Chapter 7

Walking, Writing and Resisting the City: Spatial Tactics and Postcolonial Reimaginings in Janice Pariat's *Everything the Light Touches*

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Abstract

This paper examines Janice Pariat's *Everything the Light Touches* (2022) as a complex meditation on space, memory, and decolonial resistance. It analyses the novel's nonlinear narrative and its shifting portrayals of urban and natural landscapes and argues that Pariat constructs what Doreen Massey terms a "thrown-togetherness" of place. Her articulation of space is chaotic yet generative, marked by vitality and multiplicity. The study explores how characters inhabit postcolonial terrains through practices such as walking and dwelling at the margins, and how these acts become modes of negotiating identity. It also contends that Pariat's fragmented storytelling mirrors the fractured condition of postcolonial subjectivity. Thus, it also opens pathways to alternative epistemologies and Indigenous knowledge systems.

Keywords*:* postcolonial literature, spatial theory, decolonial ecology, Indigenous epistemology, walking, place-making.

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7.1 Introduction: Stories Like Trees

Some stories slowly grow on the readers like trees, branching and meandering. Janice Pariat's *Everything the Light Touches* (2022) tells one such story. It branches to various time periods and jumps across transcontinents. However, there is an underlying connection between the myriad stories and lives. At a preliminary reading, the novel may seem like a historical puzzle. It is populated by multiple characters scattered across different continents and living across centuries. We meet Shai, a young Khasi woman in Shillong, we meet Carl Linnaeus in Sweden, we also meet Evelyn, who is a budding British biologist in the early 20th century, and we also meet the famous botanist Goethe. But amidst all this cacophony, the characters engage with similar questions of how the space we inhabit defines us. This chapter argues that Pariat's novel provides decolonial spatial poetics. Through walking and ecological relationality, the text challenges and subverts dominant ideas. It puts forth an alternative way of thinking whose foundation is indigenous knowledge. While the fragmented narratives may not be linear, the approach to knowing and being is holistic. Pariat's narrative resists colonial cartographies and capitalist temporalities. Her work reimagines space as relational and unfinished. It is ethically inhabited and not conquered. This chapter analyses how Pariat's characters navigate urban and rural landscapes and reclaim them by improvising tactics and generating subtle forms of resistance. The chapter will engage with these tactics across the postcolonial city of Shillong, the forest as counter-world, and the distant village of Mawmalang.

7.2 Spatial Theory and Postcolonial Studies

The relationship between space and power is an important area of study in postcolonial theory. Henri Lefevre's groundbreaking work *The Production of Space* (1991) puts forward that space is not just an empty container but a social product. Space is also reproduced by relations of power. Lefevre's triadic model, consisting of conceived space (representations of space), perceived space (spatial practices), and lived space (spaces of representation), helps one understand how colonial and postcolonial subjects navigate these spaces. Michel de Certeau carried Lefevre's work forward. In his book, *Certeau* (1984) states how common people engage with spatial orders imposed on them. He uses the concepts of 'strategies' used by state institutions and 'tactics' improvised by the common people to resist. Subjects of regimes and colonies have often subverted using tactics. Doreen Massey's *For Space* (2005) challenges a linear understanding of both space and time. She understands space as a sphere of multiplicity. Spaces are not created in a vacuum. They also emerge from the intersection of multiple trajectories. This multiplicity is reflected in Pariat's book. We look at Shillong through a multi-layered lens.

The study of ecology has changed over the past two decades. Newer epistemologies challenge both colonial and capitalist extractionist notions of ecology. Arturo Escobar called it "decolonial ecology" (2018). Decolonial scholars and eco-feminists make a case for focusing on indigenous knowledge systems (Shiva, 1988, 38-57). Eurocentric scientific knowledge has tended to objectify and control nature. Many recent scholars have advanced notions of relationality and reciprocity with nature (Simpson, 2017; Whyte, 2018). They advocate returning to the land and to one's roots for knowledge, and they regard nature as a source of pedagogy. Such perspectives can help us understand how Pariat's novel makes a case for indigenous ways of knowing and

living in the world. Contemporary scholarship on ecology has looked to nature as a teacher (Kimmerer, 2013, 55-60). Nature is not merely to be objectified. Students of nature must cultivate a relationship with it. This resonates with Janice Pariat's critique of Linnaean taxonomy and aligns more with Evelyn's relational approaches to botany.

Urban studies have also emerged as a critical field of enquiry in recent times. How we look at our cities must change with our shifting priorities. Many scholars have critiqued the Eurocentric understanding of cities (Roy, 2009; Robinson, 2006). Abdou Maliq Simone (2004) argued that people are a crucial part of urban infrastructure, improvising new networks to survive in cities. They often bypass bureaucratic structures that overlook the marginalised. These practices infuse cities with new meanings and values.

Shillong in Janice Pariat's book can be situated in these multiple frameworks. Shillong is not just a post-colonial town. But place-making has ensured that Shillong shapes its residents the same way its residents and their changing priorities shape Shillong. The city's contemporary character has been shaped by colonial enterprise. Shillong was the capital of the Chief Commissionership of Assam. This pushed the hilly city to the centre. The spaces in the city became commercial and reshaped by colonial imagination. Slowly, people from neighbouring places started trickling in for jobs. Both geography and demography underwent a transformation. Shillong gradually absorbed neighbouring villages to accommodate its growing population. When Meghalaya became a separate state in 1972, Shillong underwent another wave of transformation. The rights of indigenous groups became a prominent issue. While the state grappled with the entry of people and capital from outside, the indigenous way of life faced multiple challenges. The city and its people found themselves caught in an impossible dilemma – to continue tradition and to partake in modernity.

7.3 Methodology: Walking with the Text

In this section, the novel Everything the Light Touches will undergo a spatial reading. The paper will pay close attention to how different spaces, both physical and psychological, are portrayed. As a reader, I will closely 'walk' the text. For Certeau, "The act of walking is to the urban system what the speech act is to language" (1984, p. 97). In a similar way, this paper will engage with Pariat's narrative. Through the act of walking, the characters reclaim spaces and infuse them with new meaning. Such acts provide windows of tactical resistance to oppressive structures. But it is not only walking that manages this; many other physical acts, such as hugging a tree or staying beneath one, also reflect how spaces are seen in a new light in a fast-growing city. At the same time, these physical acts show how residents resist such reconfigurations that are an onslaught on nature.

The analysis will focus on three spatial dimensions – it will look at the physical space of Shillong, a postcolonial city; it will look at the forest, which has become a site of contestation; and, thirdly, it will look at the village of Mawmalang, which has become a site of resistance. This paper will not try to solve the novel's narrative puzzle. Rather, it will walk alongside Pariat's characters, observing the ways they resist and create new knowledge. Such an approach acknowledges that

postcolonial experience does not fit neatly into categories but at the same time benefits from theoretical attention.

7.4 Analysis: Tactical Wanderings Through Space and Time

7.4.1 The Postcolonial City: Shillong as Thirdspace

Shai's story anchors the novel in the present. She returns home after a busy city life. What begins as a break is prolonged as Shai slowly drifts towards her roots. Her move is marked by ambivalence. When her mother asks why she returned, Shai murmurs, "Sometimes you must make the journey to find out" (Pariat, 2022, p. 11). This foregrounds Shai's ambiguous relationship with Shillong. The Shillong that Shai returns to is like a "third space" to her (Soja, 1996, 56-60). It is neither purely material nor completely imagined. It is a hybrid space where multiple histories co-exist. The city's colonial architecture sits uncomfortably alongside newer constructions. Gated communities, high-rise buildings and shopping complexes mark the arrival of neo-liberal consumerism. These new structures are "stacked awkwardly on older houses" (Pariat, 2022, p. 23). The city is experienced not just as geography but as affective residue. Here, memory, loss and aspiration get sedimented gradually.

Shai takes long walks through the city. Her walks, as opposed to other preferred modes of transport, are again marked by ambiguity. She is neither the curious tourist nor the confident native. Her walks are tentative and exploratory. She reflects on the city's "disjointed rhythms", which is how new developments are imposed on existing social structures. Shai reflects on the violence her city endured. After independence, the people of the hills fought for a separate state. But even while accepting their demands, a Sanskritised name was given to a place where people spoke no Sanskrit (Pariat, 2022, p. 27). This was an effort to nationalise the space in the northeast. This is embedded in the process of postcolonial state formation. Local histories are obfuscated in favour of national logics. The introductory chapters show the reluctance of the elderly people towards the encroachment of development. Shai laments the construction of ugly illegal structures while sidelining a few low-roofed old houses with names like Little Cloud and Hacienda. Shai reflects on the inherent violence of such imposition.

Shai's experience of the changes that Shillong underwent resonates with the development of global cities in the Global South. Urbanisation in post-colonial states tends to prioritise fitting into the global set-up, overlooking local needs. Such urgency creates landscapes that feel alien to the place. The city of Delhi that Shai left is also an example of such urgency. It is an unplanned megacity that boasts of international standards but struggles with clogged drains during the rain. Similarly, Shillong is at the heart of a struggle to modernise and develop, but not at the cost of its indigenous identity. The struggle pulls the city in different directions. Shai has a very interesting and evolving relationship with Shillong. She is not nostalgic for the Shillong of bygone days. She is also not very enthusiastic about the fast-paced developments. Somewhere deep in her heart, she believes that the city does not have to cut itself off from its legacy to modernise. It can carry it along and enter the future. Shai finds the remnants of the city she grew up in small instances. She finds the woman who used to grow flowers, the friend who still plays music, and her father's quaint ways of environmental activism. These small gestures resisting an imposed modernity are

similar to "weapons of the weak" (Scott, 1985, pp. 28-35). These are everyday practices that are mundane yet subversive in their limited ways.

Janice Pariat, through the book, walks a very narrow line. There is no celebration of the post-colonial city, nor any angst at the loss of an old city due to rapid urbanisation. Instead, Pariat presents the city as a third space – a space 'both' as opposed to 'either/or'. Colonial legacies co-exist with modern assertions. Global pressures meet local resistances, which are not dismissive but want to engage.

7.4.2 Taxonomies and the Violence of Classification

The scope of the novel is vast and delves deeply into the politics of naming. Janice Pariat engages with Carl Linnaeus and the development of modern botanical taxonomy. Through her subtle critique of Linnaeus, she critiques the eurocentrism within Enlightenment rationalism. Western scientific systems have often been used for colonial domination. This eurocentrism is personified in the work of Carl Linnaeus, whose ambitious project was to categorise the natural world. He sought to systematise the chaos into manageable groups. He declares that classification and naming will be the foundation of western science (Pariat, 2022, p. 78). Pariat critiques this classification on multiple levels. To start with, it problematises the cultural specificity of such universal scientific categories. Linnaeus's binomial nomenclature embeds western assumptions about nature and hierarchy. The idea that plants and animals require Latin names to become scientifically legitimate reflects the colonial state's tendency to invalidate indigenous knowledge systems.

On another level, the novel explores how taxonomic thinking shapes perception. When Shai wonders whether the forest doesn't speak to her because she can't name what she sees, this discomfort becomes clear. Knowledge is mediated by naming and claiming. The act of classification becomes inseparable from the politics of possession. This act echoes colonial regimes that aimed for mastery through documentation. This leads to alienation from entire systems of the natural world that may not yet have been discovered and classified. It also unnecessarily objectifies the human-nature relationship through a compulsion to understand and classify. Shai's discomfort can be contrasted with her father's approach to the environment. He protests against tree-cutting by chaining himself to the pine tree. He does not try to reclaim the ecology by knowing it through scientific classification. His knowledge is relational and embodied. His approach to the environment is the grammar of animacy, a way of understanding nature as subjects rather than objects (Kimmerer, 2013, 58-60). Human beings should treat nature as a teacher rather than as resources to be exploited. The critique of such classification is furthered through the character of Evelyn, the early 20th-century botanist from Edwardian Britain. Evelyn looks for connectivity in nature rather than watertight compartmentalisation. She seeks what the novel describes as "resonance over control, relationship over dominance" (Pariat, 2022, p.89). She records what she observes during her travels in India. But her entries are not merely scientific and botanical; they are also remnants of ecological thinking.

Johann Wolfgang Goethe offers yet another alternative to such reductionist classification. He seeks to understand nature through 'exact sensorial imagination', which means careful

observation combined with intuitive insight. This approach treats phenomena as a whole rather than as a collection of parts (Bortoft, 1996), emphasising process and relationship over classification. These alternative ways of seeing and knowing the nature question reductive and extractive scientific knowledge. Pariat's novel does not take an anti-intellectual stand. It also does not indulge in romantic primitivism. Indeed, it suggests that different kinds of knowledge should complement, not contest, each other. The novel also questions the logic of destroying nature to pave the way for development. Trees need to be cut down to make way for new construction. Nature is portrayed as obstructive. Shai's father's protest exemplifies an alternative way of thinking and participating in ecological communities that may include but are not centred on human needs.

7.4.3 The Forest as Counter-World

The forest in Everything the Light Touches functions as a "counter world". It is a space that operates according to a logic distinct from that of a city. It also opens up different possibilities of being. Pariat's novel does not treat the forest as exotic, as seen through the eyes of urban dwellers. Rather, the forest is a refuge and a teacher; it provides political space and philosophical intervention. Forests are also carriers of multiple temporalities. When Shai learns that a seed may lie dormant for a thousand years before germinating, this subverts the neoliberal logic of productivity and profit. The forest provides cyclical growth in the form of rotating seasons. Late capitalism emphasises short-term gain from manipulated or biotechnologically engineered agricultural products. The long-term ecological cost is often overlooked (Malm, 2018). The forest does not work in tandem with such short-term goals. The forest's time to recuperate is reflected in traditional agricultural practices like Jhum in Meghalaya. Pariat's novel also discusses the interconnectedness amongst trees. She talks of mycorrhizal networks which allow trees to share nutrients as well as communicate (Simard, 2021). Such an understanding aligns with indigenous knowledge of treating forests as entire communities.

Shai's father's protest is an art of noticing (Tsing, 2015). He does not violently confront the forest officials who came to cut down trees. He protests through his presence amongst the trees. Shai's father's activism is a product of the emotional attachment he has to the forest. Shai's own relationship with nature changes when she travels to the distant village of Mawmalang. When she plants seeds in the gardens, waters them, and sees seedlings grow, her initial isolation is replaced by a newfound sense of belonging. Shai's new learning in Mawmalang presents her with a different way of being. While living in close proximity with nature, dilemmas of life present themselves to her. No roads, no connectivity meant no proper treatment for her ailing nanny Oin. But roads came with the additional baggage of mining, which created health hazards. Mining would also mean the destruction of hills and the loss of sacred forests. The forests are also an integral part of the lives of the people of Mawmalang. They have co-existed for ages. The forests are not just present as wilderness. They are carriers of memory and histories. Ancient trees carry ancient knowledge. Forests are not just resources for capitalist acceleration. They can be role models for different ways of being, for sustainability. The forest in the novel is both a literal and figurative space. It provides an alternative relationship between human and nature and also offers sustainable ways of living within damaged landscapes.

7.4.4 Walking as Epistemology: Movement and Meaning-Making

Shai walks across Shillong, to Mawmalang and the nearby areas of the village. Throughout the novel, walking emerges as both a literal and an epistemological method. Through walking, she knows. This is different from textual, sedentary knowledge. Not just Shai, but all the main characters in the novel are seen walking and wandering around. Walking is primitive; it is also timeless. The different characters in the novel walk in different ways and contexts. Linnaeus walks with the confidence of imperial science. His walk is purposeful and extractive. His walks are aimed at the collection of specimens and classification into predetermined categories. His walk reflects the burden of the white man to bring order to the chaos of nature. On the other hand, Evelyn's walks are more tentative. In a patriarchal set-up, Evelyn struggles to find purpose. Her walks are also more open to new ideas – about nature, about life.

Shai's walks constitute a distinct category. While walking around Shillong, she reminisces. Her walk is investigative, seeking a lost city. Yet she is not sentimental about it. By contrast, when Shai walks in Mawmalang, like Evelyn, her walks are more receptive to new ideas. She witnesses the struggles of lives unknown. Through her travels along dusty village roads to far-flung areas and protest sites, Shai reclaims what is lost through this walk. Colonial spatial ordering often worked to erase indigenous symbols and structures. It worked to impose a "strategic invisibility" on structures and people deemed disposable or unwarranted. Rational modernity, obsessed with order, finds informal networks and indigenous practices chaotic. Alternative forms of social organisation do not fit into their epistemology of space (Duncan & Gregory, 1999). Through such walks, Shai discovers lesser-known aspects of Shillong and the completely obscured story of Mawmalang. While official discourses may have left out what mining did to the people of the village, Shai rediscovers that through her walks. But this was not the first instance of knowing through walking for Shai. As a child, she walked with her father and learned to recognise trees by their bark and leaves. A shift to a metro city caused a break in this pursuit. Back in Shillong, Shai, in a way, takes it up again to continue.

In Mawmalang, Shai witnesses a place struggling to sustain itself, caught at the crossroads of 'development' and conservation. While the tussle between environmentalists, NGOs and the state government may have halted uranium mining, it has also foreclosed the possibility of a road to these sections. The villagers are aware of the hazards of mining and of what it does to the flora and fauna of the place, as well as to the health of the people. Yet political intervention ensures that mining does not stop completely. Here, one may take a moment to remember that this exploitation is not specific to the tiny village; large-scale coal mining has been changing the physical structure of Shillong as well as causing large-scale pollution accompanied by health hazards. It has also jeopardised the local economy by forcing rent-based income, and illegal and dangerous methods like rat-hole mining have caused loss of lives.

7.5 Home, Haunting and the Ethics of Staying

The question of home and belonging also pulses through the novel. Shai returns home with uncertainty on her mind. She does not know how long she will stay. Even her mother finds it awkward to have her at home. Her homecoming is not triumphant. Rather, it is a complex

negotiation between belonging and alienation. When she decides to visit her ailing nanny, Oin, in a far-flung village, her mother wonders how she will cope. A city girl, Shai may feel out of place. Yet despite being in a completely new place, Shai feels at home. On the other hand, Shai feels 'unhabituated' in her childhood home. Education and work took her to a distant city. Cultural displacement reconfigured her notion of home. (Pariat, 2022, p. 44) Her feelings on her return home are similar to the violence that inhabitants of post-colonial cities face. They are psychologically displaced. The logic of capital is imposed on their homes.

This 'not feeling at home' is not just personal. It also reflects spatial dispossession. Colonial violence operates through direct economic and political exploitation, but it also creates subjects caught in between. These people feel displaced in their own spaces (Bhabha, 1994, 37-39). Shai's feeling of being foreign in her mother's kitchen reflects this alienation. But Shai does not resolve this feeling through departure or nostalgia. Instead, she resolves to stay and work towards 'belonging'. In an era marked by migration and mobility, the commitment to stay is resilience. Shai commits to staying, but this stay is not a mere continuity of what she left behind. This stay intervenes in something new. Caring for her ailing nanny may have been personal, but Shai's concern is not limited to Oin. She develops concern for the people of Mawmalang. Through the protests in Mawmalang against imposed development, Shai questions her own ideas of development.

Shai's return is also marked by her engagement with her surroundings in new ways. She indulges in mundane activities such as weeding and baking. In Mawmalang, she gardens and cares for Oin. While such care work may be invisible in dominant political narratives, it sustains the conditions that make other forms of work possible (Tronto, 2013). Shai's decision to stay extends beyond her individual story. When she discovers the story of a mythical white woman who also chose to stay for the sake of knowledge, she is convinced. In societies where choices are framed as between cultural identity and economic modernity, Shai believes in the possibility of a third path. This path embraces without excluding.

Such choices to negotiate with changing spatial structures also reflect a resurgence that does not completely reject modernity. Instead, it finds ways to negotiate and creates "nested sovereignties", meaning navigating post-colonial changes while maintaining indigenous systems (Coulthard, 2014; Simpson, 2014). While Shai's story may not explore indigenous knowledge systems directly, she does emphasise exploring alternative ways of being. Her nanny's choice to let go of life also reiterates to Shai that there may be something deeper in the simple things of life. Her uncertain dwelling, first in Shillong and then in Mawmalang, opens up new issues for her.

7.6 Fragmentation, Multiplicity and the Art of Not-Knowing

The narrative in the novel is not linear. It is fragmented in structure. There are multiple timelines, and the story moves across continents. The novel's form enacts spatial thinking (Massey, 2005, 9-15, 118-121), which privileges multiplicity as well as simultaneity. It also favours open-ended storylines over simplistic cause-and-effect closures. The novel's movement between different characters, time periods and geographical locations creates a "spatial narrative". It asks readers to navigate multiple relationships. It does not provide a single plotline and a neat closure. While the

storylines may seem random and situated at very different points in time, there is an underlying connectivity across them. The characters' concerns are shared. Understanding nature as well as responding to the crisis creates a bond between the various characters.

The novel's scope is vast. It encompasses characters across different time periods. Yet a single point of convergence is their shared concern with understanding nature. Indigenous knowledge systems often operate through such convergence. Such systems honour complexity and multiple perspectives, as opposed to meta-narratives. The novel also moves between different time periods, from 18th-century Sweden to colonial India and then to contemporary India. While they may be spread across the timeline, taken together they are myriad points in the process of colonisation. Colonial interventions have also met resistance. They have engineered environmental changes. Linnaeus's taxonomic project, Evelyn's botanical explorations and Shai's contemporary concerns may initially come across as separate stories. But a closer look will lay bare that they are all part of the historical process which shapes the postcolonial experience of today.

Modern India is also home to "colonial continuities". Colonial structures and assumptions persist. The obsession with cities rediscovering themselves as a new version is an example of this continuity. It equates mindless development and urbanisation with modernity and overlooks the extractive nature of such projects. At the same time, the novel's temporal complexity offers windows of possibility. Characters develop alternative relationships and interrupt colonial logics. Whether it is Goethe's eccentricities or Evelyn's difficult choices, the characters redefine a set path at different points in time. The steps taken by these characters have caused ruptures in these colonial continuities.

The novel's constant movement from one plotline to another is a cradle for an epistemology of uncertainty. Pariat's novel is not about coherence in knowledge. Rather, it champions a way of knowing that is open to what is yet unknown. Throughout the novel, characters acknowledge the limits of their knowledge. Evelyn wants to understand the ways of an indigenous tribe that has carved out a separate way of life. At great personal risk, she undertakes the journey only to face a life-changing choice. Yet that very moment of uncertainty gives Evelyn's life purpose and meaning. Shai's journey is also marked by uncertainties. She is not sure why she is back and for how long. After Oin passes away, she is unsure whether to return to Shillong. She is even unsure how her relationship with a former partner will be. But such uncertainty has not unsettled the plot of the novel. Rather, it highlights the complexities of human characters.

The novel also refuses to provide simple closures. Rather, the multiple storylines end with curiosity and ongoing questions. That the author managed this even with a historical character like Goethe is commendable. Evelyn's difficult choice is left inconclusive. Evie travels to other parts of Meghalaya, but even then her reference point with regard to weather and the surroundings is Shillong. When she meets the Nongiad tribes and tries to learn about their whereabouts, she is made aware that, unlike the others, they don't have equal access to all spaces. A nomadic tribe, they are forced to be constantly on the move because of their different ways of living. Shillong, even during the colonial period and especially because of colonial intervention, was made to witness these myriad ways of living. The society underwent stratification, and hierarchies were put in place. These hierarchies also marked the physical spaces of the state – Shillong was earmarked as a place where the colonial administration could flourish. The elements which seemed too unruly

were relegated to a distant space and denied access to these central places. The book ends on a slightly ambiguous note, but one can very well understand that Evie must have accepted the terms of the Nongiad tribes and exchanged her liberty for the sake of knowledge about diengiei, or the tree of life.

Pariat's novel subverts the 'coloniality of time'. It dismantles the imposition of a linear, progressive notion that assumes the future is better than the present (Wynter, 2003). The novel resists this temporal colonisation with "ongoingness". Knowledge gathering is also a process, and it did not end with modernity. Even readers are forced to engage with this multiplicity. Reading a novel of such expanse enables readers to become comfortable with uncertainty and incoherence. Through such a narrative, Pariat creates "World travelling" (Lugones, 2003). It enables readers to move seamlessly between multiple narratives across timelines. Readers connect with characters in different settings. Through them, readers can move between different ways of seeing and being without reducing them to single perspectives. Thinking is decolonised when readers navigate between indigenous and Western knowledge systems. Such novels create grounds for decolonial consciousness. Readers learn to hold complexity without reduction. Rather than answering questions, such works teach living within questions while searching for deeper meaning.

7.7 Toward a Postcolonial Ecology of Attention

Janice Pariat's novel constructs a "post-colonial ecology of attention". In it, the author creates a world where ecological and decolonial insights are integrated into everyday practices. This ecology is reflected in the novel's treatment of space, time and resilience. Characters who approach knowledge relationally develop the most sustainable connections to places. Shai and Evelyn are perfect examples. Even Shai's father, through his simple tactics, does so. Evelyn has no aim of strictly objectifying nature. She is keener to know. Even Shai's realisation about the problems of Mawmalang emerges from her personal connection to Oin. The novel also constantly juxtaposes colonial temporality, inspired by capitalist logic, against slower, ecologically sustainable rhythms. This imposition has political implications, and the effect is profound. Such imposition on the environment often leads to "slow violence" which unfolds over an extended period of time. (Nixon, 2011, 2-2, 19-22)

Apart from time and temporality, the novel also presents the choice of where to stay as an act of resilience. Shai's decision to remain in Shillong and Evelyn's decision to give up the life she knew for the sake of knowledge show how these women resist dominant narratives through simple choices. But merely choosing a place is not enough. It carries the added responsibility of ensuring its flourishing. The novel also differentiates between strategies and tactics. It favours the tactics that the marginalised use against state machinery, which relies on strategies. When policies favour the powerful, the weak are left with fewer weapons. Through art, storytelling, documentation and reporting, Shai and her friends resist the neoliberal narrative of development. Shai's father, sitting under a tree, is part of such tactics. Shai's travel to a distant village and participation in their protests are also tactics. Such tactics foreground the importance of "prefigurative politics". These are forms of resistance whose sole aim is not to capture state power. Rather, they aim to put in place alternative value systems. Such politics bypass the urge to dominate and control. Rather, they open us spaces for decolonial alternatives.

The novel also does not claim to have the final word on anything. It acknowledges that knowledge is always partial, ongoing rather than complete or universal, and context-specific, constantly evolving. This way of knowing, which rejects claims to mastery, is decolonising methodologies (Smith, 1999). Such an approach to knowledge is accountable to communities and places rather than claiming universal validity. Postcolonial contexts need such methodologies, which resist Western canonism and Eurocentrism. Objective neutrality is problematised in such methods. Plurality is accepted even in ways of knowing. In postcolonial societies where colonial knowledge systems continue to shape policies, such methods offer alternative modes of thinking and doing.

7.8 Conclusion: Living the Questions

Everything the Light Touches does not end with simple resolutions. Rather, it leaves the reader with deeper questions and a sense of curiosity. Such expansive novels leave readers dwelling on the uncertainty that marks lives rather than providing false clarity. Pariat's novel makes readers also dwell like her characters. Readers are forced to dwell on questions which continue to be relevant. Today's world is marked by environmental crisis, conflicts and various social upheavals. In such a scenario, readers will find resources in Pariat's book. But at the same time, it will also challenge readers to bypass simple solutions to complex problems. The book ends with another chapter on Shai, in which she further delves into the politics of mining and the way a section of affluent local authorities is in cahoots with the devastating activities of mining corporations. As Shai ruminates on and revisits her own life in Shillong before her move to Delhi, we see that such social hierarchies echo even in modern-day Shillong. For Shai's parents, her development hinged on moving away from the place and people like Dajied. And it was this move that later made Shai envious of the rootedness that Dajied felt towards Shillong, which was somehow absent in her.

The novel consciously avoids colonial certainties and the urgency of capitalist acceleration. Postcolonial societies face the challenge of living sustainably amidst fragile ecologies. The novel does not provide easy answers, but it offers practices and perspectives for such living. Literary works like these demand new ways of thinking and being. The forest continues to grow, sometimes slowly and sometimes in surprising bursts. Like nature's own rhythm, the resilience of ordinary people takes its sweet time. It is not always structured or formal, but it may take varied forms. Pariat's novel offers one of these many forms, in which characters reclaim lost spaces through walking and infusing them with new meaning, in places where struggle is constant.

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