



Transforming Space into Place: Navigation of Kathmandu's Social Landscape in a Short Story

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Received: April 23, 2025

Revised & Accepted: May 27, 2025

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Abstract

Background: This paper studies the relationship between identity, space, and place in a short story set in Kathmandu. By analyzing Ranjan Adiga's short story "High Heels," set in the urban social space of Kathmandu, this paper explores how a character who migrates to Kathmandu from rural areas experiences both the challenges of exclusion and opportunities for reinvention.

Methods: This paper utilizes a qualitative methodology to perform a close textual analysis. Through close reading, this research scrutinizes the protagonist's experiences of exclusion and reinvention within Kathmandu's society. The study integrates theoretical frameworks from Henri Lefebvre and Yi-Fu Tuan to interpret the story and contextualize the findings within a larger discussion of place-making in an urban hub. **Results:** The results infer that Kathmandu has a dual nature; it can be a space of exclusion and a space for transformation. The protagonist, despite experiencing caste, gender, and religious discrimination, actively seeks to create a sense of belonging through her job, faith, and fashion choices. **Conclusion:** This paper concludes (implies) that urban life has transformative potential for marginalized individuals, where they can challenge societal constraints and forge their own sense of belonging. **Novelty:** This paper introduces a unique perspective on literary analysis, a topic seldom explored in Nepal, where space, place, and identity are rarely analyzed together. It analyzes the entanglements of these elements with individual identity and the sense of belonging within a spatial context. It also offers a novel approach that can pave the way for future literary analysis of literature that deals with identity, literature, and place in Nepal.

Keywords: Place-Making, Identity, Belonging, Exclusion, Urban Transformation



Introduction

[Martin Heidegger \(2011\)](#) in his essay “Building Dwelling Thinking” asserts that, “The relationship between man and space is none other than dwelling, thought essentially” (p. 252). Heidegger’s dwelling is not just a place of lodging; it is the most fundamental way humans can be in this world, which is to find belonging, meaning, and connection to where they dwell. This dwelling or feeling of being at home exists within a broader social context. In *The Production of Space*, [Henri Lefebvre \(1991\)](#) argues that the social space is not a neutral backdrop, but is socially produced, and is constantly being reproduced through negotiations. Sometimes, this production is not harmonious, as it favors certain groups and marginalizes others. This unequal production of space makes it difficult for marginalized individuals to find belonging within a social space that does not favor them.

Regarding belonging, [Yi-Fu Tuan \(1977\)](#) suggests that when humans create a meaningful location in space, it turns into a place of belonging, a place where one can dwell (p. 12). Considering this, I argue that if individuals, through their agency, can transform socially produced space into a meaningful place of dwelling, they are able to feel at home or included in the social space. Conversely, if they are unable to transform the space into a meaningful place, they cannot realize the essential dwelling that Heidegger describes.

This understanding of dwelling in socially produced space provides a valuable framework to scrutinize how characters interact with and experience the social space depicted in literature. Every work of literature is fundamentally located in a space, largely known as the setting of the narrative. The setting of the narrative allows readers to locate where the story is unfolding. It also reveals the social reality of the story. Setting elaborates the social space of the narrative, which shapes characters’ experiences and reflects the social context in which they exist. Thus, depending on the social space, characters can feel alienated or welcomed in a particular space. This paper examines how social space shapes human experiences of exclusion and reinvention in the selected story.

In the book titled *The Routledge Handbook of Literature and Space*, [Robert T. Tally, Jr. \(2017\)](#) writes that “[m]atters of space and spatiality are, in some senses, nothing new to literature. Setting is a key feature of almost all stories because stories take place in a given place. Distinctive locales, regions, landscapes, or other pertinent geographical features are often crucial to the meaning and effectiveness of literary works” (p. 1). It explains the importance of spaces and places for stories because they happen in particular places whether imagined, such as Lewis Carroll’s Wonderland in *Alice in Wonderland*, or real places like Paris in Gustav Flaubert’s *Sentimental Education*.

Building on this importance of setting, I turn my attention to the social space of Kathmandu, as depicted in 21st century Nepali diasporic literature written in English. This paper particularly focuses on the story “High Heels” from Ranjan Adiga's [Leech and Other Stories \(2024\)](#). Set in Kathmandu, this story offers valuable insight into the lived reality of individuals in the city. Adiga, an Associate Professor of English at the Westminster University of Salt Lake City, Utah, presents the experience of Sarita, a Dalit (lower-caste) Nepali woman,



who has converted to Christianity. Sarita has left her village home in the fringes of Kathmandu Valley to move into the city. She seeks to better her life in the city, primarily to overcome her caste-based identity and work. Her family's traditional occupation is that of a blacksmith, which in most South Asian countries is seen as impure and hence those who belong to such caste are relegated to the bottom of the social and caste-based hierarchy. Sarita aspires to be a modern working woman and has converted to Christianity seeking a community free from the prejudices she experienced based on her previous Hindu faith.

Literature Review

At present, the story under inspection, and the book *Leech and Other Stories* has not been extensively researched. However, there are some reviews of the books on some websites. [Maximillian Morch \(2024\)](#) in his review mentions that *Leech & Other Stories* by Ranjan Adiga presents a captivating collection of narratives exploring the lives of characters from Nepal, both within the country and abroad. In the story "High Heels" Sarita struggles with workplace dynamics and the complexities of identity and belonging. Another reviewer, [Swapna Peri \(2024\)](#), indicates that the book contains stories that address issues such as the difficulty of belonging, stereotypes, segregation, relocation, and societal standards surrounding desire and sexuality. [Vangmayi Parakala \(2024\)](#) mentions that the story "High Heels" set in a workplace in Nepal exposes how Nepali (and any South Asian) society manages a woman's complaints about safety in the workplace without dealing with the aggressor directly.

These reviewers' observations, while revealing key themes, do not explicitly deal with the experience of character with space and place. Also, the relative lack of academic engagement with *Leech & Other Stories* creates a significant opening for scholarly inquiry. Building upon these preliminary insights and informed by theoretical frameworks of space and place, this paper argues that Sarita, as a domestic migrant, faces significant challenges in establishing a sense of place within Kathmandu's complex social and cultural space. By analyzing the influence of specific spaces within "High Heels," this paper demonstrates how Kathmandu can function as a space of exclusion, while also exploring how these same spaces can offer opportunities for transformation and the potential creation of new places of belonging.

Theoretical Foundation

This paper bases its theoretical framework predominantly on [Henri Lefebvre's \(1991\) *The Production of Space*](#), in which he posits that social space is socially produced. Also, the social relations produced within that space are in turn shaped by the production of that space, and should not be simply understood as a concrete, material object, but also as an ideological, lived, and subjective one ([Warf, 2009, 3](#)). In tandem with this, [Yi-Fu Tuan's \(1977\) *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*](#) provides a corresponding perspective where he argues that space becomes a place as we get to know it better and endow it with value (p. 6). Through these theories, I examine whether Sarita can establish a sense of belonging within Kathmandu's social space. Also, I aim to delve into how, despite the experience of exclusion, Kathmandu's social space allows a space for reinvention for Sarita. She has relocated from the fringes of Kathmandu to the city to better herself, in terms of finances, security, education, and social



factors. However, due to factors, such as caste and gender, make her feel ambivalent to belonging in the city space.

Lefebvre's book, *The Production of Space*, which [Christian Schmid \(2022\)](#) also says is actually *The Production of Urban Space*, because Lefebvre wanted to name it *Théorie de L'espace Urbain* or *The Theory of Urban Space* (p. 315), in which Lefebvre challenges the Cartesian dualism of object and subject, arguing against the traditional view of space as a passive container (p. 1). Instead, Lefebvre proposes a dialectical triad of spaces: the spatial practice, representations of space, and representational spaces ([Yan, 2022, p. 23](#)). This paper is based largely on the analysis of representational spaces, which [Lefebvre \(1991\)](#) equates to space as directly lived through its associated images and symbols, and hence the space of 'inhabitants' and 'users,' . . . (p. 39). It is essentially the spaces used by the people who inhabit them.

Lefebvre's *Production of Space* extends beyond objects to include the reproduction of biological and social relations ([Stewart, 1995, p. 610](#)), emphasizing that social space is not a tangible object but a dynamic outcome of operations and interrelationships ([Lefebvre, 1991, 73](#)). He acknowledges literature's value for spatial analysis, noting that "an already produced space can be decoded can be read" (p. 17), suggesting that space can be understood through the relations of its inhabitants ([Radovic, 2014, p. 15](#)).

If space is produced, such as the urban spaces, there should be a productive process. [Lefebvre \(1991\)](#) mentions that the forces of productions are nature, labour and the organization of labour, technology and knowledge (p. 46). Lefebvre's three interconnected moments in the production of space or the dialectical triad of spaces are perceived or spatial practice, which is the space we experience and interact with daily everyday life. It is influenced by our cultural backgrounds, sensory perceptions, and individual experiences. The conceived or representations of space is the mental representations of space. It is often shaped by technical or ideological perspectives through planners, architects, and politicians, who conceive of space in terms of plans, maps, and theories. Lastly, the lived space is the space where conceived and perceived spaces intersect and conflict. We are talking after all, of the setting in which we live (p. 92). It is the space where we resist, negotiate, and transform the dominant representations of space.

Furthermore, Yi-Fu Tuan's idea of spaces and places from the book *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* offers a profound exploration of how human beings interact with spaces and construct meanings out of them. [Tuan \(1977\)](#) writes that "[p]laces are centers of felt value where biological needs, such as those for food, water, rest, and procreation, are satisfied" (p. 4), emphasizing the human capacity for emotional and social bonds, particularly through nurturing experiences (p. 138). Unlike tangible objects, places are where one dwells (p. 12), which can be a center of meaning and significance. Thus, place extends beyond its physical attributes to encompass the emotional and psychological investments made by individuals. Tuan asserts that humans actively shape space to reflect their feelings and values (p. 6), transforming space into place through sensory experience and reflection (p. 18). He further notes that freedom implies space (p. 52) and that people can feel crowded by various



conditions, including economic and psycho-social factors (p. 60), so it can be postulated that urban centers are places that squeeze people and deprive them of their freedom. Through the use of this, “High Heels” can be explored by how certain locations in Kathmandu become significant to Sarita, serving as sites of exclusion and reinvention.

Similarly, the arguments of this paper hinge on the agency of the character from the story to transform unfamiliar spaces into familiar places. [Tim Cresswell \(2015\)](#), a student of Yi-Fu Tuan in his book *Place an Introduction* defines that, the most straight forward and common definition of place – a meaningful location (p. 30). But how can a location be meaningful? Cresswell elaborates that transforming space into place can be done by having [a] common strategy to make the space say something about you. You add your own possessions, rearrange the furniture within the limits of the space, put your own posters on the wall, arrange a few books purposefully on the desk. Thus space is turned into place. Your place (p. 24). Hence, hypothetically, everyone in the world is engaged in making their own place in the world, to create meaning in their lives, to belong to a location.

Methods

This paper utilizes a qualitative research design focusing primarily on literary textual analysis of the short story "High Heels." The methodology involved multiple close readings of the primary text to gain a comprehensive understanding of its content and context. Particular attention was given to the narrative patterns to identify the character's experience of not belonging (i.e. exclusion) and reinvention within the setting of the story. The study integrates theoretical frameworks from Henri Lefebvre and Yi-Fu Tuan. These frameworks help interpret the story and contextualize the findings within the discussions of place-making and urban spaces. These sources provide additional support and context for the analysis, which enriches the understanding of the themes and dynamics present in "High Heels."

The data analysis was qualitative, centering on the interpretation of the text and the identification of connections between the protagonist's identity, experiences, and the broader social dynamics illustrated in the story. Furthermore, this paper adopts an interdisciplinary approach, which helped integrate insights from urban studies and social theory to inspect the discoveries within a larger discourse on social exclusion and urban spaces. This approach endeavors to provide an awareness of how the social spaces of Kathmandu are produced, experienced, and transformed by characters navigating complex social environments in literature.

The final step involves synthesizing the findings to provide an understanding of the social spaces of Kathmandu as depicted in the story. The intention is to explore how the protagonist's experiences reflect themes of identity and belonging in an urban setting. By following these methodological steps, the study provides a nuanced analysis of the narrative,



unveiling the complex interplay between space, identity, and belonging in the context of Kathmandu's social landscape.

Textual Analysis

Intersectional Identity and Exclusion

[Robert J. Tally Jr. \(2017\)](#) argues that cities are social spaces produced by human activity and are an active force in shaping human societies (p. 30). Society according to [Lefebvre \(1991\)](#) is, “a space and an architecture of concepts, forms and laws whose abstract truth is imposed on the reality of the senses, of bodies, of wishes and desires” (p. 139). The social structure of concepts, forms, and laws exert control over our physical experiences and our psyche. It leads to the inhabitants experiencing inclusion and exclusion within a social space. [Hilary Silver \(2007\)](#) defines exclusion as a multidimensional process that prevents individuals or groups from fully participating in the economic, social, and political life of their society (p. 534). This was the idea originated in France in 1974. This leads to the marginalization of the excluded groups, and they have limited agency to access resources, opportunities, and social networks essential for integrating into society.

In South Asia, [Joanna Pfaff-Czarnecka et al. \(2009\)](#) mentions that exclusion was based on caste, ethnicity, and racism that predate discourse in Europe (p. 1). For centuries the social and cultural systems excluded certain communities from common facilities or benefits. Historically, social exclusion in Nepal has been rooted in the Hinduism-dominated political and social ideology. The state condoned the discrimination and supported it through structural barriers in access to resources, justice and services by the excluded social groups such as women, Janajatis [Indigenous people], Madhesis [People from the Lowlands of Nepal] and religious and linguistic minorities ([Pfaff-Czarnecka et al., 2009, p. 5](#)). According to Harka Gurung quoted in Pfaff, “State advocacy of Hindu religion relegates the Janajati, ethnics, Dalits and other non-Hindus as peripheral subjects. Caste system perpetuates untouchables that inhibit the right to equality of Dalit (p. 5).” This is the basis of exclusion in Nepal.

Kathmandu's social space is a space where Hindu norms and values are reproduced and spread through education and even the mass media, both of which ignore or marginalize groups other than Parbate Brahmin and Chhetris by what is or is not taught in schools and published in the press ([Pradhan, 2006, p. 175](#)). It generates social exclusion of groups and individuals that do not adhere to Hindu values. [Thomas Bell \(2016\)](#) mentions that in Nepal, “the norms of high-caste Hindus from the hills were constitutionally defined as national traits, and made compulsory by law” (p. 244). Thus, in a space occupied by the dominant Hindu patriarchy, “people, practices, objects, and representations” ([Gieryn cited in Binit, 2022, p. 80](#)) that are seen as others find it hard to create a meaningful place is fundamentally interwoven with the Hindu patriarchy and caste-based hierarchies. In the story “High Heels,” Sarita, a low-caste Kami woman and a Christian convert faces multidimensional oppression. Sarita's only desire in her life is to break free from the societal constraints, especially those imposed by a patriarchal and caste-conscious society in Kathmandu.

Her workplace, Nepal National Bank, is a place deeply rooted in power structures. It is not a meaningful space for her because she faces subtle and overt forms of discrimination and



harassment. Her experience with Binod, a colleague who showered attention on her ([Adiga, 2024, 109](#)), shows that she is facing challenges in transforming her office space of work into a meaningful place of self-empowerment. No one asks Sarita for lunch, not even Binod ([Adiga, 2024, p. 109](#)). Binod was someone who flirted with Sarita when his other lackey friends were not around her. He also showed his curiosity about Christianity to be closer to Sarita saying, "How does a lost soul achieve salvation?" ([Adiga, 2024, p. 121](#)). This was just to be close to Sarita, but when they are alone in a secluded place Binod "without warning, slid his hand underneath her bra and squeezed her naked breast" ([Adiga, 2024, p. 123](#)). Binod is creating a false sense of connection and physical connection illustrating the physical violation and harassment women face in spaces where they are marginalized.

Sarita's working desk arrangement in her office was a nuisance to her:

Sarita and the three men were confined to this cramped remittance room with an awkward table arrangement where her back was permanently exposed to their crude eyes and remarks. So many times, Sarita complained to the management, but they kept brushing it off as a temporary arrangement. ([Adiga, 2024, p. 110](#))

The small remittance room, with its table arrangement, creates a physically restrained environment that reinforces the power imbalance between Sarita and the three men. Her back permanently exposed to their eyes and remarks represents the vulnerability and lack of privacy she experiences. The office space is a public place where Sarita undergoes unwanted attention just because she is a woman ([Xiangming et al., 2018, p. 42](#)). Sarita's helpless position and the men's more dominant roles create a space where she feels weak to stop the harassment. The workplace is portrayed as a space that reinforces traditional gender roles, with men holding power and women being subjected to domination.

This powerlessness is also felt by the manager of the bank who is also a woman. Sarita was surprised how the manager was likewise dominated by the patriarchal space of the society as a whole:

She felt a mixture of awe and pity for her manager, a woman of wealth, education and a taste for pencil skirts—the steady clatter of her high heels on the concrete floor was enough to put everyone's mind to work, but rumour also had it that the manager declined a promotion because she wouldn't dare earn more than her husband unless she wanted to be a home wrecker. No matter how many fancy degrees they had, Hindu women preferred to toil under gender oppression. ([Adiga, 2024, p. 111](#))

The manager's wealth and education show that she belongs to a high class. However, even within the high class, she is under the control of societal gender norms of not seeking to surpass her husband's income and being seen as an overachiever than the husband leading to people judging her husband as an underachiever, leading to instability in their home. This clearly illustrates that the workplace is under patriarchal domination, whose ties do not extend to all members, especially to women. Thus, women are excluded from work place – a place based community ([Xiangming et al., 2018, p. 45](#)). Hence, the space of contemporary Kathmandu is



influenced by the traditional values and beliefs of the Hindu society, where even educated and successful women are oppressed.

Additionally, Sarita disliked the Hindu caste system, as she was living a life where she couldn't even step inside the kitchen of anyone above her station ([Adiga, 2024, p. 119](#)); she had experienced the active exclusion propounded by the Hindu dogma. [Amartya Sen \(2004\)](#) argues that active exclusion is deliberate and implemented by policy or laws (pp. 15-16). Nepal's Muluki Ain, the Country Code of 1854 placed some communities, such as Dalits or untouchables ([Bhattachan, 2009, p. 17](#)). The state policy and practices sternly excluded Dalits, which is still prominent today. The regulation lead to extreme disadvantage and exclusion, which Naila Kabeer asserts is hard-core exclusion, as in the case of Dalits, who are disadvantaged economically, politically, and culturally (cited in [Pradhan, 2006, p. 167](#)). So, when Priest Mathew came to spread the message of the Bible, she discovered that she could be saved from an eternally cursed life as a low-caste Hindu ([Adiga, 2024, p. 112](#)). Sarita's aspiration was to be able to speak fluent English, earn money, have a college degree (p. 111), desire for upper social mobility, and be something. Thus, she came to Kathmandu and found a single room apartment near St Mary's Church (p. 114). The church and bible had allowed her to aspire to look for a place where she had more agency that fulfilled her ambition.

Sarita was drawn by Priest Mathew's sermon and Christianity offered her a way out of her miseries because:

The stories [of the bible] spoke to Sarita of a world where she'd be taken in as equal by the Lord, not dismissed as a Kami. Just the fact that she could read the same Bible that the priest read, in simple English, was a deal-breaker because it wasn't customary for low-caste Hindus to read the scriptures, an entitlement granted to the Brahmins. ([Adiga, 2024, pp. 112-113](#))

The Bible for Sarita creates a sense of sacred space, where she can shelter from the discriminatory practices she faced as a low-caste Hindu before her conversion. Her conversion to Christianity allowed her to experience equality which was a far cry from the caste-based hierarchies of Nepali society. Through her new faith, she is in the process of challenging the limitations on her sense of belonging. By attending church services, Sarita hoped to make a place where she belonged and was able to get support within the city.

On the contrary, Sarita's faith is seen as a nuisance in the office. There rumor was that the manager did not like Sarita's constant chatter about God this and Lord that. . . ([Adiga, 2024, p. 111](#)). Binod taunted Sarita by saying that Christian women are supposed to be bold and westernized, and have boyfriends. Sarita knew that the rumors about Christian girls were that they were "[l]oose and easy" (p. 120). This made Binod and his lackeys oppress Sarita, as they thought Christian women did not follow the Hindu ideology of women being chaste and proper. Binod's assumption presents the gender stereotypes associated with Western culture that are presumed in the Nepali community. This thought makes Binod approach her with ill intentions leading to harassment.

Thus, Sarita's experience in Kathmandu is a complex mixture of positive and negative sides. The city offers her certain freedoms after converting to Christianity that she did not get



when she was a marginalized low-caste woman. Despite the city's diverse nature, Sarita still faces discrimination because of her Christian faith. Additionally, she has faced gender-based harassment in her workplace. It shows the challenges women experience when they navigate the city's social and professional environments.

Reinvention by Breaking Chains

Henri Lefebvre's theory of space posits that social space is produced and reproduced by human activity and it is an active force in shaping human societies ([Thacker, 2017, p. 30](#)). This process is never static, but it involves constant place-making activities by those who occupy the space. [Tim Cresswell \(2015\)](#) echoes this sentiment by asserting that if we view the world as full of places, we see the attachments between people and place (p. 36) as a continuous process. He further declares that "in general, places are never complete, finished or bounded but are always becoming – in process" (p. 95). Thus, those who occupy a space are always in the process of creating a meaningful location of belonging.

[Binit Gurung \(2022\)](#) quoting Vanessa May iterates that belonging is shaped by one's relationship with others including friends, family, acquaintances, strangers, and so forth (p. 92). Thus, those who occupy the margins of Kathmandu are continually engaged in the process of creating a meaningful location of belonging, shaped by their interactions and relationships with others in the social space.

The city is often an unfamiliar space for new migrants, but they try to create meaning by purposefully aligning themselves with the way of the social space. Thus, the Sarita is engaged in place-making activities ([Cresswell, 2015, p. 28](#)) in the city. The social identities people seek to create are not fixed but are constructed by how they situate themselves in the social space of the city. It can be done when they experience the spaces of the city from the inside ([Prieto, 2016, p. 60](#)). The social space that Sarita interacts with to make a place for herself is produced according to her social aims and objectives which in turn, shape her social life. Ultimately, the city of Kathmandu functions as a facilitator for Sarita's efforts to reinvent herself. Even though she faces challenges, such as exclusion, she does actively try to transform herself. Also, her transformation is not only personal but interwoven with the larger social forces at play in the city.

Sarita seeks to break free from traditional gender roles and societal expectations and attempt to reinvent herself. Her family back in her village objects to her way of life after converting to Christianity. They questioned if she ate beef or had sex before marriage ([Adiga, 2024, p.118](#)), and saw her as being arrogant. Her mother wanted Sarita to stop going to school and help with housework. Sarita's parents wanted her to learn the works of blacksmithing and then start a "life devoted to cleaning her husband's house. . ." ([Adiga, 2024, p.113](#)). Her life back at her parents' home was oppressive because she could not follow her dream of getting a college degree and speaking English. Any girl who stood out in her village was seen as proud and like a snake must be tamed before it harms others ([Adiga, 2024, p.118](#)). Sarita's Church space also has hints of exclusion because the computer-based work is given to the middle-class urban girl, and not to Sarita. Her arrival in Kathmandu shows a pivotal moment in her quest for identity. Her journey is representative of the struggle of many Nepali women seeking



independence in a society that confines them to rigid roles. She has moved from her home, a mud-covered house, where the larger Hindu society saw her low-caste Hindu life as eternally cursed ([Adiga, 2024, p. 112](#)). She had come to the city to better herself.

[S]he left her home and rode a bus to Kathmandu city and found a single room apartment near St Mary's Church. She volunteered at the church and landed a decent-paying bank job, thanks to that high school certificate she fought so hard to earn. (p. 114)

Sarita was bound by the Nepali traditional role of a daughter who has to struggle for higher education. Her choice to convert to Christianity and work in the city presents that she is on a path of creating a new meaning in her life. [Neal Alexander \(2017\)](#) quotes Seamus Heaney as "place is most often the first place of home and provides a steady anchorage in the world, offering not just a situation and context for the poetic imagination but also emotional sustenance" (p. 41). This idea of home is lacking in Sarita's family home, so she is turning to the city to create a place, a new home, which offers her emotional sustenance, a source of comfort and inspiration.

Sarita always wanted to speak good English, to go to college ([Adiga, 2024, p. 111](#)), and admired Bollywood heroines (p. 108) with ease in how they moved their legs adorned in high heels even in rain-soaked dances. This was off-limits in her family home because they were poor and from a low-caste family. [Mark Liechty \(2003\)](#) citing G.S. Nepali suggests that the introduction of the cinema was one of the contributory factors for bringing about a new trend in the style of dress in Nepal (p. 126). Sarita's fascination with Bollywood heroines is the result of influences from movies. Sarita felt out of place in her family home. [Liechty \(2003\)](#) further elaborates that:

Fashion was also a very important part of how middle-class people in Kathmandu imagined themselves as members of a larger, even global, movement. Through fashion people could imagine themselves as members of a transnational fashioned class, while distinguishing themselves from their lower-class compatriots, urban or rural. (p. 139)

From this, it can be implied that by adopting the high heels, Sarita imagines herself to overcome her identity as a lower-caste rural person. With fashion, she can mark a class distinction within the space of Kathmandu, and develop a sense of belonging. In Kathmandu if you do not follow fashion you "do not count," and were nonentities in the urban "prestige" (ijjat) economy ([Liechty, 2003, p. 140](#)). Liechty clarifies that people who did not count were mostly low-caste groups that lived on the city's periphery, like Sarita, who lived on the outskirts of Kathmandu ([Adiga, 2024, p. 112](#)). Doing fashion served as a kind of gatekeeping device for the middle class ([Liechty, 2003, p. 140](#)). Thus, doing fashion was Sarita's attempt to jump over the fence and belong into the social fabric of Kathmandu.

Liechty's (2003) Nepali friend commented that footwear is one of the clearest indicators of a person's *gharko sthithi*, his family condition (p. 144). Sarita's shift to the city and a job promises to fulfill her aspirations of earning money to change people's view of her *gharko sthithi*, to follow fashion (her high heels), speak English, and reinvent herself the way she wants to. The city gives her a space to reinvent herself as she had always wanted to be, a



woman who is both professional and fashionable. Her bold choices assert her independence, and the city becomes a canvas for her transformation. The city for Sarita is a space that offers the chance to reclaim her agency over her life and rewrite her own story.

Sarita's choice of religion also gives her ample space to reinvent herself. [Henri Lefebvre \(1991\)](#) remarks that "The adoption of another people's gods always entails the adoption of their space. . ." (p. 111). Sarita's conversion to Christianity helped her engage with new spatial practices and leave behind the dictatorial Hindu religion. The church services and interaction with other fellow Christians helped her create a sense of place in Kathmandu. Regarding religion, [Yi-Fu Tuan \(1977\)](#) writes:

Religion could either bind people to place or free them from it. The worship of local gods binds a people to place whereas universal religions give freedom. In a universal religion, since all is created by and all is known to an omnipotent and omniscient god, no locality is necessarily more sacred than another. (p. 152)

With regard to this, Christians have helped Sarita create a distinct place in their community within the space of Kathmandu through their religious practices and community-building activities.

It was the Bible that gave Sarita the confidence to leave behind a life mired in caste mentality. A life where a lower-caste woman couldn't even step inside the kitchen above her station. Sarita followed the light to Mary Magdalene, the first to bear witness to the risen Christ. ([Adiga, 2024, pp. 118-119](#))

Christianity and the church represent a place of sanctuary for Sarita, a place where she can escape the harassment of people in her office. The story also ends as Sarita purposefully moves in the direction of the church ([Adiga, 2024, p. 131](#)). Hence, her decision to relocate to Kathmandu, embrace Christianity, pursue a career, follow fashion, and work in a bank, collectively empowers her to dismantle the constraints of patriarchal Hindu orthodoxy. Through self-discovery, resilience, and the possibility of upward mobility, Sarita represents the transformative potential of urban life.

Conclusion

The study of Ranjan Adiga's "High Heels" through the lens of social space and place-making within Kathmandu's social space reveals that Kathmandu, as a city, has a dual nature. The city can be a place of exclusion and a place of transformation for individuals who dwell in it. Sarita's journey from a marginalized identity of a low-caste woman to becoming a Christian and moving to Kathmandu to seek better opportunities presents the dual nature of Kathmandu's social space. People and places that have Hindu religious and patriarchal prejudices make Sarita feel oppressed and challenge her to make a connection to the life she aspires to live.

Despite the significant challenges, Sarita with her resilience and agency continues to transform her experiences with Kathmandu's social space. Her conversion to Christianity, a job in a bank, and adoption of fashion trends in the city are her endeavors to reinvent herself as an urbanite. Sarita's story highlights the transformative potential of urban life where individuals can dismantle societal constraints and make their narratives. This analysis also reflects the lived realities of marginalized individuals who inhabit Kathmandu, who are



constantly in the process of making a place for themselves in the social space of Kathmandu, which otherwise excludes them from feeling at home in the city.

Additionally, through literary analysis, this paper can help improve our understanding of how stories that reflect real-life experiences mirror the complexities of the urban spaces of Kathmandu. This paper thus contributes to social studies of a migrant's experience in the capital city of Nepal. By studying the narrative of marginalized characters in Kathmandu, this research provides a valuable perspective on the broader social and cultural dynamics at play in Nepal. Thus, the implications of this paper can ultimately promote more inclusive and equitable urban environments, enhancing a deeper understanding of the complex interplay among space, identity, and belonging in urban settings.

In conclusion, this research also encourages a more holistic analysis of literature and its interaction with real-life urban experiences. As cities continue to evolve, so too must our understanding of the complex interplay among space, identity, and belonging. It promotes the idea that urban space should become more inclusive and equitable for all residents, expressing a concept of spatial justice in Kathmandu, to understand the lived reality of urban residents.



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