

## Writing Space, Writing Anxiety: Colonial Writing the Landscape of Disquiet in the Nineteenth Century Eastern Frontier of Bengal

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### Abstract

*Institution of new spaces was a vital imperative of the empire. Colonialism produced new geographies of power and modes of colonial knowledge regularly participated in the production of space. Alongside their production at a material level, geographies were also produced discursively, frequently drawing from politically succinct metaphors. Very often the metaphorically construed geographies foreshadowed the construction of the material. In what is understood as the northeast frontier of colonial India also, the arrival of colonialism was accompanied by the inception of a distinct spatial rationality. The present article examines the production of space in select colonial texts produced in the nineteenth century eastern frontier of Bengal. Colonial knowledge produced the Eastern frontier along a range of dominant tropes. With an awareness that the wide-ranging manifestations of the new spatiality cannot be justifiably pigeonholed into a singular expression, the present article focuses on the discursive construction of landscape along a range of tropes in *Travels and Adventures in the province of Assam (1855)*, a nineteenth century colonial text by Major John Butler. The idea is to explore, if there is any, the recurrence of tropes, their potential political undertone and to verify whether seemingly innocuous acts of narration, in actuality, are implicated in projects of domination.*

**Keywords:** Space, landscape, metaphors, frontier, nineteenth century

Colonialism is not merely a material act. It is regularly accompanied and assisted by forms of knowledge and groups of ideas, that constitute its ideological mainstay (Cohn, 23). Certain Ideas generated within the historical context termed as colonialism seem to cast their powerful shadow in the way, what is defined as the Northeast India, imagined and understood as a socio-political and political space. The incorporation of the

multiplicity of spaces that the region historically stood for, into grids of radically rationalized and instrumental episteme was the most important legacy of colonialism in nineteenth century northeast frontier of Bengal. The dominant registers of what is considered as scientific rationality as well as a rhetoric of sentiment seem to co-opt in the articulation of this distinct territorial consciousness that underwrote the

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production of colonial space in the region. The inventory of ideas and images, deployed repeatedly across the studied texts draw attention to powerful ideological undercurrents, that came together to shape acts of imagining and expressing actual and potential spaces in the region. The present paper aims at understanding space production in nineteenth century colonial discourse in the region by examining landscape as a vital component of colonial space in Major John Butler's narrative *Travels and Adventures in the province of Assam* (1855).

Major John Butler came to Assam in 1837 to serve East India Company. His memoir *Travels and Adventures in the Province of Assam* (1855) is an early instance of colonial writing in the northeast frontier. The text can be seen as one of the earliest discursive attempts to construct the region as frontier space.

### **Contextualizing Production of (Colonial) Space**

Space is a social construct (Lefebvre). It is political, partial and ideological. Construction of space is implicated in political projects of control (7, 26). Hegemonic political powers produce dominated space through highly interested employment of knowledge which works to implicate newly produced space as an instrument of power (Lefebvre 9, 11, 27). It is through constant generation of social space that hegemonic powers pursue validity and claims of legitimacy (Lefebvre 34).

Production of space, thus, is essentially implicated in historically specific codes of space (Lefebvre 17). It is through spatial practices that social space is proposed, produced, institutionalized and mastered. Representations of space is an ideological act (Lefebvre 41), aimed at intervening and modifying and manipulation of lived spaces space (L42, 59). It is generated out of a rationalized and theorized form serving as an instrument for the violation of an existing space (151-152).

Colonial space is a form of 'abstract space' (Lefebvre 49). Homogenizing, isotropic and uniform it constantly dissolves and appropriate preexisting social spaces, sponsors politically convenient modes of spatialities entailing logic of property in space (Lefebvre 57). As political product colonial space is strategic in nature (Lefebvre 84) and always implicated in the will to power. The politicization of space by colonialism consists of constant transformation of non-instrumental pre-colonial space into 'Instrumental space' (Lefebvre 51, 306). Through constant ideological generation of instrumental space that colonialism continually validates and reproduces itself as a form of hegemonic power. As a form of 'political, strategic space' (Lefebvre 94) colonial space is produced by acts of partitioning and enumerating things within space (Lefebvre 90) regularly employing figurative strategies of reduction, 'metaphorization', 'metonymization' (JanMohamed 1995, 21).

Colonial space is constructed through metaphorization and anaphorization. Regular employment of imaginary elements, symbols constitute the ideological sub-text of textual space production. Apart from being implicated from well-entrenched Eurocentric episteme, these tropes and assumptions have violently colonizing propensities. Colonial metaphorization and metonymization frequently pose as visual observation justifying claims of possession. The reduction of a fully alive social space to simplistic ideological statements is effected very often through the construction of landscape. Production of landscapes is directed by functional imperatives. Examination of textual landscape confirms the implication of the travelling gaze in colonial mandate of economic and military incentives. Narrating landscapes, the colonial gaze constantly topples between desire and fear.

### **Theorizing Landscape:**

Conventionally viewed as a genre of art, landscape is a particular historical formation associated with European imperialism. John Barrell defines landscape as based on that 'which could be seen all at one glance, from a fixed point of view' (1972, 1). Originally constituted as a genre of painting associated with a new way of seeing landscape emerges in the seventeenth century and reaches its peak in the nineteenth century (Mitchell 7). It is a medium of exchange between the human and the natural, the self and the other

(Mitchell 5). As natural space mediated by culture, landscape is both a represented and presented space, both a signifier and a signified, both a frame and what a frame contains, both a real space and its simulacrum, both a package and the commodity inside the package (5). It is medium of cultural expression, a vast network of cultural codes rather than as a specialized genre of painting (Mitchell 14). It has often been theorized as a 'cultural image that structures or symbolizes surroundings' (Daniels and Cosgrove 1994: 1) and is constituted through representations. Barnes and Duncan views landscape as a cultural production (1992, 5-6).

Within critical discourse landscape has increasingly been viewed as a product of distinct social formations and a carrier of ideology (Mitchell 7). The critical understanding of landscape as a social construct finds articulation not only in key contemporary thinkers on landscape like Denis Cosgrove and Stephen Daniels, but is detectable even in important earlier generation thinkers on landscape like Raymond Williams (1975) and John Berger (1972).

In 'Prospect, perspective and the evolution of the landscape idea' (1985) Denis Cosgrove points out linear perspective as the basic foundation for understanding the landscape way of seeing. More than as a historically constituted art genre, Landscape is viewed as 'visualizations on the basis of perspective' suffused by connotations of

authority, control and ownership (Wyle 58). Cosgrove defines landscape as:

A way of seeing, a composition and structuring of the world so that it may be appropriated by a detached individual spectator to whom an illusion of order and control is offered through the composition of space according to the certainties of geometry (Cosgrove 1985, 55).

The critical materialist position on landscape represented by Cosgrove highlights the complicities between the authority of perspective, its production of a detached viewing subject and the production of land as private property (Wylie 59). That way, it underscores the relations between perspectival vision manifest through textual representation and the materiality of property relations within capitalism. Perspective allows the eye 'absolute mastery of space' (Cosgrove 48) and renders space visually 'the property of the observer' (Cosgrove 49). That way landscape way of seeing involves 'control and domination over space as an absolute, objective entity; its transformation into the property of the individual or the state' (Cosgrove 46). Cosgrove (58) points to the desires to impose 'order', 'proportional control' inherent in the landscape idea. In *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape* (1984) Cosgrove comments:

"The landscape idea represents a way of seeing- a way in which some Europeans have represented to themselves and to others the world about them and their relationships with it, and through which

they have commented on social relations" (Cosgrove 1998 [1984] 1)

Landscape is an ideological construct embodying socially and economically determined values (Bermingham 1984: 3, Mitchell 1994). Even while conveyed through its materiality, the meanings encoded in landscapes endorse the interests of power in subtle ways (Cresswell 140). As Cosgrove puts it:

"Landscape, I shall argue, is an ideological concept. It represents a way in which certain classes of people have signified themselves and their world through their imagined relationship with nature and through which they have underlined and communicated their own social role and that of others with respect to external nature" (Cosgrove 1984: 15).

Landscape in both its material and artistic forms, is often a political instrument in the arsenal of the new bourgeoisie for asserting and claiming control over space (Cosgrove 1984, 85). It is an important part of the practice of power (Duncan and Ley 233). W J T Mitchell's *Landscape and Power* (1994) argues that it must be seen as operating to 'embody, conceal and support forms of power' (105) (Malpas 108).

In comparison to terms of space and place, landscape is marked by a certain particularity. It is always organized, structured and crafted which are cultural acts. Landscape is a means of perceiving the world derived from vision and the imposition of a visual structure. Landscape is basically linked to

perception and applicable to multiple scales; landscape of the body and landscapes of possibilities. As a metaphor, landscape need not be tied to a material form and can be seen as a means of interpreting the world and making it into an identifiable image.

### **Colonial Landscape: Through Imperial Eyes**

In colonial situations, landscapes are often discursively construed as cultural instrument to naturalize European superiority. Colonial landscapes are constructs of voyeuristic speculation and subsequently a constant generation of desirability, often ensuing from a projected abundance of nature and deficit of culture in the landscapes of the colony. Natives were lumped with landscape under the rubric of environment- the pre-colonial landscape had to be pristine, natural- a wilderness empty of human modification (Sluyter 12). Mary Louis Pratt (1992) examines the construction of colonized landscapes in imperial travel writing. Colonized landscapes in colonial travel writing is formulated as uninhabited, unpossessed, and un-historicized, empty space (Pratt 147). Landscapes serve the political imperatives of dismissing native claims over space and imposing a much-desired order on a supposedly order-less natural space (Beinart & Hughes 78) facilitating acts of appropriation. It ensue that colonial landscape is an ideological construct (Wahab 2010: 15) produced through a process of uneven positioning between the colonizer and the ‘colonial

space’ (Wahab, 21) and as an instrument imposing visual order over non-European spaces (Wahab 12) they participate in naturalizing claims of colonizing.

Essentially underscoring the will to power (Wahab 36), colonial landscapes are often constructed through ‘repeated rehearsal of tropes and scenes’ (Wahab 39). Martin (2000) points to imperial landscape tropes such as the picturesque and the romantic frequently employed in nineteenth century European colonial travel writings (21), (Wahab 12). The colonial gaze sought to systematically invent and manage the other (Doring 2002, 23). Besides sponsoring the myth of emptiness that validates claims of control (Sluyter 8) colonial landscapes are also instruments of surveillance and control (Sluyter 15).

The construction of space as landscape is embedded in the ‘colonial imagination of domination’. Textual representations of landscapes carry out the visual appropriation of the colony into claims of authority (Sutton, 7) very often as potential ‘beneficiary’ of colonization (Sutton, 8). It involved a constant playing out of nature-culture dichotomy. In landscape, aesthetics and utility merged and complemented one another, and the un-colonized land was the welcoming recipient of adjustment and improvement (Sutton, 8).

It is clear that in the colonial context, landscape serves a political function, complementing the imposition of colonizers understanding of space onto the

colonized. To colonize a place is to undermine its very character, to redefine it. Landscape as a structure of perception was deployed as a means to enforce a certain definition of territory, legislating the relationship between the self and the world. It is a cultural mechanism involved in political domination. Attempts at imposing clear, determinate boundaries, privatizing the spaces of the colony, replacing space with actual property, are essentially pursued through landscape as a trope.

Landscape construction is always a fantastical acquisition of colonial territory, and therefore landscapes are parallel acts of territorializing. Orders of legitimate expropriation are enabled by representing landscapes in shadows of ideologies (Sutton, 12). Production of colonizable space (Sutton, 58) and its appropriation into the 'regime of invigilation/surveillance' (Sutton 73) is accomplished through landscapes.

The colonized landscape emerged through the 'scripting/ writing' of rulers' ideology over it and a subsequent 'Incursion of imperial governance' (Sutton, 1). Production of 'imperial landscape' is pursued through extension of bureaucratic control over space (Sutton, 3). Paul Carter reveal's imperial Historiography and the reduction of space to 'stage' European narratives (10). The un-colonized landscape is reduced to a marker of difference. Colonising spatial imagination relegates 'other' landscapes as the embodiment of the *time* before

colonization (Sutton 4). Construction of space as landscape is also pursued through contemplative and legislative imagination (Sutton 4). Dismissal of indigenous agrarian landscapes and visualizing new ones- All unoccupied land was designated 'wasteland' (Sutton 53). In colonial juridical discourse, wasteland was the absolute property of the state. Colonial surveys identified colonizable landscapes (Sutton 55). Production of micro-geographies and terrains of strategic value and creation of definitive wasteland maps (Sutton, 56) Extension of the category of 'villages' in the hills was a revenue and administrative ploy (Sutton, 75).

The idea of Landscape, as used in the study, goes beyond the formal meaning of 'scene' and is defined here as a summary of a particular space, a natural and social composite, that was identified for the purpose of expressing some form of jurisdiction: appropriative, scientific, ethnographic, or conservationist. The village, the forest, the settlement and the plantation are all landscape forms: apparently self-evident, coherent and communicable material realities. Their predictive and speculative aspects enable them as landscape (Sutton, 9). In the colonial context, landscapes were not descriptions, but applied ideas; their articulation was inseparable from some proposed intervention (Sutton, 9). Forms of appropriation- sometimes the idealization of the landscape claim was based on rhetoric of similarity, recognition and nostalgia.

### **Landscape as Trope: Butler and the Rhetoric of Un-ease**

The trope of the wild : Space to be Tamed

Integrating travel narrative into travel narrative Butler's text *Travels* (1855) constructs the landscape of the frontier as a desolate and wild space. It fabricates a paradoxical aura of dystopian unease and utopian temptation by constantly playing upon the trope of the wild, enframing the frontier landscapes into the idea of the wild. The metaphor of the 'wild' seems to be employed to fulfill the ideological function of producing colonizable space. In those accounts the wild seems to convey more connotations of threat and hence a space for colonial domination. It is overwhelmingly through metaphors of the wild that Butler enframes the space as a landscape. Butler's travel, structured like a *picaresque*, is overshadowed by perennial presence of dystopian hardships and trial. In him, the northeast emerges as an unfriendly, inhospitable, unattended-wild frontier. It illustrates a dominant colonial episteme to enframing the eastern frontier as the threatening, wild other, a dominant trend in earliest writings. The metaphor was used differently in reference to the plains and the hills. In the context of the plains the term was used chiefly to its natural landscape, whereas in the context of the hills, it came to be increasingly applied to the inhabitants. In both the ways, the idea was instrumental in the ideological construction of landscapes. Enframed in the dichotomy of hill-plain, the hills appear as a wild ethnic territory.

In text after text, the imperial eyes constructed the hill terrains surrounding the valleys as a threat to civilization

This book is intended to describe the habits, customs and manners of the remaining wild tribes of the hills (Butler, Preface)

In the texts, the idea 'wild' functions as powerful ideological statement on the cultural landscape. In fact, the colonizing potency of the term derives from its metaphoric propensities. The employment of generic descriptive words 'wild tribes of the hills' assigns the landscape a strategic aura of inconsequentiality. 'Tribes' and 'hills' are powerful generic expressions to essentialize, ethnicize, the landscape as a social space. Subsequent textual evidence illustrate that In nineteenth century colonial writings the hills emerge only as wild landscape, that too more as a distinct cultural category.

Trope of Desolation: Space to Overcome

Landscape is both natural and cultural. Colonial knowledge, while documenting the natural, regularly made comments on the cultural. The construction of the frontier as an 'empty space' is further reinforced by tropes of desolation and an anticipation of constant threat.

Again, it fell to my lot to take up my residence with my family at the desolate and remote station of Saikwah (Butler)

"The forest was of precisely the same character as yesterday, not a vestige of any habitation or a human being was seen

between Mohung Dehooa and Dheemahpoor, a distance of thirty miles. A more dreary and desolate wilderness I seldom traversed in any part of Assam. It seemed totally devoid of man, beasts, or birds; a death-like stillness everywhere prevailed, broken only by the occasional barking or halloo of the ooluck or ape... we felt little depressed, and all hailed with joy the Dhunseeree river at this season of the year about thirty yards wide, and navigable for small canoes till December, as far as Dheemahpoor" (Butler, 17).

Frequent agonies of boredom reinforce the aura of emptiness and gloom through which the frontier landscape emerge in the text. Whereas landscape is a visual phenomenon, a place is an act of bodily performance. As a perceived space, the frontier materializes as an unexciting, lifeless space, not only through the agency of the eyes, but through other sensations. Bodily experiences confirm the perceived dystopian impressions, constantly augmented by a perennial shadow of apprehension. It is the frequent passage/transfer between the 'perceived', 'conceived' and the 'lived' dimension and the confirmation of the perceived by the lived experience of the body that makes supposedly more empirical genres like travelogues powerful tools of space-production.

"A dreary trip of six week's tracking up against a rapid stream, with heavy west-country boats, brought us to our destination. We were fortunate in meeting with a small bungalow, made of bamboos,

grass, and reed walls; but it was void of the luxury of a door. Having frequently before felt the discomfort of being without windows... I had learnt experience" (Butler, 2).

#### Trope of the Peril: Space to Win

It is primarily through impressions of desolation, distress and danger, that the frontier literally emerges as a space of ordeal; a trial-ground, a colonizable territory. For instance, terms like 'a howling, desolate wilderness' 'perils from the climate, wild beasts and demi- savages in the hills' (Butler 3, 4) conveys the frightening face of the colony.

That a soldier should be exposed and suffer privation is a matter of course, but when I saw a lady and child put to these shifts... in what has been truly termed a howling, desolate wilderness (Butler, 3).

The Principal Assistant of a district... exposed to many perils from the climate, wild beasts and demi- savages in the hills (Butler, 4)

M L Pratt in *Imperial Eyes* highlights the trick of constructing empty, depopulated landscape in colonial writings arguing that it was a necessary pretext for colonization. Driven forward by economic desires, the imperial eyes produce the landscape as a 'resource frontier.' In the studies texts the colonizing gaze keeps on surveying spaces of opportunity, creating cartography of prospect. If emptying the landscape of human presence in most occasions was an effective tool of colonizing space, so was

the constant suggestion of the absence of signs of human effort and industry. For instance, the overwhelming sights of 'Jungle' becomes a powerful signifier of native indolence. Not merely a wild, unattended landscape, the jungle, despite its challenging ambience, is also a temptation. Constant inscription of impulses of desire and apprehension characterizes the construction colonial landscapes.

In the vicinity of Rajapo-mah great numbers of tea-trees were observed growing luxuriantly in the jungle, some twelve or fourteen feet high; but we did not discover that the Nagahs ever drink tea (24).

The two first marches to Koteeatoilee and Dubboka, about twenty four miles, were through a level country, studded with flourishing and populous villages and gardens, and intersected by streams and large lakes. We passed through immense sheets of fine-rice cultivation, and here and there small patches of sugar-cane (10).

Trope of Savagery: Space to be Civilized

As a landscape, the frontier also emerges through the trope of disruption. One can refer to the landscape of hills. The colonial gaze regularly perceived the hills as an unruly space sheltering the forces of disruption. Framed around the dichotomy of civilization/ savagery, the hills were the dangerous 'other'.

"I had scarcely assumed charge of the division; orders suddenly came enjoining me to be prepared to conduct a military

expedition into the Angahmee Nagah country bordering on the territory of Muneepoor and Burmah. The object of the expedition was to meet the Angahmee Nagah chiefs, and by a conciliatory intercourse, to prepare them to co-operate with me in repressing their annual murderous and marauding incursions against our more peaceable subjects; to survey and map the tract of country in question, and to open a regular communication with Muneepoor and Now-Gong, through the Angahmee country via Dheemahpoor, Sumookhoo-Ting, Poplongmaee, and Yang, which would facilitate trade, improve the condition of the hill tribes, and eventually lead to the abandonment of savage habits, and the peaceable and prosperous settlement of this barbarous tribe" (Butler, 9).

The Trope of the Blank, the Empty: Space to be Inscribed

M L Pratt has highlighted the trick of creating empty, depopulated landscape. Depopulated or empty landscape was the necessary pretext for colonization. It is possible to note that the imperial gaze is driven forward by economic desires, producing the landscape as a 'resource frontier.' Chasing the capitalist vanguard's gaze, one finds the apparent inconsistencies in the imperial minds' conceptualization of the colony. Throughout the texts, the travelling gaze is seen to be surveying spaces of opportunity, creating cartography of prospect. If emptying the landscape of human presence in most occasions was an

effective tool of colonizing space, so was the constant suggestion of the absence of signs of human effort and industry. The seemingly innocuous trope 'Jungle' (67) becomes a powerful signifier of native indolence. Not merely a wild, unattended landscape, the jungle, despite its challenging ambience, is also a temptation.

Trope of Decay: Space to be Restored

David Spurr in *The Rhetoric of Empire* (1993) points to strategies of negation and insubstantialization as tricks of constructing colonized landscapes. Instances of the same could be seen in Butler where an ever-present unwelcoming and depressing ambience of the frontier landscape adds to the general aura of desolation, reinforced by repelling, offensive impressions and sights of poverty and destitution. Especially it is the tribal territory which is always described in terms of repulsive impressions.

"Our path was rough, winding, and difficult, through thick tree forest and high grass or reeds unvaried by the signs of cultivation or villages...after wading through a very high reed jungle, we at last came to his dwelling, a wretched grass hut situated on the edge of a tank choked with rank weeds, in the middle of an extensive and poorly cultivated grass plain. A few straggling huts, inhabited by Cacharees and dependants of Senaputtee, formed all that could be called a village; a few pigs, fowls, and ducks, were wandering about, but there were no signs of comfort around

any of the huts; no gardens or enclosures; all appeared poverty-stricken, as well as sickly, in this wilderness of jungle" (12).

"The whole route was through a dark, damp, chilly, gloomy forest with small undulating hills, and neither the sky nor sun was seen throughout the day. On reaching our camping ground, we cut down the jungle, and quickly erected, little sheds or huts...and secured the camp against any sudden surprise, we retired to rest" (16).

Colonial landscapes are traceable in the imperative instincts of desire and fear. The domestic space also became subject to the imperial gaze. If the natural and cultural landscape of the hill space was expressed through the dominant trope of the wild, the domestic landscape was one of filth and squalor. Repulsive feelings, textually suggested by reference to filth and dirt marked the white colonial response to the micro-spaces of the hills. It was another trick towards geography of fear and repulsion and both could be read as rationalizations of colonial intervention. For instance Butler's text offers the Naga household as an abominable space. Spirit tub, huge rice basket induces induce repelling impressions in the imperial sensibility and transforms them into metaphors of 'otherness.'

"Planks of wood are arranged round the fire on the ground for seats, and fowls, pigs and children, men and women, seen to have free access, the filthy state of their dwelling can, therefore, be imagined. In

front of each house large stones are placed, on which the Nagahs delight mornings and evening to sit and sip, with a wooden ladle from a bowl, the most offensive liquor made of rice” (106).

“The houses, though irregularly built, are generally in two lines, the gable ends of each row of houses projecting towards the main street. Into this everything is thrown, and is being the receptacle for the filth of the whole village, consequently the odour is so offensive that it is scarcely possible to remain long in the main road.”

Trope of Anarchy: Space to be Tutored

If the space of civilization was a space of state, the colonial discourse perceived the hills as a space of lawlessness. Repeated reference to occurrence of murder and bloodshed portrays the hills

as an unruly territory of mischievous savagery -

“No regular government can be expected to exist among wild uncivilized tribes, who are ignorant of the use of letters or the art of writing and whose dialects differ and are scarcely intelligible to the tribes on the adjoining hills, and whose leisure time is spent in the diversion of surprising each other in hostile attack, rapine and murder” (Butler, 107).

Butler’s text is a typical instance of the colonial discursive pursuit to asserting the racial and civilizational superiority of the ‘White Man’ carving out of military and economic space was premised on production of epistemic nullity. This nullity is evident in constructing landscape through a politically crafted discourse of disquiet.

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