

INTRODUCTION

This work examines the ideological implications of garden spaces in select Anglophone works of fiction from the nineteenth to the twenty-first century. The study is premised on the idea that gardens are social formations in the same way that novels are. While traditionally the garden is seen as a green space contributing to beauty or to the serving of horticultural ends, the thesis argues that such spaces represent ideological formations and social webbing in the novel. The thesis thus offers fresh perspectives on (i) the colonial and nationalist roots of the ‘science’ of gardening, (ii) the complex mapping of agriculture, especially horticulture, and gender formation and (iii) the political-spiritual alignments between ecological conservation and the Anthropocene. This leads to the act of describing and de-scribing or unraveling.

The hyphen in the title ‘de-scribing’ suggests that scribing (writing) is also an act of voluntary and involuntary erasures (carrying the opposite sense of scribing). As we write, we keep on de-centering ideas, motives and motifs. This creates a complex web both of description (narration) or deceit (ideological grounding)

Chapter 1, titled “Framing the Garden in the Novel,” seeks to look at the concept and contexts of the garden as space, act and metaphor and aims to situate the thesis in the critical tradition of garden studies in literature and cultures. The idea of the garden translates Eden into an enclosure but the enclosure defines itself ontologically and epistemologically vis-à-vis the putatively limitless cosmic space. This tension in the act of shaping of nature or its Edenic overtures is drawn from its imaginings in philosophy, art, literature, botany and empire. The review of literature for this chapter is accordingly divided into clusters. The first of these looks at the meaning and metaphor of the garden as discussed by critics and theorists such as Raymond Williams (*The Country and the City*, 1973), Tom Turner (*Garden History*, 2003), Mark Francis and Randolph T. Hester Jr. (*The Meaning of Gardens*, 1990) and Gordon Campbell (*Garden History*, 2019). The second cluster looks at the history of gardening in such works as Tom Turner’s *Garden History* (2003), Elizabeth Blackmar and Roy Rosenzweig’s *The Park and its People* (1992) and Eugenia Herbert’s *Flora’s Empire* (2011). The garden and its Edenic understandings discussed in writers such as R.W.B Lewis (*The American Adam*, 1955), Annette Kolodny (*The Lay of the Land*, 1975), Raymond Williams (*The Country and the City*, 1973), Carolyn Merchant (*Reinventing Eden*, 2003) and Stephen Greenblatt (*The Rise and Fall of Adam and Eve*, 2017) form the third cluster. The next cluster discusses

the garden as imagined by philosophers such as Voltaire (*Candide*, 1759), Michel Foucault ("Of Other Spaces," 1984) and Zygmunt Bauman (*Modernity and the Holocaust*, 1989). How the garden figures in the discourses of the empire is examined in the fifth cluster in writers such as Richard Grove (*Green Imperialism*, 1994), Londa Schiebinger and Claudia Swan (*Colonial Botany*, 2005) and Jayeeta Sharma (*Empire's Garden*, 2011). The chapter also looks at the upsurge of botanical literature in the last two decades in works such as Michael Pollan's *The Botany of Desire: A Plant's Eye View of the World* (2001), Dawn Keetley and Angela Tenga's *Plant Horror* (2016), Elizabeth Hope Chang's *Novel Cultivations* (2019), and Anna Burton's *Trees in Nineteenth Century English Fiction: The Silvicultural Novel* (2021), which hint at a growing interest in non-human scholarship and entwined lives. The final cluster looks at the recent body of work on the meaning and implications of the garden in literature which includes texts such as *Garden Plots: The Poetics and Politics of Gardens* (2006), Jennifer Munroe's *Gender and Garden in Early Modern English Literature* (2008), Shelley Boyd's *Garden Plots: Canadian Women and their Literary Gardens* (2013), Jennifer Atkinson's *Gardenland* (2018), and Sue Edney's *Ecogothic Gardens in the Long Nineteenth Century* (2020). The chapter also discusses the frames of nation, gender, ecology, and the sacred used to discuss gardens in each of the chapters.

Chapter 2, titled "The Garden and the Nation", examines the links between gardens and narratives of nation formation. The gardens examined in this chapter in novels such as Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* (1814), Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), Paul Auster's *Moon Palace* (1989) and Rhys Bowen's *The Victory Garden* (2019) offer critiques of the dominant national narratives. The chapter looks at how Austen's narrative offers an understanding and a critique of the act of pushing aside of labour in favour of aesthetics in relation to the estate garden, an act upholding the English values of stability and offering a picture of pastoral quiet. The processes of production kept aside here were brought to the fore by the World War which called upon people to actively engage themselves in the cultivation and production of food, thereby challenging the old notions of stability as seen in Rhys Bowen's *The Victory Garden*. The Puritanical notions of American Eden find expression in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* in the form of the garden world of restricted behaviour in seventeenth century Massachusetts. In Paul Auster's *Moon Palace*, this garden world mirrors the

foundations of the New World where Central Park does not seem to offer respite in an all pervasive capitalist setup.

In Chapter 3, titled “The Sacred and the Profane in the Garden,” the implications of the garden as a sacred space of healing and ecological embeddedness and as a profane space of transgression and one animated by magic is discussed. The chapter looks at texts such as Frances Hodgson Burnett’s *The Secret Garden*, (1911), Kate Morton’s *The Forgotten Garden* (2008), J.M. Coetzee’s *Life and Times of Michael K* (1983) and Nadeem Aslam’s *The Blind Man’s Garden* (2013) to examine how the garden becomes the site of debates surrounding the sacralising of space.

Chapter 4, titled “Sexual Politics in the Garden,” examines the sexual metaphor of gardens in novels like D.H. Lawrence’s *Sons and Lovers* (1913), Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita* (1955), Angela Carter’s *The Passion of New Eve* (1977), and Elizabeth Gilbert’s *The Signature of All Things* (2013). The use of the motifs of Eden and cultivation in Lawrence and Nabokov are informed by the ideas of control of nature and sexuality and female body and the gendered notion of spatiality. Gilbert draws attention to this masculinist control of nature in botanical gardens while in the garden offers a mode of subversion and a means to gendered and sexual fluidity in Carter. The chapter thus argues that garden depictions and its metaphorical implications of culturing, seeding, paradisiacal bliss partake in construction of notions of masculinity and femininity in fiction.

Chapter 5, titled “The Garden in the Anthropocene,” looks at how the garden figures in ecological debates pertaining to the Anthropocene. From humble cultivation in the backyard to large scale transformations of landscape in estates and plantations, gardening as an act of shaping nature is central to the idea of the human as a geological force. The chapter looks at how such discussions play out in the pastoral depictions of the garden as nature and paradise lost on one hand, and, as an opportunity to reclaim nature on the other. In texts like *Tom’s Midnight Garden* (1958), the garden figures as a place of childhood nostalgia to which one can escape only in dreams or fantasy, while the urban backyard is not seen as a site for garden. The chapter discusses texts such as *The Year of the Flood* (2009), and *The Lowland* (2013), where the garden becomes a way of stewardship and creating new nature.