

Beyond physical realms

THE word “place”, geographically speaking, can be defined as an area or a region, which possesses some characteristic in the context of pre-conceived ideas, local conditions or unique events. But the term has varied meaning, in its myriad nuances, when it comes to literature, films, music, architecture and photography. A place does not revolve around just geography but it has other aspects as well and its uniqueness is affected by its history, language, society, time and inner conflicts. Every place goes through a course of varied changes in terms of development or destruction as politics and other societal ideas remarkably mould it into a distinctive fabric. This idea was discussed at a recent event in Kolkata, which was organised by the British Council in collaboration with the Writers’ Centre, Norwich, UK.

Place when it comes to be defined as a dwelling, encapsulates the concept of someone’s existence in that particular region. The thought made Peter D McDonald, professor of English and related studies, Oxford University, to look upon it with “visceral scepticism”. He took up the examples of Rabindranath Tagore and James Joyce and said that in their works, dwelling in the sense of place, refers to the idea of ownership. But a particular street is different from another while the same goes for two cities. The more one’s ambit of consideration

The idea of ‘place’ was given much thought at a discussion in Kolkata organised jointly by the British Council and Writers’ Centre, Norwich, UK, says neelabh raj

increases, the more differences crop up but underlining everything is a combining factor. To that, Amit Chaudhari, eminent writer and musician, said, “Place can be provincial and yet cosmopolitan.”

Away from the physical realm, a place can exist in the mind, case in point being James Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake*, which tells a story in a non-linear

narrative of a space in the world of dreams. In the famous soliloquy in William Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, the term *born* refers to the land of the dead. Novelist Anjali Josph referred to a character in one of Sunil Gangopadhyay’s works for whom a place of existence is not the room he shares with his brother but rather a small box where he keeps his possessions. The box totally subverts the perceived idea of what a place should be like but consequently conforms to the notion of a room being a personal haven. What is obvious is that the realms of place in that tale completely overturn the concepts of physical dimensions of size.

Even estrangement from a place colours one’s ideas about it as evidenced by the abundance of narratives concerning the same in post-modern and modern literature. Celebrated and ostracised in equal measure, writer Salman Rushdie believes in the integration of cultures and identities and goes on to denounce the idea of a nation, culture or even home. Living in London, the settings for most of his works are India where he was born. He refutes the idea of being on exile and accepts both places with their cultures and its identities. This further begs the propensity of a writer or filmmaker creating “fictional places” in which they put ideas or events, which otherwise wouldn’t have made sense in a “real” setting – utopian or dystopian worlds give wings to an artist’s creative expression.

Vesna Goldsworthy, novelist and professor of creative writing, University of East Anglia, threw light on the matter by saying, “Young Mexican writers mostly

write about other places such as Australia because they are tired of stereotypical renderings of their nation.” Writing about a place is affected by how one perceives the region and that varies from one individual to the next. The advent of technology has allowed one to gain a picture of a place. However, the same place can be interpreted in completely disparate ways. Both Gregory David Roberts’ *Sbantaram* and Suketu Mehta’s *Maximum City*, give details of life in Mumbai. The former though is autobiographical in nature and sets a starkly different tone to that of the latter. Similarly, the London of Charles Dickens was quite apart from Virginia Woolf’s view of the city. In a way, the setting of a place conveys to readers, the ideas at play in a writer’s mind.

That aspect is also informed by the descriptive style of a particular writer. Like, in the gothic novels of yore, Transylvania has always been portrayed as a gloomy and dark place and as somewhere people wouldn’t wish to stay. But reality is completely different. However, such interpretations elevate the possibilities of a lived reality. Time is another important factor that greatly affects the idea of place. According to Goldsworthy, time can change not just a place but a whole country. Belonging to Serbia, she became nostalgic about the place of her childhood. She said that the bombing by NATO in Yugoslavia and the passage of time had greatly changed the country. “It is not what it was before,” she said. Even if one looks at Kolkata, the city isn’t the same as Calcutta.

To sum up, one can easily come to the conclusion that a place is really an amalgamation of completely independent and often, conflicting ideas. All great works of art move beyond pre-conceived notions of geography and frame a comprehensive construct by infusing it with the creator’s individual quirks.



An illustration from Charles Dickens’ *Bleak House* by HK Browne.