Urban Identity and Rural Investigations: Urbanisation in the Selected Works of Agatha Christie's *Miss Marple* Series

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Abstract: This paper examines the portrayal of rural landscapes in Agatha Christie's Miss Marple series, published between the year 1930 to 1976, highlighting the subtle yet significant transformations in rural England during these years. By employing Henri Lefebvre's theory of space, the study delves into the aesthetic and identity shifts in these rural settings, contrasting pre-war and post-war periods. The Miss Marple narratives serve as a lens to observe the nuanced changes within the rural community, shedding light on how these transformations reflect broader socio-economic trends. The paper aims to explore the causes behind these evolving landscapes and their impact on the rural populace, focusing on factors such as industrialization, urban migration, and shifts in social structures. Additionally, my paper plans to juxtapose these findings with the contemporary fragmentation of urban space in India, drawing parallels between the rural-urban divide in mid-20th century England and present-day urban fragmentation in India. This comparative analysis will generate a deeper understanding of how space and identity are interwoven, transcending the time-space barrier to provide valuable insights into the ongoing dynamics of rural and urban aesthetics. Through this exploration, the paper will contribute to the broader discourse on landscape change and community identity in literature and spatial theory. The term "landscape" indicates a multifaceted concept that is important across various fields of study but is especially central to geography. The *Dictionary of Human Geography*(2009) defines it as cardinal term of human geography that serves as a central object of investigation (Gregory et al.409).While the physical qualities of an area can be termed as the "natural landscape" (Sauer 325), man expressing his place in nature as a distinct agent of modification leads to the formation of cultural landscape (Sauer 333).Urban landscape is, therefore in terms of human geography, a derivation of cultural landscape that come to dominate the modern era.

Keywords: Urbanisation, Rural landscape, Community identity, Migration, Spatial Transformation, Gentrification

This paper examines the portrayal of rural landscapes in Agatha Christie's *Miss Marple* series, published between the year 1930 to 1976, highlighting the subtle yet significant transformations in rural England during these years. By employing Henri Lefebvre's theory of space, the study delves into the aesthetic and identity shifts in these rural settings, contrasting pre-war and post-war periods. The *Miss Marple* narratives serve as a lens to observe the nuanced changes within the rural community, shedding light on how these transformations reflect broader socio-economic trends. The paper aims to explore the causes behind these evolving landscapes and their impact on the rural populace, focusing on factors such as industrialization, urban migration, and shifts in social structures. Additionally, my paper plans to juxtapose these findings with the contemporary fragmentation of urban space in India, drawing parallels between the rural-urban divide in mid-20th century England and present-day urban fragmentation in India. This comparative analysis will generate a deeper understanding of how space and identity are interwoven, transcending the time-space barrier to provide valuable insights into the ongoing dynamics of rural and urban aesthetics. Through this exploration, the paper will contribute to the broader discourse on landscape change and community identity in literature and spatial theory. The term “landscape” indicates a multifaceted concept important across various fields of study but is especially central to geography. The *Dictionary of Human Geography* (2009) defines it as cardinal term of human geography that serves as a central object of investigation (Gregory et al. 409). While the physical qualities of an area can be termed as the “natural landscape” (Sauer 325), man expressing his place in nature as a distinct agent of modification leads to the formation of a cultural landscape (Sauer 333). Urban landscape is, therefore in terms of human geography, a derivation of the cultural landscape that came to dominate the modern era.

The term "urbanisation" is commonly associated with "the experience and expectation of human demographic change" (Gregory et al. 792). Hence the modern era with its teeming billions necessitates the conversion of the natural landscape into a habitable place capable of supporting the growing population. A second lens to identify the process of urbanisation includes economic transformation which traditionally excludes the primary activities of agriculture, forestry, fishing or mining. Consequently, society changes due to size, density, heterogeneity with a greater likelihood of lacking familiarity with one another (Castree et al. 542). These changes in the economic, social and cultural transformation along with the physical transformation of the land into built-up areas, all contribute to the creation of urban space.

In this paper I would like to explore how this phenomenon can be observed in the stories of Miss Marple, written by Agatha Christie and published between the years 1930 to 1976. The stories will argue were most likely driven by the post-war changes in the economic, social and political scenario such as the decolonisation of South and South-east Asia, decentralization of the economy, decline of agriculture and rising population. In other words, they provide a map charting the shifting political climate of the time and can be used to study how changes on a global political scale impacted the everyday life of rural England. As changes occurred in the rural landscape due to urbanisation, the effect was simultaneously felt in the community, leading to a change in the sense of 'place'. There is a distinct change in the atmosphere of the stories as they proceed to the post-war period into a more modernised world. There is a sense of loss of community and a sense of nostalgia. I would like to argue further that this is not just unique to England but can be noticed in Indian society as well, undergoing the process of urbanisation. The underlying reasons and period may differ, but the reaction it evokes from the people inhabiting that space remains unchanged.

Edmund Crispin in his conversation on Christie with H.R.F Keating says, "When one thinks of her, one thinks inevitably of English country life.... in particular of small villages and parsonages" (Keating 33). Like many inter-war mystery novelists, Christie was fond of the village landscape as

the setting for her detective novels. She drew on her personal experiences to create them, claiming accuracy by stating, "there are several villages remarkably [a]like" (Snell, 24). A closed community, microcosmic in nature, is reflected in the stories of *Miss Marple* by Christie. Published from 1930–1971, they exhibit idyllic country life where the effect of murder is heightened by moral shock and a sense of unexpectedness. One would expect such a village landscape to remain constant or as Raymond West, Miss Marple's nephew, puts it, a "stagnant pool" (Christie Vicarage 353). Yet a close study of the stories reveals changes that are occurring in the background bringing about transformation both subtle and glaring in the village landscape.

Stories like *Murder at the Vicarage* (1930) or *Body in the Library* (1942) written during the inter-war period, exhibit a strong "rural" background. A rural landscape is dominated by primary activities such as agriculture and with a more dispersed population pattern (Castree et al. 444). It is relatively homogenous in nature, resulting in a close-knit community where "nothing ever happens" (Christie *Sleeping Murder* 25). Instances of the closeness of the community is understood when Mr. Clement, the vicar tells the artist Lawrence Redding that everyone in village probably knows what kind of toothpowder he uses (Christie *Vicarage* 25) or the fact that the news of murdered girl found in Colonel Bantry's library spreads throughout the village with surprising accuracy but with obvious embellishment even before the police comes to the scene in the story *A Body in the Library*. The closeness of the community is also expressed through the detailed house-by-house mapping which creates a spatial grid of conventional and recognizable layout where social interaction and community dynamics can be expressed in a familiar manner (Snell 26). Thus, both the narrators, Mr. Clement in *Murder at the Vicarage* and Jerry Burton in *The Moving Finger* (1943) are very scrupulous in their description of the villages they inhabit. Convening at the Vicarage for tea to discuss village problems and issues is a recurrent motif in these early novels highlighting a space where religious and social aspects combine to again create a sense of strong community. The Vicar in these narratives often acts as the village community's ethical and moral authority. Thus, we see in *Murder at the Vicarage* and *Body in the Library* Miss Hartnells, Miss Price Ridley all swarm to Mr. Clement the Vicar with their

owes and complains while in *The Moving finger* and as well as *Murder at the Vicarage* the Vicarage itself serves a s a space of consultation and elucidation of the crime.

These devices generate a sense of "rurality", of a space characterized by aspects of "local knowledge" which is the "the tacit and explicit knowledge possessed and used by people who share the same culture, acquired from sustained proximity" (Castree et al. 290). Hence there is this all-pervasive feeling amongst the reader that everybody knows everybody, which is highlighted in later books like *A Murder is Announced* (1950) where Miss Marple comments to Inspector Craddock as:

> Fifteen years ago one knew who everybody was. The Bantrys in the big house-and the Hartnells and the Price Ridleys and the Weatherbys... They were people whose fathers and mothers and grandfathers and grandmothers, or whose aunts and uncles, had lived there before them. (Christie *Announced* 154)

This very local knowledge is challenged if not completely but to a certain extent, in the post-World War II novels. The turmoil of the War and its after-effects on Britain's economic and political landscape could not be ignored. Decolonisation of Britain's overseas empire triggered migration of the "repatriates", that is, white settlers who left colonies to return to their "homeland" (Elridge et al. 156). One such instance can be found in *Murder is Announced*, where Miss Marple says:

> Every village and small country place is full of people who've just come and settled there without any ties to bring them. The big houses have been sold, and the cottages have been converted and changed. And people just come - and all you know about them is what they say about themselves. They've come, you see, from all over the world. People from India and Hong Kong and China... (Christie *Announced* 154)

Suppose there is an underlying tone of discontent. In that case, it is perhaps the reflection of the fact that "returnee-citizens faced discrimination from resident-citizens in subtle (and sometimes less subtle) ways" (Elridge et al. 156). The once close-knit community with familiar faces now has

elements of the unknown. “Alison Light commented on Christie's obsession with unstable identities, the ultimate unknowability of others' which can be said is the outcome of these changes taking place. It is this sense of a safe, known world thrown out of kilter... These characters grapple with their relationships and connections to others suggesting they are not part of a consciously defined community” (Snell 47). This lack of awareness of their belonging creates a sense of disharmony in the social fabric. Thus, we see Philipa Haymes, in *A Murder is Announced,* and Brayan Eastley, in *4.50 from Paddington* (1957), struggling to find their place in the community and, as a result, creating friction in both society and within the family sphere. Whereas Philipa is a possible suspect in the attempted murder of Miss Blacklock, Bryan struggles to settle down into a fulfilling family life with his son. As Lucy Eyelsbarrow observes:

> She had gone on and grown up into a post-war world - but she felt as though Bryan had not gone on but had been passed by in the passage of years. His next words confirmed this. He had subsided onto the kitchen table again. “It's a difficult sort of world,” he said, “isn't it? To get your bearings in, I mean”. (Christie *4.50* 72)

Her observation reflects the general sentiment of these displaced individuals towards the post-war society and it can be well imagined the outlook of the community towards such uprooted people.

The migration of the repatriates and their subsequent process of inclusion into the community isn’t the only reason for the changing rural landscape that can be detected. British population had grown rapidly from 48,841,000 in 1951 to 53,078,000 in 1971, and several planning decisions were taken to cope with the situation (Clout 21). This led to rural areas around important urban centres starting to experience “dramatic growth in the form of continuously built-up suburbia and more dispersed commuting settlements” (Clout 20), ushering in the process of urbanisation. As Lefebvre puts it:

> The urban fabric grows, extends its borders, corrodes the residue of agrarian life. This expression, "urban fabric," does not narrowly define the built world of cities but all manifestations of the dominance of the city over the country. (Lefebvre 3-4)

The reason for this dominance of the city over the country was manifold. Beginning from the inter-war period, the price of farmlands had gradually been declining, which was capitalised by the government during the post-war period, where regional development schemes promoted the conversion of farmhouses and land to meet the housing needs of the "new middle class". The new middle class here, possibly referred to as the working class, who are delineated from the cultured professional middle class (Savage 55). Other reasons for the growing population in the countryside can be attributed to:

> continuing dispersion of suburbia (urbanisation) further into environmentally attractive countryside;
>
> a trend for certain forms of industrial activities and service employment to undergo decentralisation from large cities to medium-sized towns, market towns and even smaller settlements.
>
> counter urbanisation, whereby people make a fairly clear break with urban/suburban lifestyles to settle in remote rural districts;
>
> retirement migration, which takes late middle-aged and elderly people to coastal and - increasingly - to rural locations where cheaper, more appropriate housing is to be found in attractive environments. (Clout 25)

The reasons which have been stated above are observed because of a city's coping mechanism to accommodate its growing population. As the city proper struggles with space, various attributes of the city, especially that of housing, are dispersed to its surrounding area. With developed lines of communication in form of roads and railways and increase in private car ownership, the remote nature of the rural area is obliterated, and it is initiated into the urban fabric. This example can be observed

in *4.50 from Paddington,* where the Crackenthorpe's land has already been surrounded by the town (Christie *Paddington* 34) or in *Mirror Crack'd from Side to Side* (1962), where we get a glimpse of the changes in St. Mary Mead through Miss Marple's reminiscences where she delves over each changed and unchanged aspect of the village. Though there are those characteristics which have unchanged characteristics like "houses themselves were little changed in appearances" (Christie *Crack'd* 4), the essence of the village, with "a glittering new supermarket - anathema to the elderly ladies of St Mary Mead", is lost as Miss Marple declares "St Mary Mead was not the place it had been" (Christie *Crack'd* 4 - 5). Perhaps the biggest indication of the changing rural landscape and a reflection of the promotion of the conversion of the farmhouses and land to housing estate is when Miss Marple mentions the "The Development", which was in the area where Farmer Giles's fields once were (Christie *Crack'd* 5). "The Development" housing estate as is understood as the story proceeds is necessary and was part of the 'Planning' (Christie *Crack'd* 7).

The expansion of the "urban fabric" (Lefebvre 3-4) is evident through physical transformations in the rural landscape, such as increased built-up areas and rural gentrification ensues the transformation of the rural community. "Rural gentrification" is defined as the process by which the rural landscape is transformed and improved through the reinvestment of capital, leading to the displacement of local residents by incoming, higher-income groups (Castree et al. 443). The fragmentation of the rural community emerges as the "urban phenomenon" (Lefebvre 46) becomes more pronounced, so much so that any region untouched by it is either stagnant or dying (Lefebvre 4). The primary characteristic of the "urban phenomenon" is defined by its enormity and complexities (Lefebvre 46). Society ceases to be homogenous, and several heterogeneous elements arise, ranging from economic to social. Whether it is diversification of the employment sector (farmers are now confronted by agricultural towns (Lefebvre 4)) or deviation from the traditional class structure, social relations no longer remain unequivocal. These may include relations of production, exchange and market relations both visible and invisible (Lefebvre 46). Thus, where the "a glittering new

supermarket" in St Mary Mead presents the visible change in market relation, the more invisible changes in the market relation are exhibited when Miss Hartnell exclaims:

> Packets of things one's never even heard of... All these great packets of breakfast cereal instead of cooking a child a proper breakfast of bacon and eggs. And you're expected to take a basket yourself and go round looking for things – it takes a quarter of an hour sometimes to find all one wants - and usually made up in inconvenient sizes, too much or too little. And then a long queue waiting to pay as you go out. Most tiring. (Christie *Crack'd* 5).

Such changing market relations also impact the social space where before, shopping was more of a social activity, "So obliging, comfortable chairs to sit in by the counter, and cosy discussions as to cuts of bacon, and varieties of cheese" (Christie *Crack'd* 5) to a more economic exchange of goods and services.

The incursion of outsiders, due to gentrification (The Development (Christie *Crack'd* 7)) into the tight-knit rural community of St Mary Mead in the post-war novels of *Miss Marple* leads to a sense of alienation with its landscape when compared to the previous books. Description of the village is no longer provided in detail beyond a certain area. If there is a general sense of annoyance towards the 'people of the Development', the sentiment could be incited because, unlike return migrants who were still to a certain extent welcomed into the rural community due to their past familial connection, the new migrants have no family connections, and their rising numbers could lead the local residents to feel like minority in their own home area (Clout 27). The Vicarage has stopped being the center of activity which denotes the fact that influence of the church was declining, and the concept of Parish was all but gone. Even the home was not free from changes as there was a decline in the domestic service sector with the unavailability of a maid being a recurring theme. Thus, we see in *4.50 from Paddington* this bleak situation of the domestic situation is capitalized by Lucy Eyelsbarrow who starts her own specialized domestic service while in *Mirror Crack'd from Side to Side Miss Marple* reflects on the changing nature of maids who in past had skills, rather than education and compare

them to her present maid Cherry who though 'an intelligent girl, took telephone calls correctly' lacked the skills 'to wash up, and how to make a bed' (Christie *Crack'd* 8).

Many of the effects of urbanisation as seen in rural Britain post-war is noticed in India though much later, during the post liberalisation era. The Indian economy opened up in 1991 and its impact hardly noticeable in the first decade, has since then emerged as the driving force behind changing urban landscape (Shaw 27). In this process, significant changes in land use are taking place, noticeably altering the appearance and atmosphere of certain areas within the cities. The cities encroached on their surrounding area leading to faster rate of growth of suburbs and peripheral areas much of which was a result of considerable decentralization very much alike post-war Britain (Shaw 28-29). The process of liberalization led to a change in market relations where smaller and more local shops lost their importance to much by larger departmental stores. Within this lies the economic conflict of formal and informal, local and global showcasing the struggle over space and the multi-layered nature of the issues involved (Shaw 75).

Another aspect of similarity which is noticed between post-war Britain and post liberalisation is the rise of the new middle class. Leela Fernandes, in her book *India's New Middle Class* (2006) comments that "the rise of the new Indian middle class represents the political construction of a social group that operates as a proponent of economic liberalization." (Leela xviii). This middle class is not "new" in the sense of having a different structural or social foundation. In other words, its "newness" does not imply that it consists of previously lower-income individuals moving up into the middle class. Instead, the term "new" refers to the creation of a distinct social and political identity that stakes a claim to the advantages brought about by economic liberalisation. The emergence of this identity is linked to the socio-economic transformations driven by liberalisation policies, which have created opportunities for economic and cultural capital accumulation, reinforcing their privileged position in the evolving social hierarchy (Leela xviii).

In conclusion, this paper has explored the shifting dynamics of rural and urban landscapes as depicted in Agatha Christie's *Miss Marple* series, illustrating how these narratives serve as historical maps of socio-economic and cultural transformation. Through the lens of Henri Lefebvre's spatial theory, Christie's portrayal of rural England from the inter-war period to the post-war era reveals the profound impact of urbanisation, migration, and changing market relations on traditional community structures. The comparative analysis with contemporary urban fragmentation in India underscores the universal nature of these spatial transitions, reinforcing the notion that rural and urban identities are in constant negotiation.

More than mere backdrops to crime fiction, Christie's villages reflect the anxieties of modernization—nostalgia for a vanishing world and apprehension toward an unfamiliar future. The disruption of long-standing social ties and the erosion of localized knowledge challenge our understanding of "place" and belonging. As today's cities and rural areas continue to evolve, often in ways that mirror the patterns observed in Christie's England, the question remains: how do communities reconcile the preservation of identity with the inevitability of change? This inquiry not only extends the relevance of Christie's work but also invites reflection on our own spatial and cultural landscapes in the face of ongoing urban expansion and social transformation.

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