

Spatializing Pedagogical Resistance: Reimagining the Classroom Through Soja's Thirdspace in Mathangi Subramanian's *Dear Mrs. Naidu*

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Abstract— “People are intrinsically spatial beings,” Edward Soja observes in *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places*. Transdisciplinary research moves beyond isolated disciplines to tackle problems often swept under the rug. Literary spatial analysis frequently limits itself to geography, culture, or socioeconomic settings without exploring how these concepts operate in real-world institutional practices. Bridging literary studies, spatial trialectics, and educational policy, this paper examines the structural crisis of educational inequality in Mathangi Subramanian's young adult novel *Dear Mrs. Naidu* (2015). Set in urban Bengaluru against the backdrop of India's Right to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act of 2009, the study uses Soja's spatial framework to map how educational access is physically and institutionally segregated. The crumbling infrastructure of under-resourced government schools' functions as Firstspace, i.e concrete material reality, while the bureaucratic promises of the RTE Act represent Secondspace, i.e conceived policy representations. Top-down policies fail to deliver educational justice when trapped between physical neglect and administrative non-compliance. In response, twelve-year-old protagonist Sarojini constructs a pedagogical Thirdspace which is a lived domain of critical reflection and strategic subversion. By transforming a routine assignment into an epistolary dialogue with freedom fighter Sarojini Naidu and establishing a student-led Child Rights Club, Sarojini extends learning beyond school walls into community activism. Ultimately, the paper concludes that Subramanian's novel redefines the classroom not as a static container, but as a fluid site of spatial literacy and collective action capable of challenging systemic segregation.

Index Terms—Edward Soja, Thirdspace, Spatial Theory, *Dear Mrs. Naidu*, Mathangi Subramanian, Critical Pedagogy, Right to Education (RTE) Act.

School walls do more than just hold up a roof. They define who belongs, who stays outside, and who gets heard. In postcolonial urban landscapes like Bengaluru, educational institutions do not merely reflect existing social hierarchies; they actively build them out of concrete, iron gates, and bureaucratic boundary lines. Mathangi Subramanian's 2015 young adult novel, *Dear Mrs. Naidu*, steps right into this tension. It tells the story of Sarojini, a twelve-year-old girl attending an underfunded government school, as she navigates the fallout of the Right to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act of 2009. Literary scholarship on Indian young adult fiction frequently centres on themes of coming-of-age, identity formation, or socio-economic hardship. Yet, such approaches often treat the setting, including the physical school, the slum, or the private academy, as a passive backdrop. This paper argues that space is an active participant in Subramanian's narrative. Using cultural geographer Edward Soja's trialectics of spatiality, particularly his concept of Thirdspace, alongside Edward W. Said's critical insights on imaginative geography and spatial authority, it can be traced how school spaces turn into battlegrounds for social justice. Said asserts in *Orientalism* (1978) that spatial boundaries are socially constructed to maintain power, noting that geographic boundaries accompany social, ethnic, and cultural distinctions, creating imaginary geographies that intensify the sense of

difference. In the context of postcolonial education, elite schools construct such imaginative geographies to preserve institutional exclusivity. Top-down educational policies fail to bring real equity when they rely solely on administrative rules. Because of this gap, marginalised students must carve out their own spatial strategies to claim their right to learn. Subramanian structures the novel around Sarojini's letters to the late Indian freedom fighter and poet Sarojini Naidu. What begins as a routine class assignment quickly evolves into a personal tool for critical thinking and civic action. Sarojini does not just observe the physical decay of her classroom or the bureaucratic failures of policy but rather actively transforms her environment. By blending her lived experiences with historical reflection and grassroots activism, she builds a flexible, subversive learning space within and beyond her school.

To understand how the spatial trialectics comes into play in the novel, the spatial theory must be broken down. Edward Soja, expanding on the spatial theories of Henri Lefebvre, argues in *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places* (1996) that human spatial experience is built on three interconnected dimensions. The first dimension is Firstspace, or spatial practice, which covers the material, empirically measurable environment. In education, this includes physical buildings, broken furniture, blackboards, boundary walls, and spatial proximity to resources. The second dimension is Secondspace, or representations of space, which is conceptualised space designed by planners, urbanists, and policymakers. This covers legislative blueprints like the RTE Act, official curricula, institutional regulations, and ideological assertions about what a school should be. The third dimension is Thirdspace, or representational spaces, which is a radically open, trialectic space that combines Firstspace and Secondspace while resisting both. Soja explains that Thirdspace is a place where everything comes together: subjectivity and objectivity, the abstract and the concrete, the real and the imagined, structure and agency. Complementing Soja's model, Edward Said argues in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) that struggle over geography is not only about soldiers and cannons but also about ideas, about forms, about images and imaginings. When applied to institutional spaces, Said's framework demonstrates how administrative authority dictates who has the legitimacy to occupy

specific spaces. Traditional critical pedagogy, rooted in Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), highlights how education can either oppress or liberate through dialogue and consciousness-raising. Joining Freire's pedagogical theories with Soja's and Said's spatial frameworks allows one to see the classroom as more than just a site of intellectual exchange. It is a physical, ideational, and postcolonial territory. When educational policy, representing Secondspace, fails to fix material deficiencies found in Firstspace, learning spaces turn rigid and oppressive. Resisting that oppression requires spatial literacy, which is the ability to decipher, critique, and restructure the spatial arrangements that enforce social inequality.

Subramanian paints a stark picture of urban educational inequality through Sarojini's description of her material surroundings. Her school, the Ambedkar Town Government School, embodies the harsh reality of Firstspace neglect. Sarojini observes the structural decay around her, questioning the systemic abandonment of government institutions: "If they really want us to succeed, why don't they just fix the schools we can go to for free?" (Subramanian 42). The school relies on inadequate infrastructure, broken desks, and crumbling walls that reinforce the poverty of its students. This physical decay is not accidental; it reflects a systemic distribution of resources. Firstspace is never neutral. The peeling paint, leaking roofs, and shortage of desks continuously remind students of their low standing in the urban hierarchy. Across town, elite private schools feature high walls, air-conditioned labs, sprawling playgrounds, and security guards designed to keep out the surrounding slum communities. These material setups shape student subjectivity, silently communicating who deserves dynamic learning environments and who must settle for physical decay. As Said emphasises, spatial dominance relies on establishing clear visual and physical divides that code spaces as either superior or inferior.

Secondspace enters the novel through India's Right to Education (RTE) Act of 2009. The policy mandates that private schools reserve twenty-five percent of their entry-level seats for children from economically weaker sections. On paper, the RTE Act represents a democratic vision of educational space. It promises to break down socio-economic segregation through policy design. Yet Subramanian exposes how this

conceived space falls apart when put into practice. Private school administrators use bureaucratic loopholes, fake address verification demands, and social intimidation to keep disadvantaged students out. The policy exists as an abstract promise that fails to alter the lived realities of children in Ambedkar Town. The turning point occurs when Sarojini's best friend, Amir, moves to a private school under the RTE quota, only to be marginalised within its walls. Amir is forced to sit at the back of the classroom, barred from extracurricular activities, and treated as an unwelcome outsider by teachers and peers alike. Amma warns Sarojini about challenging these institutional spaces, whispering: "You know I'll do anything for your future, ma. But if you stir up trouble, you'll get a reputation, and no one will take you no matter how much we pay" (Subramanian 114). Amir's experience highlights the core limitation of Secondspace interventions. Moving a working-class body into an elite physical space does not automatically guarantee spatial justice. Without changing the underlying social dynamics, the elite school simply reproduces spatial segregation inside the classroom walls.

Faced with Firstspace neglect and Secondspace failures, Sarojini begins building a Thirdspace through her writing. Her teacher, Annie Miss, assigns the class a writing exercise, advocating for a learning environment where critical thinking and emotional growth are prioritised. Sarojini chooses Freedom Fighter Sarojini Naidu, initiating an extended epistolary journey. What makes this letter-writing act a true Thirdspace is that it operates outside traditional spatial and temporal boundaries. Sarojini turns her notebook into an unrestricted zone of critical inquiry, stepping beyond the rigid monitoring of her physical classroom. In her early letters, Sarojini writes with hesitation, treating the assignment as a standard academic task. But as she sees the injustices around her, the notebook transforms into a private lab for spatial critique. Sarojini realises her own growing agency, asserting her resolve to break institutional silence: "I don't care what's written; I'm rewriting it" (Subramanian 156). Through this epistolary link, Sarojini engages in what Soja calls combining real and imagined places. She bridges India's anti-colonial past with its neoliberal present. She draws on historical movements for independence to challenge modern educational inequalities. The letters also dissolve

traditional classroom power dynamics. In the physical classroom of Firstspace, Sarojini is a passive listener, expected to memorise facts for standardised tests. In her notebook within Thirdspace, she becomes the active inquirer. She questions government officials, critiques school administrators, and evaluates legal frameworks. Writing becomes a spatial act, functioning as an internal sanctuary where she develops the critical consciousness needed to take action in the real world.

Sarojini's critical awakening does not stay trapped on the pages of her notebook. Thirdspace is not merely an intellectual exercise; it demands real-world action to reshape lived environments. As Sarojini comes to understand how the RTE Act is being undermined, she moves from private reflection to public activism by forming the Child Rights Club. This student-led group brings together children from different backgrounds, including Sarojini from the government school, Amir from his elite private school, and Deepti, a girl who dropped out to work. They transform an abandoned construction site near their settlement into their meeting hub. By selecting an unmonitored, informal location outside home and school, the children establish a physical Thirdspace. Here, they discuss legal rights, audit local school conditions, and plan their strategies. Sarojini embraces this active posture, noting: "If I let worrying stop me, I'd never do anything. I'd never try to change anything" (Subramanian 188).

The club's work directly challenges the boundary between the classroom and the street. Recognising that adults often ignore their complaints; the children gather empirical evidence. They survey local families, document RTE violations, and map out children who have been illegally denied admission to neighbourhood schools. When they petition the local educational authority, they use their gathered data to demand working infrastructure and fair admissions. Sarojini anchors her determination in the legal promise of justice, recognising that "The law is on your side. And the law is a powerful thing" (Subramanian 162). They refuse to accept the official story that there are no resources available. By bringing community data directly to government offices, the children force administrators to confront the reality of their failure. The classroom expands beyond four walls to encompass the entire neighbourhood, demonstrating

that true learning happens through active civic participation.

Analysing *Dear Mrs. Naidu* through Soja's and Said's spatial frameworks highlights key insights for critical pedagogy in postcolonial literature. First, the novel exposes Firstspace neglect by showing that physical conditions matter. The quality of education alone cannot be underlined while ignoring crumbling infrastructure, dirty water, and a lack of basic supplies, because material conditions directly impact student dignity and learning. Second, it subverts Secondspace control, demonstrating that top-down policies like the RTE Act often fail when they treat equity as a simple administrative checkbox. Without public oversight and student agency, official regulations can easily become tools of exclusion.

Third, it highlights the creation of lived Thirdspaces. Sarojini's journey demonstrates that marginalised students are not passive victims of their environment. By using creative tools like epistolary writing, community clubs, and the help of the media, alternative learning spaces can be constructed that foster critical consciousness and real social change. Subramanian's novel redefines what it means to be literate in a deeply unequal world. Reading and writing are not just functional tools for job preparation; they are spatial practices that allow individuals to map out, critique, and transform their world. Mathangi Subramanian's *Dear Mrs. Naidu* shows how literature can unpack complex spatial politics for young readers.

By reading the novel through Edward Soja's Thirdspace theory and Edward Said's spatial critique, the educational inequality that is built into the physical and administrative structures of the modern city can be traced. The novel rejects the idea that legislative reform alone in Secondspace can fix deep material inequities in Firstspace. Instead, true change comes from below. By creating a pedagogical Thirdspace, first through her letters to Sarojini Naidu and then through the Child Rights Club, Sarojini resists the spatial injustice. She proves that a classroom is not defined by its physical boundaries, but by the critical conversations and collective actions that take place within it. Subramanian offers a powerful reminder that when educational systems fail to provide equitable spaces, students and communities will build their own.

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