

**DE-SCRIBING THE GARDEN IN FICTION: A STUDY
THROUGH SELECT TEXTS**

**A thesis submitted in part fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of**

Doctor of Philosophy

PRIYANKA SAHA

Registration No. TZ166928 of 2016



SCHOOL OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

TEZPUR UNIVERSITY

JULY 2024

CONCLUSION

The thesis studies the fictional renderings of gardens in select texts from the nineteenth to the twenty-first century and underlines the idea that the horticultural imaginary takes on protean forms of expression that are ideologically charged. These literary expressions of gardening offer insights into how contemporary understandings of the empire, sexuality, the divine and the mysterious, human-non-human interactions are interwoven into the arboreal imagination and the act of cultivation.

The garden can be thought of as an ideological tool shaping our perceptions of the self and the world. The act of digging, planting, making the soil yield and shaping it to desired shapes and forms engender ideas relating to world building, disciplining, the beautiful and ugly, the productive and the aesthetic, exclusion, purification and nurturing. These highlight the thematic concerns of nation making, husbandry, contemplation of the divine and sacralising of landscapes, cultivation for food, recreation and conservation.

Apart from the ideological import of the act of cultivation and weeding, the metaphor of the garden as Eden lends itself to the image of an ideal time and place of bountiful nature, human and non-human harmony, and a world under the providential grace of a benevolent God. The idea of the garden as Eden leads to ruminations of a golden past often giving rise either to nostalgic inaction or to attempts at recreating the same in the present era. This finds expression in the form of the Medieval *hortus conclusus*, in the Islamic *chahar bagh*, in countries conceived as Edenic redosings such as the USA, or even in national parks used for conservation and recreating a haven for rare plants and animals.

Such ideological insinuations of the gardens can be supported through observations by such philosophers and scholars such as Voltaire, Simone de Beauvoir, Foucault, Raymond Williams, Henry Nash Smith, R.W.B Lewis, Zygmunt Bauman, Carolyn Merchant, Donna Haraway etc. While Voltaire's "cultivate your own garden" sees the garden as a site of withdrawal, stoicism and political quietism, Bauman's idea of the holocaust as a sort of weeding out of Jews in order to maintain the purity of the *Reichgarten* reinforces gardening as a political metaphor. Beauvoir's observations on the origins of agriculture unearth the shared roots with gender formation which are effected through the act of husbandry and the demystification of the earth and woman. Drawing on the idea of land as woman, Merchant observes how nature is seen in the image of

either an unruly woman or a cornucopian garden mother waiting to soothe the anxieties of men. Henry Nash Smith's idea of America as virgin land and Lewis' notion of the American Adam has gendered implications as here the nation is seen as an inviting landscape in need of cultivation by a man. Foucault sees the garden as an example of heterotopia of juxtaposition and a space packed with meanings. Finally, Haraway's idea of plantationocene offers a way of looking the current geological epoch effected by large scale movement of plants and people.

Gardens in fiction elucidate the worldviews reflected in the lives of characters, cultural shifts within communities, nations and the planet across centuries. Landscape gardens in fiction open up discussions on taste and aesthetic implications of Englishness and improvement which effectively takes place through the screening off of any kind of ugliness or signs of productivity. This is replicated in the larger colonial patterns of labour happening elsewhere on other gardens named plantations and providing the basis for beautiful garden designs at home. The idea of the New World as Eden gives forth the idea of the garden state disciplining bodies and weeding out or punishing transgressive desires, while the actual wilderness in the form of old pines in the forest hint at the clearing of wild growth in order to carve a controlled garden nation.

The parks of national importance in fiction becomes sites offering an allegory of the foundational narratives of the nation such as encounter of the New World by the explorers who met with a howling wilderness, transcendental experience in the lap of nature, the image of hero in American culture escaping from civilization to the wild, and displacement and violence at the root of creation of national civilizations. The garden becomes instrumental in the shift in the British national ethos emphasizing aesthetics in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries to one which places weight on productivity and food cultivation in the wake of food shortage in the two world wars. With the formation of The Women's Land Army, an association of women who could take up cultivation and fill in the gaps left by men who were enlisted in the army, the traditional class divisions were challenged as women were recruited from across different classes and made to work the land. The national myth and image of landscape gardens designed by men here undergoes sea change leading to a new kind of garden myth, that of women working the land and feeding the nation.

The idea of the garden as interlinked with the idea of the sacred and dangerous derives from its Edenic implications. The garden is seen as a space for rumination of the holy, the beautiful and safe haven and secret space to be protected from any kind of profanation. The acts of tilling, planting and clearing up of space might be seen as a kind of world building and as linked with the act of cosmicising. The cosmos modeled after the perfect form of the eternal garden is seen as existing outside of time in a paradisaical, pure state. As in the case of the Puritan America, nations seen in an image of Edenic purity are visualized as gardens to be protected and often resorting to violence in order to uphold its sacrality. Apart from its sacred connotations, the garden in fiction is imagined as a potent space housing magic, a force seen as profane and opposed to the sacred.

Fictional depictions of the garden spaces take on microcosmic forms of the processes of colonization through religion where the profane space of magic symbolizing the oriental colonies is subdued and subsumed in favour of Christian theology and scientific temperament. Parallels are drawn between an overgrown secret garden with teeming wilderness and transgressive females exuding physical and artistic fertility, taking up residence in the same, making it a forbidden space challenging the sacrality of the Victorian household overseen by a patriarch. From an ecological standpoint, the garden becomes a site of reasserting sacred ties with the land. The garden in this case offers a subversive text challenging the geometrical understanding of the world in the wake of colonialism as the garden land alongside the act of cultivation is seen as ordained by God and the stewardship of the earth seen as sacred duty.

The gendered implications of the tropes of cultivation are seen in the culturing of female bodies by men and also in the sexually charged image of Edenic bliss and transgression. The garden metaphor when linked to the national myths of countries such the U.S. gives rise to a set of gendered images in literature and popular culture. The idea of the new world as virgin land and an inviting landscape is played on, on one hand, to account for forbidden sexual desires finding expression in gardenscapes and parks, and to espouse the idea of Adam being tempted by Eve in the American garden on the other. In poststructuralist renderings of this myth, the idea is subverted in order to turn the Adamic character into an object of the sexual act and a fertile garden to be cultivated, by operating on the male body to turn the same into a female one.

The metaphor of the garden lends itself to the idea of seeing women as wild nature to be tamed by men through imposing forms on them. Their complex emotions and motives are often reduced to archetypes and images as the women are variously compared to different kinds of gardens as a nunnery garden, chaste and wholly spiritual, or a sinning paradise, teeming with promiscuity. The botanical garden carries gendered implications symbolizing conquest of wild nature by explorers, mostly men, who went out in search of exotic plant specimens across the world and carried them back for taming in gardens at home. The fictional depictions of these gardens suggest parallels between the culturing of plants and of women who work and surround themselves in those, leading them to adapt a scientific temperament and a gendered fashioning on terms laid out by men who own those gardens.

The Edenic metaphor along with the scale at which the act of cultivation takes place has lasting impacts on a planetary scale. The metaphor of Eden hints at nature lost in the past and a fall from an Edenic state of human-nonhuman harmony. This leads to nostalgic inaction and anxious attempts at conserving nature in its “pristine” forms with the assumption that much of nature has already vanished. On the other hand, the Edenic insinuations of natural glory are also implicated in the attempts to recreate the same in the form of parks for amusement, plantations for monocropping over large swathes of land which inevitably calls for dispossession of people and exploitative land use. Another kind of garden, however, finds expression in the form of cultivation work on rooftops, by roadside or at abandoned buildings or sites. In addition to supplementing food requirements, these kinds of garden signal conservation work by creating more nature instead of preserving the same and expanding the idea of nature. Anthropocene fiction offers interesting depictions, juxtapositions and contrasts between the two forms of horticultural expressions highlighting the two ways of coming to terms with the Anthropocene, vis-à-vis the garden, one exploitative and violent, and the other, nurturing and conservational.

The garden is an ideologically charged text that both furthers and subverts understandings of national, gendered, religious and ecological worldviews. Ideas relating to landscape gardening and the idea of Englishness, the agrarian myth, national parks, nations conceived of as garden lands of discipline, all highlight the significance of land and cultivation in the nationalist myth. Further, the land as virgin or wilderness in need

of husbandry or parallels between the conquest of natural world and the sexual act offer cues as to how our gendered understanding of the world is informed by our workings on the land. The Edenic insinuations of the garden cut through and inform, apart from its nation and gendered perspectives, the views of land as sacred and gardening as way of retrieving the paradisaical state on earth through the stewardship. Gardens, whether inside or outside of homes and lived spaces, are part of larger ideological-aesthetic-epistemological formations that demand appropriate historical descriptions in different geo-temporal contexts. The use of the garden in the novel, seen this way, provides not only key imprints of culture and ideology but also guarantees access to key moments in the history of planetary lives.