluda detective fiction consistently highlights its role in indigenizing the genre within the Bengali cultural milieu while simultaneously engaging with global detective traditions. Mukherjee's study emphasises how Ray localised Western tropes by embedding Feluda in the *bhadralok* ethos, thereby making the detective figure accessible to younger readers and culturally resonant within Bengal. Ghosh extends this argument by situating Feluda as Ray's most significant contribution to the development of Indian detective fiction, underscoring his originality in comparison with Sherlock Holmes and his enduring influence on later narratives. Hota's comparative analysis of Byomkesh Bakshi and Feluda further demonstrates how both characters resist colonial frameworks, with Feluda embodying modernity, intellectual sharpness, and a distinctly postcolonial sensibility. Taken together, these works reveal Feluda as a hybrid figure—at once a continuation of global detective archetypes and a uniquely Indian creation—whose narratives bridge adult and children's literature, affirm cultural identity, and expand the scope of South Asian detective fiction. The scope to analyse the narrative

of space and the understanding of otherness and marginalisation of locales is vibrant and will definitely help in situating the stories in the context of the broader lens of representation.

## **Discussion**

The gaze of any traveller defines the sense of belonging or otherness. As Lacan explains in his theory, the gaze that objectifies a body, the gaze of a tourist through romanticising, objectifies the place. This objectification creates a third space, which is not necessarily the real portrayal of the place. This portrayal also creates a performative image of the scape, which fits with the romantic imagination of the viewer. The detective fiction of Feluda set in the mountains creates a similar image of these places while neglecting the realist representation of these spaces, which further creates a sense of otherness among the readers of the plains or urban locale and the dwellers of these hilly terrains.

The narrative of the first story of the Feluda series, *Danger in Darjeeling*, Feludar Goindagiri (1965–66), is set in the hilly town of Darjeeling, in northern Bengal. It is particular about the stories set in the hilly regions that the name plays a spatial role. In the case of this story being the first of the Feluda series, the title did not intend to highlight Darjeeling as the focus of the titular narrative had to be the detective himself, yet the English translation by Gopa Majumdar, published by Penguin, had Darjeeling incorporated in the title following the tradition of Feluda stories. This title also ignites the inquisitiveness of the readers, which eventually hints towards the notion of othering. While stories based in and around Kolkata do not need to be titled with Kolkata in its name, as the focus primarily remains on the crime and the mystery related to it, for instance, “The Key”, published in Bangla as *Samaddarer Chabi* (1974) or “The Magical Mystery”, *Indrajal Rahasya* (1986). The story is set in Mumbai, then Bombay, which is also named “The Bandits of Bombay”, *Bombaiyer Bombete* (1976), which also refers to the othering of the place, as Bombay remained a place of

significance as the financial capital of the nation. “The Emperor’s Ring” or *Badshahi Angthi* (1977), set in Lucknow, does not include Lucknow in its title, as the aristocratic world here serves to create the required inquisitiveness. In this particular story, a character, Tinkori Babu, mentions the change in the climate of Darjeeling, but fails to point out the greater cause. ““Yes, but the air, I’ve noticed, isn’t as cool and fresh as one might have expected” (Ray, Majumdar, 2003). Tinkori Babu also uses Darjeeling as a summer retreat. The British Indian government took away Dorjee Ling from the then Sikkim king, through a treaty and monetary deals. This district of a hill station faced various ethnic and political disputes among the indigenous Lepchas, the Newars and Bhutias from the neighbouring states of Nepal and Bhutan. The identity of these tribes was overlooked, and the hill station was made into a retreat and a buffer for the British Indian government. Ray’s character, following similar instincts look at Darjeeling through a similar gaze, and does not really indulge in the discourse of indigenous belongings.

While another of Feluda’s stories, “Trouble in Gangtok”, *Gangtok e Gondogol* (1970), highlights the otherness of the narrative space in various ways, the narrator, Tapes, does not seem to acknowledge the presence of the region’s dwellers as his fellow, but rather looks up to them in awe. This also highlights the tension of a coloniser’s instinct, although it is not performed in the same way. The narration of the place begins in a way that makes it seem replaceable by any other hill station, such as Darjeeling. The very notion of looking at a space isolated from the living beings dwelling in it and their experiences. A vital character in the story, Sasadhar Bose, states that he loves Gangtok, and he further explains the scenery of the place. The valleys, the hills, the rivers and whatnot. Although he points out the poor condition of the road, his description and the reason behind loving Gangtok boil down to the romanticisation of the place, which further accentuates the idea of the third space created by the intersection of the real space and the imaginary understanding of the space in the narrator’s mind. Also, the

landslides are referred to as “a nuisance”. Landslides are also mentioned in his another story set in the mountains, “Crime in Kedarnath”, published in Bangla as “Ebar Kando Kedarnathe” (1984), again with no mention of human interferences in the ecology of the mountains.

The mountain is affected by the continuous capitalistic interference of the anthropocentric process. This increases the risks of depletion of the mountain ecology and also impacts the lives of human beings living in the vicinity of these zones. Although the history of ecology is ancient, the awareness of man’s dependence on nature has been noted, but man as the maker or unmaker of ecology had not been studied as late as the 1980s (Arnold and Guha, 95). The lack of this perception is prominent in the narrative of Mr Bose. He further speaks about the leaves needed for his chemical that are available in Sikkim alone. While this speaks for the importance of the vegetation, the capitalist gaze of the traveller remains prominent. He also mentions a flood that had destroyed buildings, structures and bridges. Yet, he fails to recognise the damage that is caused by anthropocentric, capitalistic endeavours. In the story set in Kedarnath, the author mentions the changing landscape, the numerous new houses and the advertisements painted on these walls. On one hand this pictures the changing scape of the hilly terrains; on the other hand, it fails to explain the cause of such constructions, and the eventual aftermath faced by the natural ecology. These stories were written by the author primarily for young readers. In contrast, the author acknowledged his goal of educating young readers about various places and tidbits of science, but he failed to highlight the significance of ecological balance. The exoticization of the mountain terrains of the Himalayas also becomes prominent through another instance. While Feluda pays equal significance to the pronunciation of the names of Kanchenjunga of the Himalayas and Mont Blanc of the Alps, highlighting his connection and respect for the native culture. His narrative of alienating Kathmandu differs from that of London in “Feluda in

London”. While flying down from Bombay to London, the trio encountered the Alps through their aeroplane windows. The narrator said, “I looked out of the window, but there was nothing to see except the snow-covered Alps” (Ray, Majumdar, 2003). While the view of the Himalayan range through the aeroplane while flying to Kathmandu from Kolkata was met with exceptional praise. “Within ten minutes of leaving Calcutta, I could see Kanchenjunga glittering on our right—a sight as rare as it was breathtaking. This was followed by glimpses of several other famous peaks, each of which, I knew, held an irresistible attraction for adventurous mountaineers” (Ray, Majumdar, 2003).

This difference in the expression of emotions on encountering two though not equally yet significant enough mountain ranges points towards the exoticization of one, evidently. This can be further problematized to understand the negligence that ecology, ecological history or environmental protection faced, particularly in South Asia. While the indigenous folklores like Panchatantra, Hitopadesha, Thakumar Jhuli and others highlighted the significance of nature and transformed nature into various forms of deities and spirits to instil a sense of protection and belongingness, the aristocratic hunting bouts and the colonial perspective of considering forests as wastage of lands, marked capitalistic endeavours instilled a sense of anthropocentric arrogance and capitalistic curiosity specifically in the urban spaces. This led to a violation of boundaries and further destruction of ecology. The growing population and the dependence on industry and urban spaces further disengaged the population from nature and increased the sense of otherness and marginalisation. In the narrator’s point of view, the “peoples” of Gangtok find a passing reference. He mentions them as objects of gaze alongside balconies, pots, plants, etc. He mentions them only according to their races, as “The people in the streets, I knew, were not from Sikkim alone. Many of them were from Nepal, Bhutan or Tibet” (Ray, Majumdar, 2004). Although, this can be contrasted with the descriptions of the people dwelling in the northern

Himalayan regions of Kedarnath. Here, the plot is well supplied with characters speaking Hindi, belonging to the hills and indulging in the regular culture of the space. This proves the situation in favour of the author, that the particular mention of the people of the Sikkim and other eastern Himalayan regions may not be particularly inspired from a racist sentiment. But the distinction of the race in the indigenous community of these regions might have raised the issue of the identity of certain characters from the stories set in the eastern Himalayas to be derived from their racial group. The particular mention of the honesty of the people of Sikkim also builds another aspect of racism. In his 1979 book *Gender Advertisements*, Erving Goffman coined the term “infantilising”. The book deals with the portrayal of adult women in a childlike manner through various media. This act of treating someone for a prolonged period as much younger than they actually are. This dehumanises and questions the autonomy of particular individuals. This infantilisation also happened based on race, leading to slavery. While the story narrates the dwellers of the hill station as honest and quite incapable of committing many crimes, this also, in a certain way, infantilises them based on their descent and race. The overall plot of the story is almost silent on the realistic representation of Sikkim’s lives, and individuals are identified primarily by their race. Although the racial ethnic identity of the dwellers of the Himalayan states becomes crucial as these groups, like Tibetans, Lepchas, Nepalis and Bhutias, have a history of conflict and confederation, one might also consider the mention of the driver as a “Nepali driver” to recognise his ethnic identity while also othering him from the middle-class Bengali, who remains the imagined reader of these texts.

Scholars studying detective fiction set in Appalachia have identified the narrative arc. They claim that while the Appalachians provide the plot for mystery fiction, the authors of this fiction engage with the locale’s culture and indulge themes of folk culture, mystery, myth, and locale-specific narrative in their plots. Although

the locale-specific blend of the plot includes the marginalised locale in the broader landscape, the very mystery and gothic elements linked to the hilly terrains create a sense of otherness. In the case of Feluda stories, the indigenous culture of the locale finds a voice, yet the voice of the narrator, who is an urban dweller, remains pivotal.

### **Conclusion**

Satyajit Ray remained influential across generations, not only for those who read Bangla books and watch Bangla films, but also for those who do not understand Bangla, through various translations. Leela Majumdar also mentions this in her essay, “Feluchand”. Interestingly, the stories of Feluda go on to instruct readers about the harmful effects of substance abuse, such as LSD and weed. They somehow fail to recognize the ecological significance and balance. While pointing out the importance of fresh air in less-polluted areas, the stories draw attention to

the fact that pollution makes any place unpleasant. They refrain from shifting the gaze from the anthropocentric perspective and from understanding the narrative of the abiotic elements and the dwellers of the mountainous locale.

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