



# The Sensory Landscape of Andaman: A Polysensorial Reading of *Island's End*

Ancy Cyriac<sup>1</sup>, Dr. Jyothimol P<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Assistant Professor, Department of English, BCM College Kottayam, Kerala, India

<sup>2</sup>Professor, Department of English, Baselius College, Kottayam, Kerala, India

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**Abstract**— *Geocriticism is an interdisciplinary approach within literary theory that focuses on the spatial aspects of literature and the relationships between place and literature. A key concept in Geocriticism, polysensoriality stresses the point that the experience of an environment comes from all the senses. The dominance of the visual is challenged as the perception of our environment clearly involves all our senses. Padma Venkatraman's 2011 novel Island's End coordinates several types of spatial perceptions, forming a vast polysensory landscape. The novel is set in the Andaman Islands which situates in the turquoise blue waters of the Bay of Bengal, hundreds of miles east of India. The novel speaks about a native tribal group of the Andaman Islands, and how they survived the 2004 tsunami, which wreaked destruction across the globe. An ancient knowledge of the movement of winds and oceans and a sensitivity to the behaviour of sea birds and island creatures might have warned these native people to flee inland in the nick of time. The paper looks into the soundscape, the smellscape, the tactile kinaesthetic qualities of the Andaman archipelago, vividly portrayed in the novel, leading to the representation of a synesthetic landscape.*



**Keywords**— *Geocriticism, polysensoriality, soundscape, smellscape, touchscape, tastescape.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

The term 'space' enumerates various possibilities and meanings such as physical and imagined space, geographical space, real and fictional space, liminal space, embodied and virtual space and so on. Our engagements with such spaces form our social practices, cultures and ideologies. The spatial turn in modern and postmodern literary theory and criticism is an acknowledgement of the extent to which matters of space, place and mapping had been underrepresented in literary and cultural studies of the past. With the spatial turn in humanities, an aftermath of the Second World War, spatiality has become a key concept in literary and cultural studies. Temporality, that has dominated the prewar period had lost its supremacy, leading to a rereading of space. The obsession with time and history, which imply a fascination with chronology and linearity, has given way to discourses of space. The spatial turn was aided by a new aesthetic sensibility of postmodernism, with a strong theoretical critique provided

by poststructuralism. The essay titled 'Of Other Spaces' written by Michel Foucault in 1967 prophesied that the twentieth century would witness a spatial turn in humanities. The rise of human geography in the 1970s, led by scholars such as David Harvey, Edward Soja and Henry Lefebvre laid the groundwork for an increased focus on spatiality within humanities. Harvey's concept of 'space-time compression' and Soja's idea of 'Third space' introduced new ways of thinking about the interconnectedness of physical, social, and perceived spaces. Spatially oriented literary studies or spatial humanities including literary geography, literary cartography, geophilosophy, geopoetics, geocriticism have helped to reframe contemporary criticism by focusing upon the relations among space, place and literature.

Place is a vital condition of human life on earth. All living organisms are indispensably situated in a certain location and our identity is essentially structured by the

spatiotemporal specificity of a place where we live. According to the Chinese American humanistic geographer Yi-Fu Tuan, place is basically space enriched with human experience and understanding: an organized world of meaning. For Doreen Massey, place is a particular constellation of social relations. Altman and Low define place as a setting to which individuals are emotionally and culturally attached. In Lippard's view place is the locus of desire. A place is suffused with meanings and is thus within the territory of literary criticism. The idea of a place as a construct coming out of the human experience of a landscape or a territory led many humanistic geographers to turn to literature and art, which depend upon the lived experiences of place as they were not available in the more scientific and discipline-specific approach of a geographer. Hence, a place is more than a cartographical dot on the map. A place becomes a complex amalgamation of social, cultural, political and economic conditions that structure the ways an individual sees and understands the place. The term 'sense of place' is the result of so many complexities that encircle human being geographically as well as culturally. The sense of a place can be different to different individuals of the same place given the context of their subject position, their ethnic, social and cultural background. Yi-Fu Tuan says that the sense of a particular place cannot be inherently positive always. So the sense of place is related to those features that render a place with some special or unique characteristics as well as to those that evoke a sense of reliable human attachment or belonging. In anthropology the sense of the place is often seen as 'place attachment'. Place attachment is more than an emotional and cognitive experience that link people to place. The environmental psychologists like Fritz Steele have defined the sense of place as 'the particular experience in a particular setting. David Hummon in his essay 'Community Attachment: Local Sentiment and sense of Place' has given a sociological definition of the term:

By 'Sense of Place', I mean people's subjective perception of their environments and their more or less conscious feelings about those environments. Sense of place is inevitably dual in nature, involving both an interpretive perspective on the environment and an emotional reaction to the environment...Sense of place involves a personal *orientation* toward place in which one's understanding of place and one's feelings about place become fused in the context of environmental meaning (*Place Attachment*, 254; italics in the original)

Hence place and the experience of a place, become crucial in a geocritical point of view.

## II. METHODOLOGY

Generally agreed as the most promising development in spatially oriented literary studies, geocriticism presents interesting ways to engage with the spaces of fiction and reality. "Drawing on interdisciplinary methods and a diverse range of sources, geocriticism attempts to understand the real and fictional spaces that we inhabit, cross through, imagine, survey, modify, celebrate, disparage, and on and on in an infinite variety"- says Tally in his Translator's Preface of Bertrand Westphal's *Geocriticism: Real and Fictional Spaces* (2007). The traditional notion of place as the setting of a literary work, has undergone tremendous changes in the postmodern era. The concept of temporality that had dominated the pre-war period had lost much of its legitimacy which in turn valorised the rereading of space. Geocentered approach to literature would allow a particular place to serve as the focal point for a variety of critical practices. Geocriticism mainly focuses upon the interrelations between space and literature, mapping and writing, description and narration and how literary and cartographic practices overlap, infuse one another, and ultimately blend together to form 'literary cartography'. It tries to analyse real and imaginary spaces and their relation with one another in literature and reality. In geocriticism, the pluralistic image of a place is derived through a variety of sources- classical myths, modern fiction, historical works, tourist brochures, secondary reports, legends or any available material. By bringing together multiple authors, including multiple genres and disciplines, the geocritic lays out multiple points of view, allowing diverse perspectives to flesh out, to round out, and perhaps to overcome the limiting images of a given place. Different texts may present multiple images of a place. The minute details of sensory experiences in the narratives, also provide the geocritic a chance to enquire into the sensuous plenum of a place. The ever changing nature of a place gives birth to, what Westphal has said, a kind of multifocalization and polysensoriality because a place can be seen and represented by multiple writers differently in different time frames.

Polysensoriality centers on the perception that the experience of an environment comes from all the senses. As Tuan notes, "Experience is a cover- all term for the various modes through which a person knows and constructs reality. These modes range from the more direct and passive senses of smell, taste and touch, to the active visual perception and the indirect mode of symbolization." (8) Polysensoriality tries to challenge the dominance of the visual by focusing upon all the senses. The hierarchy of senses, which has seemed to strengthen over time, is not culturally universal. In *Sensuous Geographies*, Paul Roadway notes that the aboriginal Eskimos defined space

more by sound than by sight. The American author bell hooks seems to affirm this when she says “The Australian aborigines say that smell of the white men is killing us”. The holistic nature of environmental experience can be derived only by concentrating on the non-visual senses too. The soundscape, the smellscape, the tastescape and the tactile- kinaesthetic qualities of an environment help in deriving a more holistic experience of a place. Sensoriality contributes to the structuring and definition of space. In terms of representation, space is subject to the infinite variety of sensory perception. As Rodaway points out, “The senses are geographical in that they contribute to orientation in space, an awareness of spatial relationships and an appreciation of the specific qualities of different spaces, both currently experienced and removed in time” (37). By involving all the senses, representation of a synesthetic landscapes is possible. Representation of a place in certain literary works are more wholistic as they try to bring in multiple sensory experiences. Sensory landscapes are recreated in such works by providing ample haptic, olfactory, auditory or visual images.

### III. DISCUSSION

Each place is unique and each landscape has its own characteristics. One of the most fascinating places on the planet, Andaman and Nicobar Islands, easily gets the attention of a geocritic. Part of the Indian Union, Andaman and Nicobar Islands are the largest archipelago system in the Bay of Bengal, consisting of about 306 islands and 206 rocks and rocky outcrops and covering a total area of 8,200 sq.km. only thirty-eight of these islands are inhabited; of these, eleven are in the Andaman group and thirteen are in the Nicobars. The islands are grouped into the north Andaman Islands and south Nicobar Islands, separated by the 150 kms wide Ten Degree Channel. This large archipelago is separated from mainland India by about 1200 km. The closest land mass in the North is Myanmar, roughly 280 km from Landfall Island, the northernmost island of the group. The nearest land mass to Great Nicobar in the south is the large Indonesian island, Sumatra, located at a distance of 145 km. Andaman and Nicobar Islands lie in a crescent that stretches from Cape Negrais of Myanmar to the Banda Arc of Sumatra. The Andamans are considered to be the extensions of the submerged Arakan Yoma Mountain range of Myanmar, while the Mentawai Island to the south and south-west of Sumatra are supposed to be a southern continuation of the Nicobars.

The Great Andaman group, which includes the North, Middle, and South Andaman Islands with Baratang in between, is largely covered by forests, with almost

ninety percent of the area protected as reserve forests. Located in the equatorial belt, the islands have a warm tropical climate throughout the year, receive heavy monsoon rainfall, and are surrounded by sandy, rocky, and marshy coastlines with coral reefs. Their vegetation is extremely rich, with twelve major forest types and around 2,200 plant species, including many that are found nowhere else. The islands also support a wide variety of animal life—about 8,300 species—ranging from reptiles and mammals to birds, insects, and diverse marine creatures like corals, fish, sea turtles, and dugongs. Several species are endangered or endemic to the region. Conservation efforts are strong, with national parks, wildlife sanctuaries, and a biosphere reserve. The islands were traditionally home to indigenous groups such as the Great Andamanese, Onge, Jarawa, Sentinelese, Shompen, and Nicobarese, each with their own distinct cultures and languages. However, their populations declined sharply after colonial contact and large-scale migration from mainland India in the 20th century. By 2016, only small numbers of these communities remained, and the government now follows strict policies to protect their cultural identity, support their basic needs, and minimise outside interference in their lives.

The representation of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands varies considerably in different narratives about the archipelago. Legends and myths add to the mysterious nature of these beautiful islands. Novels set in the backdrop of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, provide insights into the geographical nuances of the region pushing the reader into a process of cognitive mapping. The novelists employ various types of double mapping- of the fictional upon the real, the personal on the geographical, and the past on the present, which in turn makes reading a cartographic endeavour. Thus, the narrative is simultaneously something that maps and something to be mapped.

*Island's End* is a 2011 novel set in the backdrop of Andaman and Nicobar Islands, written by the acclaimed author of *Climbing the Stairs*, Padma Venkatraman. American author, Padma Venkatraman, has worked as chief scientist on oceanographic ships. She has experiences of living in five different countries of the world. Apart from *Island's End*, she has written four other novels. In *Island's End* the visual landscape has a dominant hue, but as the narrative progresses, other sensory landscapes discreetly unfold in the text. Drawing on first hand experiences from her visits to the Andaman Islands, she was inspired to write this story after meeting the natives who survived the 2004 tsunami attack.

*Island's End* speaks about a native tribal group of the Andaman Islands, and how they survived the 2004

tsunami, which wreaked destruction across the globe. An ancient knowledge of the movement of winds and oceans and a sensitivity to the behaviour of sea birds and island creatures might have warned these native people to flee inland in the nick of time. Divided into 46 chapters, the novel contains six parts, which offer vivid description of the soundscape, the smellscape, the touchscape and the tactile kinaesthetic qualities of the Andaman archipelago, leading to the representation of a synesthetic landscape. In the author's note Padma Venkatraman says- "When the tsunami of December 26, 2004, wreaked destruction across the globe, several primitive groups living on the Andaman Islands escaped to safety. Amazingly, they somehow avoided the killer wave that caused a shockingly high death toll in our modern times. In January 2005, an associated Press reporter met four tribesmen named Ashu, Tawai, Danna and Lah, who said that their entire tribe (over two hundred strong) had survived. ... We do not know precisely how they realized that disaster was about to strike or why they were able to take appropriate action. Here I have used my imagination, in conjunction with research, observation of the tribes and my experience with them, to tell a plausible story of what might have helped one such tribe remain relatively unscathed by this terrible natural disaster".

Padma Venkatraman, using the power of her imagination, tries to recreate the story of the Onge tribe of the Andaman Islands and pay tribute to an ancient mode of life that pulses with its own special beauty. While the story is mostly imaginative, the real geographic features, especially the sensuous geography of the Andaman archipelago is blended into the novel. The novel tells the story of the native 'Enge' tribe, (modelled after the real Onge tribe) who remain secluded from the rest of the world and how a fifteen-year-old girl, Uido, becomes her tribe's spiritual leader. Uido has been chosen as the next oko-juma (leader and healer) of the tribe by Lah-ame, the tribal group's long time wise male leader and healer. The tribe is facing intrusions from outside and the strangers are trying to lure the tribal people by presenting them gifts which would make them curious about the outside world. These strangers try to please the hunter-gatherer tribe by gifting them plenty of food and other useful things like matchstick, with the intention of exploiting the natural resources especially timber of their region. Lah-ame rejects this lifestyle of the outsiders and wants his tribe to follow their traditional way of living, in close connection with nature and drawing inspiration from nature. Anything that jeopardizes this harmonious relationship is viewed with suspicion by Lah-ame. He has strong faith in the indigenous spiritual-therapeutic practices and traditions which are rooted in the environment in which they live. He wants Uido to uphold the spirit and uniqueness of their tribe never

succumbing to the temptations of the foreigners. Uido, the second child of Kara and Mimi, undergoes a tough training as part of the transformation. Her body and mind are rigorously trained by Lah-ame who warns Uido of the possibility of losing her mind or body in the process. But Uido is willing to risk her life to protect their tribe and keep their faith in the old ways. Strictly adhering to the standards set by Lah-ame and carefully following his guidance, Uido keeps Lah-ame's faith in her. In the long process of transformation, she finds the insect eating plant as her medicinal plant and the giant squid as her spirit animal. When her younger brother Tawai falls ill, she goes to the stranger's island to bring his spirit back, even though she has never moved out from their island before. With the help of Maya, the niece of one of Lah-ame's friends, she cures Tawai of his illness and they return to their island. Ashu, Uido's elder brother is too egoistic to accept Uido as their leader. Infact he is somewhat jealous of her. There is always a tension between these two characters. Uido warns the tribe about an upcoming danger. All her people, except Aishu, his two friends and his lover Natalang, (who was Uido's friend earlier) follow Uido to the cliff. One the tribe reached a safe point, a heavy wave rises from the sea. The strangers, including the brown Ragavan and his friends who came to the island and Natalang lost their lives in the heavy tide. Ashu and his two friends, who escaped narrowly, reunites with the tribe, accepting Uido as their leader. In telling the story of a people who live in harmony with nature, the narrative takes into consideration the soundscape, the smellscape, the tastescape, the touchscape and the tactile-kinaesthetic qualities of the Andaman archipelago, resulting in the holistic representation of the place. The flora and fauna of the region too find a significant place in the narrative.

### 3.1 The Soundscape

The sounds that emanate from a place can mark the place in multiple ways. *Island's End* provides a detailed description of the sounds which are associated with the Andaman Islands. Starting from the rattling sound of the bone necklace of the tribal people, the novel captures the soundscape of the island meticulously. When Uido says in chapter five "A drongo bird flies down from the laurel tree behind Lah-ame's hut. *Tseep-tseep-tseep*, it whistles, its forked black tail bobbing over my head as if it senses my excitement" we are introduced to the variety of sounds of the region. "The clearing is filled with babies' cries and women's laughter" – the sounds that mark their everyday life is introduced in chapter five. "I hear something slither behind my heels and look back. Sea snakes are crawling out of the water, the black and white bands on their long bodies shining in the moonlight" -when Uido speaks about the sea snakes, the reader also listens to its slithering sound. The



loud sound of the cicadas in the trees, Lah-ame's drum beats, rumbling sound of the stream all contribute to the reader's experience of the soundscape of the islands. In the training session when Lah-ame gives instructions to Uido, he says "Lie down with your feet facing east and listen to my rattle and drum. Their sound will guide your spirit deeper into the Otherworld than it has gone before. After you have been there for a while, I will call you back with four sharp drumbeats" (chapter 13) he too stresses on sound. Lah-ame points out the importance of listening to sound when he says "The Otherworld is not a faraway place; it is just a different way to sense this world around us.... Do not worry about how long it is taking. Allow your ear to drink in the sound of the rattle and the drum; use your spirit, not your body, to sense and feel" (chapter 13). When Uido says "As evening approaches, we lose the distant chatter of monkeys, then the songs of birds and finally even the chirp of crickets. I hear only the splash of our poles in the creek, the *plip-tup-plip-tup* of rain and water slapping at the sides of our canoe" (chapter 16), the wide variety of sounds associated with the islands are again brought into notice. As the narrative progresses more sounds are brought in, to the extent that the reader cannot think of the landscape without the soundscape. Even the sounds of the birds are brilliantly incorporated into the narrative. eg: "I hear the kuk-kuk-kuk-kuk of a woodpecker tattooing holes in an old trunk" (chapter 33) and "We wander out of the village into the soft blackness of the jungle. In the distance, I hear the uk-uk, coo-roo of an owl" (chapter 34). Communicating with the nature involves all our senses. In chapter thirteen when Uido describes her encounter with the insect eating plant it is quite evident. She says "The drumbeat softens and I hear a whisper coming from near the plant that the spiderweb hangs on. When I bend down close, wanting to hear the voice a little better, I notice how unusual the plant is. It lacks flowers, but its leaves are so brightly colored as flowers' petals: red mottled with pink. The lower part of each leaf is shaped like the pitchers we use to store water, and the top part looks like a small lid."

The geography of the landscape is enriched with the incorporation of the acoustic characteristics of the place. The sound of the breeze, wind, ocean, waves, woodpecker, cicada, mosquitos, vipers, snakes, owl etc are essential components of the sensuous geography of the Andaman Islands.

### 3.2 The Smellscape

Porteous has coined the term 'smellscape' to describe the olfactory environment in which the individual evolves. Individuals often retain a memory of smell associated with a place. Some places are often marked by the smell associated with it. *Island's End* abounds in

olfactory images of the Andaman Islands, especially the jungles, the home of the Enge tribe. In Chapter 9, when Uido speaks "My nose catches a faintly bitter smell - like smoke though not the scent of burning wood" the reader too is able to smell. As the narrative progresses the author brings in a large number of olfactory images helping the reader to construct the smellscape of the islands. As the reader moves through chapter thirteen, lines like, "We reach a part of the jungle where the air is heavy with the scent of the ripe fruit" and "The grass becomes shorter and the scent of vanilla flowers thickens the air", the smellscape strikes the reader again. In the description of the swamp, several olfactory images like, 'the stench of the rotting leaves fills the air' and 'the stench of mud fills my nose and my throat feels heavy' are again brought in. The smellscape thus becomes an active component of geography in the novel.

### 3.3. The Touchscape

Literature privileges the visual, because it is more common to describe what we see rather than what we feel, touch, hear or taste. But the visual landscape is often enriched as other sensory landscapes unfold in a text. Least significance is given to the touchscape in most of the literary narratives. In *Island's End* the author deliberately brings in a large number of haptic images as it is crucial to the life of the tribal community presented in the novel. In chapter 12 when Uido says "I run my fingers across the smooth bones of my changa-ta, imagining what it might feel like to hold hands with the spirits of my ancestors" the touchscape brilliantly blends with the narrative. The touch of the elements- air, water and earth - is captured brilliantly in the novel. In chapter Seventeen, Uido says "A sudden gust of wind cools the sweat on my forehead. I lift my chin up to the sky and breathe in deeply. In chapter seven Uido says "The ocean looks inviting. I wade into the shallows. The water slurps around my thighs, tugging me deeper in. But at the same time a breeze stirs and pushes me gently back toward the shore. It is as though the sea is asking me to explore all that lies beyond our island, while the jungle wants me to remain safe within it". The touch of the ocean, water, waves, clay, mud, trees, plants, animals, animal skin, tree bark, breeze, air etc are vividly described in the novel highlighting the wholistic nature of environmental experience.

### 3.4. The Tastescape

Human space is a sensory space and the specificity of geocriticism lies in the attention it pays to a place using a poly sensory approach. There are many instances in the novel where the unique gustatory geography of the Andaman Islands is revealed. For instance, in chapter twelve of the novel, when Uido speaks to Lah-ame, "I rub the paste between my fingers, then lick it off. It tastes like

the drink you gave me for a stomach-ache once”, attention is given to the peculiarities of taste. The description of the insect eating plant provides multiple sensory details. “This plant traps insects. But instead of catching them with a sticky tongue like a frog, the plant has a slippery leaf. Insects are fooled into thinking the brightly coloured leaves are flower petals. If they try to land on the pitcher- shaped leaf and sip the juice inside, they slide down and drown in the juice instead. The plant then eats the insects just as an animal might” (Chapter 13) Tastes specific to the islands, like stew made from crabs and turtles, roasted meat and fish, sweet juice of the pitcher plant etc are unravelled in the course of the narrative. The novel, hence is rich in imageries of taste.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

In depicting the life of a community of people who live in close harmony with nature, the author has keenly observed the environment, bringing in multiple sensory experiences. The sensuous geography of the Andaman Islands is discreetly unfolded in the text of *Island's End*. Concentration on the non-visual senses contributes to the structuring and definition of space presented in the novel. The sensuous worlds of smell, sound, taste and touch, as well as the visual sense, are closely integrated with the plot of the novel. Thus, the landscape becomes synesthetic in the novel. *Island's End* coordinates several types of spatial perceptions, forming a vast polysensory landscape, making a geocritic to take a fresh look, to listen attentively and to be sensitive to the sensory vibrations of the text.

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