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Reclaiming the Periphery: A Geocritical Study of Marginalized Spaces in Contemporary Postcolonial Fiction

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Abstract:
In an era of globalized narratives that often privilege dominant geographies, contemporary postcolonial fiction disrupts hegemonic spatial imaginaries by reclaiming the periphery—those marginal spaces relegated to the edges of history, power, and representation. This research study engages a geocritical interrogation of how literature, spatiotemporally reconfigures marginalized landscapes—slums, borderlands, indigenous territories, and migrant enclaves—transforming them into dynamic sites of resistance, memory, and hybridity. By centering voices from the geographical and cultural fringes, these texts challenge cartographic hierarchies, exposing the tensions between imposed borders and lived realities. Focusing on novels such as Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* (2008), which redefines India's "Darkness" as a counter-geography to neoliberal urbanity, and Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* (2017), where migrant trajectories dissolve national boundaries through magical portals, this paper explores how fiction re-maps space as fluid, contested, and deeply relational. Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi's *Kintu* (2014) further illustrates how land and myth intertwine to resurrect Uganda's suppressed histories, while Kirstin Valdez Quade's *The Five Wounds* (2021) imbues the Hispanic Southwest with sacred and subversive spatialities. The study argues that these narratives do not merely depict marginal spaces but actively reconstruct them through language—be it creolized dialects, untranslatable idioms, or silences—that defy colonial geography. Drawing on Bertrand Westphal's geocritical framework, the analysis reveals how postcolonial fiction destabilizes fixed spatial orders, proposing instead a spatiotemporally layered world where periphery and centre engage in constant dialogue. Ultimately, these literary acts of reclaiming do not just narrate place; they regenerate it, offering radical possibilities for belonging in an unevenly mapped world.

Keywords: periphery, marginal, geocriticism, spatiotemporally, resistance, hybridity, geography, postcolonial fiction, re-mapping, cartography

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Introduction:

Postcolonial literature often explores the relationship between place, space, and identity, reflecting the legacies of colonialism and its impact on former colonies. Contemporary postcolonial fiction breathes life into the margins, those liminal spaces where shantytowns hum with resilience, borderlands blur identities and ancestral lands pulse with buried memories. An analytical perusal of various texts and fictional narratives reveal how geography and landscape is not just a backdrop but a powerful force shaping cultural identities, power dynamics, and the very fabric of postcolonial societies. These are sites of quiet revolution, where creolized tongues and contested geographies rewrite colonial maps. Through fractured narratives and spatial poetics, literature transforms these 'peripheries' into centers of meaning, revealing how place shapes resistance and rebirth in the shadow of the colonial empire's fading footprints.

By centering voices from the geographical and cultural fringes, these texts challenge cartographic hierarchies, exposing the tensions between imposed borders and lived realities. Marginalized spaces in contemporary postcolonial fiction emerge as insurgent spaces, for instance slums, borderlands, ghettoes, migrant enclaves, ethnic neighbourhoods and cultural districts – these are locales pulsating with linguistic hybridity and contested memory. "The colonial experience of my generation was almost wholly without violence", says George Lamming in 2002. "It was a terror of the mind"(Abdul 2024) In the novels like Lamming's *In the Castle of My Skin* (1953), Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North* (9166), Isabella Hammad's debut, *The Parisian* (2019), Juan Rulfo's *Pedro Paramo* (1955) and Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006), readers find how unacknowledged topographic zones destabilize colonial cartographies. Fiction consequently becomes a radical act of re-mapping, transforming these neglected spaces into lived archives of defiance and belonging. In fact fiction becomes both witness and architect, transfiguring isolated geographies into vibrant theatres of survival, where every alleyway and dialect articulates an unyielding demand that they do exist and always existed.

The periphery in postcolonial fiction is not just a passive setting or atmosphere but an actor—a tangled nexus of myth, violence, and resurgence. Mostly spaces like shantytowns, ancestral lands and migrant thresholds perform Westphalian spatio-temporality, where time folds and language territorializes. To read them is to trace literature's power to destabilize geography itself, turning 'nowhere' into the beating heart of de-colonial possibility. Bertrand Westphal's geocritical framework particularly the concept of spatio-temporality provides a vital lens for analysing postcolonial fiction, where space is never neutral but a battleground of memory, power, and resistance. "The geocritical approach considers space as a dynamic construct, shaped by competing narratives" (Westphal 14) Spatio-temporality in geocriticism refers to the interconnectedness of space and time within literary texts and cultural representations. It involves analysing how spatial and temporal dimensions interact, influence each other, and shape the meaning and experience of a work.

Westphal draws our attention to the complex and evolving nature of the relationship between time and space, describing an era when time was used as a tool to comprehend and navigate space, especially during periods when exploration and territorial expansion were paramount concerns. However, advancing technology, improved communication methods, faster modes of transportation accorded for human mastery over space that in turn resulted in invariable shifts in the balance between time and space. Even the revolutionary ideas put forth by physicists and mathematicians, particularly the conceptualisation of space-time as interconnected dimensions, emerged from Albert Einstein's theory of relativity transformed our understanding of the relationship between time and space. "This temporalized space became "space- time" (Westphal 11) This research paper examines postcolonial novels like Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* (2008), Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* (2017), Nansubuga Makumbi's *Kintu* (2014) and Kirstin Valdez Quade's *The Five Wounds* (2021), stories that reimagine peripheral spaces not as static margins but as sites of resistance, memory, and hybrid futurity. Conceptually Westphal's geocritical spatio-temporality -- the interplay of space and time as contested, layered, and dynamic -- provides a powerful lens for critiquing these narratives.

According to Brosseau, there are three main reasons why geographers have become interested in literature: literature provides a complement to the regional geography; it can translate the experience of places (via modes of perception, for instance); and it expresses a critique of reality or of the dominant ideology. (Westphal 31-32)

The world is not just a map of fixed borders and static places; it is alive with layers of time, memory, and resistance. Postcolonial novels reveal this hidden depth, showing how spaces we call "margins" are actually vibrant, shifting worlds. Using Bertrand Westphal's idea of spatiotemporality—where space and time intertwine—these books rewrite the stories of forgotten places, turning slums, borders, and sacred lands into powerful forces of change. Spatiotemporality in geocriticism indicates the act of crossing or challenging boundaries, norms, or established frameworks within the literary texts and geographical concepts. This involves pushing beyond traditional disciplinary boundaries and exploring the intersections between literature, culture, and space in unconventional ways. Relying on the two important premises prescribed by geocriticism, the first stating that "time and space share a common plan" (Westphal 37) and the next proposing that "the relationship between the representation of space and real space is indeterminate" (37), it is comprehensible that "that space cannot be understood except in its heterogeneity" (37) particularly in a postmodern world.

A gripping, satirical tale of modern India, narrated through the life of Balram Halwai, the son of a village *rickshawwalla* Adiga's *The White Tiger* (2008) presents rural Bihar, a caste-bound space where feudal time collides with neoliberal "progress". Born the son of a village rickshaw puller, Balram Halwai claws his way from poverty to a precarious perch, first as the chauffeur of his village's despised landlord, then as a self-styled entrepreneur in Bangalore's glittering tech world. His story unfolds through a series of sly, darkly comic letters addressed to the Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao, a mocking guide to "the

real India" no official tour will reveal. With audacious wit Balram confesses his crimes—murder, theft, betrayal—yet his narrative skewers not just the grotesque extravagance of the rich, but the absurd indignities forced upon the poor. The joke, it seems is on everyone: a society where corruption is the only ladder and the only way up is to burn it down behind you. The author pens down an ironical and social critique maintaining the vein of dark comedy Sharpens the narrative flow while keeping Balram's voice central.

"Please understand, Your Excellency… that India is two countries in one: an India of Light, and an India of Darkness. The ocean brings light to my country. Every place on the map of India near the ocean is well off. But the river brings darkness to India—the black river." (Adiga 12)

In *The White Tiger* (2008), the "Darkness" of rural Bihar is not just poverty it is a living contradiction, where ancient caste systems collide with India's glittering new wealth. Balram's journey from servant to criminal is a rebellion against the frozen times of oppression, proving that the edges of society can crack open the centre. The fictional narrative chooses Bihar, the poor state in eastern India always maligned by reporters who rarely visit there to report on it as emblematic of poverty and savagery. The fact that none of the characters are fully realized or sympathetic may be satirical; however it also suggests that they stand for the real depravity of Biharis. Adiga's labelling this place as "Darkness" in contrast to Civilization (Bangalore) cannot possibly escape a comparison to Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899), where Africa is depicted as a primitive void against Europe's enlightened modernity. Like Conrad, Adiga employs this binary to critique systemic oppression, yet risks replicating the same dehumanizing gaze that reduces complex societies to symbolic antitheses. This is an emphatic comparison that reveals how postcolonial literature sometimes unconsciously inherits colonial narrative frameworks even while attempting to subvert them. And sure enough Adiga's description of village life follows from so many stereotypes found in colonial literature.

"When the veil is lifted, what will Bangalore be like? Maybe it will be a disaster: slums, sewage, shopping malls, traffic jams, policemen. But you never know. It may turn out to be a decent city, where humans can live like humans and animals can live like animals. A new Bangalore for a new India. And then I can say that, in my own way, I helped to make New Bangalore." (Adiga 273)

Meanwhile, *Exit West* (2017) melts borders into something liquid and strange. The novel unfolds through the journey of two lovers - Saeed, the traditionalist clinging to familial roots, and Nadia, the independent rebel shrouded in her symbolic black robe - as they flee a war-torn city. Their contrasting worldviews collide and intertwine while escaping through surreal magical doors, with the novel's opening line foreshadowing their fractured destiny. "In a city swollen by refugees but still mostly at peace, or at least not yet openly at war, a young man met a young woman in a classroom and did not speak to her" (Hamid 1). The story becomes both a tender romance and a meditation on displacement in an unstable world. Its magical doors do not just connect countries. They just erase the idea

of nation altogether letting migrants evade war to safety in a single breath. Here, geography bends to the will of those who refuse to be trapped.

As the city they lived in became desperately unlivable, Saeed and Nadia became refugees who had to travel to Greece, London and the USA quite incredibly, hoping against hope absconding from a collapsing city that they called home, to rebuild their lives. The author ideates borders to dissolve into spatiotemporal ruptures where magical doors collapse and reimagines migration into a sudden action. “The door was there, and they stepped through it, and suddenly they were elsewhere" (104). Employing the narrative device of magical realism Hamid radically portrays migration miraculously where doors instantly transport refugees across continents, compressing years of dangerous journeys into moments. The magical doors serve as both literal passages and metaphors for how trauma distorts time - making past wars feel ever-present while futures remain uncertain. Near the end of the novel Hamid’s narrator declares “We are all migrants through time” (209). Refugee camps become suspended realms where war’s trauma lingers and futures remain uncertain. By compressing time and space, the author exposes nation-states as fragile fictions, reimagining displacement as both rupture and radical possibility in a borderless world. The novel ultimately suggests that in our globalized yet fractured world, traditional geographic imaginaries must give way to more porous, interconnected understandings of belonging.
The concept of doors is “effective in evoking the proximity of the desperate zones and the more secure ones in the world today, suggesting that building walls and immigration regimes of extreme vetting is not just impractical, but downright inhumane.” (Brauer 2019)

This geocritical research study that examines post-colonial fictional narratives aligns to Westphal’s notion that equips us to read postcolonial literature as counter-mapping—where fiction does not depicts space but rewires its politics. Wherefore the "margins" become laboratories for reimagining the sense of belonging. The Ugandan-British novelist and short story writer Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi’s doctoral novel *Kintu* (2014) goes deeper, weaving Uganda’s land with its myths. The earth itself remembers what colonialism tried to erase and the novel’s curse is not just a family’s burden—it is the unfinished time of history, demanding justice. *Kintu* weaves itself through the rich tapestry of Baganda history (a Bantu ethnic group native to Buganda, a subnational kingdom within Uganda), unravelling a lineage haunted by generational curses and the weight of transgressions past. Beneath its surface pulses the heartbeat of Baganda mythology—stories of creation, destiny, and divine wrath—while the quiet, persistent thrum of sexism lingers, etched into every chapter like a scar. Transporting the readers from modern day Uganda to the era of when the region was ruled as a kingdom, the novel transforms the Ugandan village from a supposed "backwater" into a vibrant spatiotemporal crossroads, where ancestral spirits walk alongside mobile phones and colonial amnesia battles cultural memory. The land itself becomes an insurgent archive—its soil whispering clan histories that official records tried to silence.

But on the ground, history looks nothing like this clash of nations and empires and states… History is a fabric of memories and fear and forgetting, of longing and nostalgia, of invention and re-creation. History is bunk, and sometimes it's a good thing it is. (Makumbi 12)

The Kintu is the name of a clan and its origin story turns on a divine dilemma—when their founding patriarch Kintu Kidda dared to love only Nnakato, the younger of celestial twins. Her family's ultimatum thundered across generations, "Take both sisters or neither" (37). His initial refusal, their fierce resistance and his eventual surrender, taking both sisters to wife, became the clan's primal wound. Consequently this forced triad marriage birthed not just a lineage but a curse, that would outlive kingdoms, where love's compromise would echo through centuries like drumbeats in a sacred grove.

Conceivably Makumbi renders an intricate interplay of myth, land, and language, offering a geocritical resistance to colonial and postcolonial spatial erasures. The writer purposefully fractures the linear temporal pattern as the curse's cyclical recurrence merges 1750 with 2004, rejecting Western historiography. By weaving together the 18th-century origins of the Kintu clan with the fragmented lives of its descendants in modern Kampala, Makumbi re-maps Uganda's spatiotemporality, challenging fixed borders - both geographical and narrative.

Bwaise (a neighbourhood in Kampala, Uganda) and other wetlands are nature's floodplains below the hills. But because of urban migrants like Kamu and his woman, the swamps are slums. In colonial times, educated Ugandans had lived on the floodplains while Europeans lived up in the hills. When the Europeans left, educated Ugandans climbed out of the swamps, slaked off the mud and took to the hills and raw Ugandans flooded the swamps. (Makumbi 2)

Analysing through Westphal's geocritical lens, *Kintu* reveals how both colonial and post-independence power structures enforced artificial spatial hierarchies—through arbitrary borders, reorganized urban landscapes, and the systematic erasure of indigenous geographies. The novel demonstrates how these imposed spatial regimes disrupted organic connections between people and land, replacing fluid, culturally-grounded relationships to territory with rigid administrative constructs that served state control rather than communal belonging. Quite wilfully the author reclaims the mythic geography subverting the colonial rigidity by geocritical fluidity. The Ganda origin myth (Kintu as the first man) is the core essence "upon which Buganda Kingdom is built. It does not matter where a Ganda is; we are descendants of Kintu (our Adamic figure) and Nnambi (the Eve figure)" (Makumbi 2020). Through characters like Suubi Nnakintu who defies the clan's patriarchal norms the author transforms domestic spaces into sites of rebellion.

I invite the reader to analyze myths and folktales with me. I ask them to compare their own tales to the Ganda's. I suggest that they take a second look at their traditional

creativity—what light do they shed on who we were, who we are and who we could be? (Makumbi 2020)

The world envisaged in postcolonial fiction is never just geography, it breathes with the weight of history and the pulse of rebellion. Novels like *Kintu* and *Exit West* tear open the myth of empty, passive spaces, revealing landscapes that remember what empires tried to erase: a tree in Uganda that whispers a pre-colonial curse, a door in Afghanistan that dissolves borders into air. These stories show us that land is never neutral; it is a palimpsest of stolen names and stubborn survival, where every slum alley and migrant camp thrums with hidden futures. The map in the end is not territory; it is a battleground of time, where the so-called "margins" rewrite the centre in their own defiant tongue.

Unique in its narrative design, *The Five Wounds* (2021) is an immersive debut novel by the American novelist Kirstin Valdez Quade, who paints New Mexico as a sacred wound, where Catholic and Indigenous traditions bleed into the soil. The land here is not scenery; it's a silent witness to generations of survival.

The village of Las Penas may be fictional, but the problems its Latinx families experience are all too real: lives are torn apart, slowly or suddenly, by unemployment, abuse, drink-driving, and addiction (there's a heroin crisis in the community, as if booze wasn't bad enough: "it's genocide, and we're doing it to ourselves"). (Williams 2021)

In the dust of New Mexico, Amadeo Padilla, 33 year old, failed son, absent father and a perpetual drunk, takes up his cross. When the nails pierce his palms before the staring town, his pregnant daughter, the 15 year old Angel bears witness to this passion play of shame and fragile redemption. In *The Five Wounds* (2021), Quade reclaims the peripheries, both geographic and social, by illuminating the sacred within the marginalized. The fictional locale, New Mexican village, often dismissed as a backwater, becomes a luminous theatre of resilience where the wounds of history and personal failure are transfigured into sites of grace. Amadeo's ritual crucifixion, performed on a dusty roadside transforms a spectacle of shame into an act of collective catharsis, while Angel's unborn child, kicking to the rhythm of Lenten drums, embodies the fragile promise of renewal. Quade's prose unearths the holiness hidden in trailer parks and butcher shops, revealing how these so-called "nowheres" pulse with the quiet defiance of survival. Here, the periphery is not a place of lack, but a crucible where broken lineages are mended, and the overlooked become the keepers of stories that refuse erasure.

Quade uses New Mexico's "dust and devotion" (Quade 301) to show how place binds past trauma to present survival. The plot collapses past and present through recurring rituals and inherited struggles. Amadeo's crucifixion re-enactment mirrors his failures as a father, creating a "temporal loop of atonement" (47). "He has spent his whole life preparing for this pain. It feels familiar, this weight" (112). The writer projects a sacred geography out of the New Mexican landscape holding layered histories for instance, colonial churches,

indigenous sites, and makeshift altars where time converges. Angel's pregnancy unfolds near the "crumbling adobe chapel where her grandmother prayed" (89), linking generations. Even though some suspended spaces like the town is featured by its grinding poverty that traps characters in stasis, yet the local carnecería (butcher shop) becomes a site of transformation, where Amadeo's literal and metaphorical wounds are laid bare. "Nothing changes here but the weather, and even that circles back" (203). The Penitente crucifixion ritual acts as a spatiotemporal anchor, collapsing past and present into a singular, transcendent moment. As Amadeo endures the nailing of his palms to the cross, time distorts - "For three hours, he exists outside of minutes, outside of years" (158). This ritual, rooted in centuries of colonial and indigenous syncretism, becomes a conduit for generational trauma and redemption. "Every generation of this family has its own cross to bear, as it were" (Williams 2021). Here, Quade reveals ritual not as escape but as confrontation: a deliberate rupture in linear time that forces Amadeo and the community to reckon with the wounds they inherit and inflict.

By exploring the spatial dimensions of literary texts, geocritics uncover the ways in which human experiences and identities are intertwined with the spaces they inhabit. Spatial metaphors have meticulously conveyed the passing time in literature. In fact post-colonial fictioneers manoeuvre real locations and places to create a visceral geography in their fictional terrains. Adiga's *The White Tiger* meticulously maps India's contrasting geographies, using real locations to underscore its themes of inequality and social mobility. Laxmangarh, the fictional setting of the plot is based on the actual rural Bihar; The Black Fort in the novel refers to Rohtasgarh Fort located in the Kaimur hills of Bihar, the Delhi mall where Pinky Madam shops; Dhanbad, the "coal capital of India" (coal-mining city where Balram first works in a tea shop); White Tiger Technology Solutions (Balram's startup) in Bangalore; Lavish apartments in Koramangala, a residential locality in the south-eastern part of Bangalore; The Delhi Public School, Lions Public School in Ashok Vihar, Delhi, and many more; from Bihar's mud huts to Gurgaon's glass towers validate how space itself enforces India's caste and class hierarchies. The White Tower (Bangalore) becomes the ironic counterpart to the Black Fort (Bihar), completing Balram's journey through India's divided landscapes.

In *Kintu* (2014), Makumbi meticulously maps Uganda's historical and spiritual geography blending real locations with mythic spaces to trace the Kintu clan's legacy. "The land itself remembered the blood spilled at its roots" (Makumbi 87). Naggalabi Buddo, where Kintu Kidda's fateful encounter with the twins unfolds is actually the coronation site of Buganda's kings – a significant cultural and historical site in Uganda; Kampala, the modern capital; neighbourhoods like Kanyanya (slums) and Nsambya (urban sprawl); Mpologoma Avenue, a bustling city street; Luweero Triangle, a war-torn region; Nnamulondo (The Milky Way), a celestial space in Ganda mythology; Lake Nnalubaale (Lake Victoria in Africa); River Kiyira, the Luganda name for the White Nile as it flows from Lake Victoria in Uganda; all these natural and real topographies, sacred and mythic spaces portend Uganda as a palimpsest - colonial borders imposed atop ancient kingdoms, sacred shrines overshadowed

by urban sprawl. The novel's geography manifests power and betrayal, postcolonial decay, erasure and resilience.

Kirstin Valdez Quade meticulously grounds her narrative in the tangible landscapes of northern New Mexico, transforming real and imagined spaces into vessels of cultural memory and personal reckoning. In *The Five Wounds* (2021), Las Penas is a fictional crumbling Hispano village; the Morada (Penitente brotherhood chapel); Española Valley where Angel's school bus parks; the hospital in Santa Fe County, where Angel gives birth; Abiquiú Lake, a reservoir located in northern New Mexico; the Chama River, a major tributary of the Rio Grande in northern New Mexico; the Black Mesa, a basalt rocky volcanic outcropping near the Rio Grande, a geographical feature shared by Colorado, New Mexico and Oklahoma; all these spaces embody Hispano New Mexico's tensions—between devotion and abandonment, tradition and addiction.

Finally Mohsin Hamid crafts a hauntingly fluid geography that blurs real and surreal spaces, mirroring the disorientation of displacement in his *Exit West* (2017) where Saeed and Nadia's apartment, "a modest flat with a balcony that smelled of jasmine and gunpowder" (Hamid 12) is located in an unnamed war-torn city (implied to be Kabul or Damascus). By the time the author inserts the surreal and magical doors into the fictional landscape, "black as oil slicks, trembling like mirages" (72), the café where they first meet and the university campus are razed off, "its lecture halls now open to the sky like broken eggshells" (34). These infamous magical doors, Mykonos refugee camp, "a city of tents between azure sea and dust" (89) and London's abandoned mansions becomes emblematic of migratory thresholds. Referring to global cities like Mykonos, Greece, London, England, Marin County, the USA; and transit spaces like the phone shop, Istanbul bus station, the border river and the desert crossing, Hamid's selective realism (naming Mykonos but not the home city) mirrors migrant subjectivity – the familiar erased, the foreign hyper-visible. These doors intentionally dissolve the Global North/South binary rendering London as transient as a refugee tent.

Gerard Genette avers that narrative time links the narration to the story. It entails the order and the speed of narration, which then allows a critic to examine the narrator's temporal position and how it relates to the events in the story. This position allows the narrator to remember, witness, imagine or even participate in the narrated actions. (*Narrative Discourse* 35)

Postcolonial fiction explodes the myth of peripheries as passive backdrops, revealing them instead as dynamic theatres of power and possibility. These margins are never "natural"—they are political battlegrounds, carved by colonial violence and neoliberal neglect, where slums and borderlands bear the scars of engineered inequality. *Kintu* does not merely depict Uganda—it re-members it. Through spatiotemporal configurations, sacred ruins, and geocritical fluidity, Makumbi asserts that land is not just inherited; it is narrated, contested, and ultimately reclaimed. The novel's resistance lies in its insistence that place is

made not by maps, but by memory. Yet these spaces also pulse with layered time: ancestral curses whisper through modern cities in *Kintu*, while migrant doors in *Exit West* collapse borders into a single breath, proving that past traumas and future dreams inhabit the same cracked earth. Most radically, these novels show peripheries as agentive - not just suffering, but seizing. Balram's Bangalore in *The White Tiger* is not just a place of oppression; it's where a servant's knife rewrites the rules. Land in postcolonial fiction, is never just land – it is a verb. A revolt. A living archive that refuses to forget.

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