



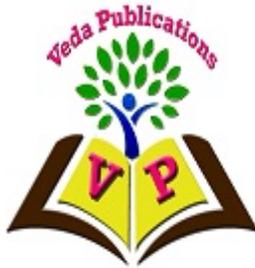
## RESEARCH ARTICLE

**THE CARTOGRAPHY OF INJUSTICE: URBAN MARGINALITY, SPATIAL PRODUCTION, AND THE SOCIAL LIFE OF CRIME IN NILANJANA S. ROY'S *BLACK RIVER***

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*Black River* by Nilanjana S. Roy signifies a tale of a brutal murder and the ensuing search for justice in the transitional area between the rapidly developing rural terrain outside of the city and the metropolitan sprawl of chaotic Delhi. This study analyses Nilanjana S. Roy's significant contribution to modern Indian crime fiction, one that reconceptualizes crime as a product of spatial dynamics rather than a result of individual moral failings. The novel, set in the peri-urban areas straddling Delhi and Haryana, places violence within environments shaped by uneven urban development, infrastructural deficiencies, and institutional apathy. Employing Henri Lefebvre's theory of space production, Michel Foucault's examination of disciplinary power, and David Harvey's concept of spatial justice, this paper posits how marginalized spaces such as informal settlements, polluted riverbanks, and administrative voids create circumstances where violence becomes both foreseeable and concealed.

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## INTRODUCTION

*Black River* is called Roy's first adult book. *Black River* originated from her four years of long walks about the capital and the Yamuna River, as well as from her years of reporting on gender from New Delhi and the surrounding states for *the New York Time*. In addition to writing novels, Nilanjana S. Roy writes columns for the *Financial Times* about books and reading. She has published a number of anthologies covering anything from Indian cuisine to the freedom fight. She has resided in Goa, Kolkata, and New Delhi.

The novel, which takes place in peri-urban areas that border Delhi and Haryana, depicts violence in settings that are shaped by institutional indifference, uneven urban development, and inadequate infrastructure. The novel uses Munia's murder as a narrative focal point to criticize state cartographies that both criminalize and erase vulnerable lives. *Black River* challenges the norms of crime fiction by rejecting moral resolution and narrative closure, portraying justice as contingent, fragmented, and unequally distributed within modern India's urban margins. By shifting the site of criminal investigation from the enclosed spaces of elite urban life to the unstable geographies of peri-urban India, Nilanjana S. Roy's *Black River* (2022) represents a significant intervention in contemporary Indian crime fiction.

Teetapur, a nondescript village nestling a few hours away from the bustling metropolitan of Delhi, is known for nothing much until the dead body of one of its children, 8-year-old Munia, is discovered hanging from the branch of a Jamun tree. In this largely Hindu village, the usual suspect is a nomadic Muslim named Mansoor. The suspicion spreads like

wildfire, driven by the Religious prejudices that lie just underneath the surface in this village. Providing readers with a gripping mystery and a panoramic "state of the nation" tale, *Black River* remains a scathing indictment of modern-day India, delivering an intricate storyline that best exemplifies the character of a country dealing with challenges of its own making.

The novel exposes violence as a predictable result of spatial inequality created by uneven urban expansion, institutional neglect, and economic dispossession, as opposed to portraying crime as an aberration brought on by individual moral failure. Roy's story highlights how underprivileged areas—villages engulfed by highways, contaminated riverbanks, and overworked police stations influence both the circumstances surrounding crime and the types of justice that are thought to be feasible.

## OBJECTIVES OF THE RESEARCH

The present study aims to examine how Nilanjana S. Roy's *Black River* reconceptualises crime as a structural outcome of imbalanced urban development and spatial inequality. The role of peri-urban geographies in shaping the conditions under which violence becomes both foreseeable and institutionally obscured has been analysed. Henri Lefebvre's theory of the production of space has been applied to the novel to demonstrate how abstract planning, spatial erasure, and the denial of lived space contribute to social harm. The operation of disciplinary power in *Black River* through Michel Foucault's framework to study the relation to policing practices, surveillance and David Harvey's concept of



spatial justice to reveal how capitalist urbanisation produces zones of dispossession have been used. The case of the murder of Munia, an eight-year-old girl, acts as the lens through which the production of cartographies of the vulnerable as either criminals and/or suspects is examined.

### REORIENTING INDIAN CRIME FICTION: FROM DETECTION TO STRUCTURAL CRITIQUE

Indian crime fiction in the twenty-first century has increasingly distanced itself from the classical detective model that privileges rational deduction, narrative closure, and moral certainty. Earlier traditions of crime writing, influenced by British detective fiction, often framed crime as an anomaly that could be resolved through individual intelligence and institutional competence. In contrast, recent Indian crime narratives reflect a growing disillusionment with state authority, foregrounding systemic failure, bureaucratic inertia, and the persistence of violence beyond the investigative process.

*Black River* exemplifies this shift by displacing the focus of crime fiction from the triumph of detection to the exposure of structural injustice. The novel's setting 'Teetarpur', a peri-urban village on the margins of Delhi functions not merely as a backdrop but as a determining force in the production of violence. Unlike metropolitan crime novels that confine violence to exceptional zones, Roy situates crime within everyday landscapes shaped by infrastructural neglect and administrative ambiguity. The murder of Munia does not inaugurate a reassuring journey toward truth; instead, it exposes

the profound asymmetry between those whose lives are deemed grievable and those whose deaths barely register within institutional frameworks.

By embedding crime within the logic of urban expansion, Roy aligns her work with a broader literary turn toward infrastructural realism. As Jonathan Shapiro Anjaria and Anupama Anjaria argue, contemporary Indian fiction increasingly represents roads, drains, flyovers, and wastelands as active narrative agents rather than inert backdrops, shaping social relations and urban experience (Anjaria and Anjaria). *Black River* extends this tendency by showing how infrastructure produces zones of abandonment where violence becomes normalized and accountability diffused.

### URBAN MARGINALITY AND THE LITERATURE OF THE FRINGE

Scholarly engagement with Indian urbanism has increasingly focused on spaces that lie outside formal planning regimes yet remain central to economic growth. Gautam Bhan's work on Delhi demonstrates how urban planning actively produces illegality by rendering entire populations vulnerable to eviction through zoning laws, land-use regulations, and selective enforcement. These "planned illegalities" are not failures of governance but essential mechanisms through which the city manages surplus populations.

Roy's fictional village of Teetarpur exemplifies this condition. Neither fully rural nor officially urban, it occupies a liminal position that renders its inhabitants politically expendable. Development bypasses the village even as it consumes its land,



producing what Sanjay Srivastava describes as “entangled urbanism,” where elite enclaves and informal settlements coexist through relations of dependence and exclusion. The residents of Teetarpur provide labour, services, and land, yet remain excluded from the protections of urban citizenship.

Literature emerging from these margins often foregrounds precarity, displacement, and the erosion of communal life. *Black River* participates in this tradition while extending it through the framework of crime fiction. The novel suggests that marginality is not merely a social condition but a spatial strategy through which the state manages inequality. Crime, in this context, is not an interruption of order but a consequence of an order that systematically withholds care.

### **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: SPACE, POWER, AND INEQUALITY**

#### **HENRI LEFEBVRE AND THE SOCIAL PRODUCTION OF SPACE**

According to Lefebvre, space is actively shaped by power dynamics, ideologies, and economic priorities rather than serving as a neutral backdrop for social action. His seminal spatial triad—representations of space, spatial practice, and representational space—allows for an analysis of how structural contradictions ingrained in spatial organization, rather than just individual acts, give rise to violence. These paradoxes are particularly apparent in *Black River* in the village of Teetarpur, whose marginal status serves as an example of how spatial erasure serves as a prerequisite for harm.

Teetarpur is essentially defined by administrative abstraction, land valuation, and bureaucratic logic as

a conceived space. Lefebvre refers to as ‘representations of space’. The village only matters to planners and authorities if it is located close to the growing metropolis on potentially lucrative land. It does not qualify as a lived community with ethical claims, histories, or social ties. Teetarpur is essentially invisible in the state's imagination due to its exclusion from official maps, development discourse, and institutional concern. However, this invisibility is extremely paradoxical: the village's residents become extremely visible as labouring bodies, statistical risks, or possible criminals, while the village itself vanishes from civic and developmental consideration. Lefebvre cautions that such abstract ideas of space systematically erase lived experience while favouring order, control, and profitability. It is a process that results in vulnerability and alienation rather than unity.

*Black River's* spatial practice, on the other hand, reveals a precarious everyday reality shaped by labour, survival, and starkly unequal power relations. Residents like Chand and his daughter Munia experience space through embodied attachment to the land and community, memory, and regular movement. A web of lived meanings that uphold identity and belonging is formed by fields, walkways, houses, and riverbanks. Nevertheless, the village's lived reality is not acknowledged by the prevailing spatial order, and these practices continue to be unsupported by institutional structures. According to Lefebvre, disconnecting spatial practice from spatial representations leads to structural instability rather than just neglect. This instability shows up in



Teetarpur as a persistent vulnerability to violence, social anxiety, and economic instability.

The symbolic and affective aspects of place 'representational space' are where the most significant effects of this spatial disjunction manifest. Locations like the jamun tree where Munia's body is found are filled with sorrow, anxiety, and social unrest. These places take on emotional significance that surpasses their actual size, turning commonplace areas into traumatizing locations. However, the state's rationalized frameworks of law and order are still unable to understand these symbolic registers. Lefebvre notes that even though representational space is where social meaning and collective memory are found, it is frequently written off as excessive or illogical. The state's disregard for these symbolic aspects in *Black River* exacerbates mistrust and hastens the dissolution of the community.

Munia's demise takes place where these opposing spatial logics converge. The crime is made possible by Teetarpur's spatial marginalization rather than just occurring there. The village's removal from public view guarantees that justice will continue to be sluggish, brittle, and ultimately compromised. The most susceptible to mistrust and scapegoating are those who live on the periphery of perceived space, such as immigrants, the impoverished, and religious minorities. Thus, violence is a structural result of spatial injustice rather than an anomaly. Lefebvre's framework allows one to understand how the denial of spatial legitimacy creates circumstances that normalize harm and diffuse accountability.

*Black River* highlights the moral ramifications of developmental abstraction by emphasizing spatial production. The novel shows that violence is spatially as well as socially or communally. The crime is made possible by Teetarpur's spatial marginalization rather than just occurring there. The village's removal from public view guarantees that justice will continue to be sluggish, brittle, and ultimately compromised.

### **FOUCAULT AND THE LOGIC OF DISCIPLINARY INSTITUTIONS**

A strong framework for comprehending how violence, surveillance, and control function in Nilanjana S. Roy's *Black River* is provided by Michel Foucault's study of disciplinary power, especially as expressed in *Discipline and Punish*. Disciplinary power operates through regular observation, classification, documentation, and normalization, as opposed to sovereign power, which operates through spectacle and punishment. By integrating control into organizations like the police, bureaucracy, and legal systems, it creates "docile bodies." In *Black River*, these mechanisms influence not only the investigation into Munia's death but also the lives of the residents of Teetarpur, an area already characterized by social and spatial marginalization.

In *Black River*, the police force functions more as a classification and containment tool than as an agent of truth. According to Foucault, disciplinary institutions use categories: normal/abnormal, innocent/suspect to exercise power. In the book, people who already exist outside of conventional social structures particularly Mansoor, the traveling Muslim labourer quickly come under suspicion.



Roy illustrates how the state can only understand Mansoor's body through suspicion. He is immediately governable due to his lack of social protection, documentation, and a fixed address. According to Foucault, disciplinary power "fixes" people in space so that it can watch and correct them. Mansoor's frequent interrogation, detention, and exposure to mob violence demonstrate how the disciplinary gaze targets those who are least able to resist.

Teetarpur is a rural equivalent of Foucault's idea of the Panopticon, a system in which people internalize surveillance. Following Munia's passing, the village is the subject of intense fear, rumors, and scrutiny. Everyone keeps an eye on everyone else, but this visibility does not result in justice; rather, it exacerbates social division and paranoia. In *Black River*, hyper-visibility does not confer protection; it amplifies vulnerability. Foucault reminds us that visibility is a trap: to be seen is to be controlled.

#### DAVID HARVEY AND SPATIAL JUSTICE

David Harvey's concept of spatial justice foregrounds the economic and material dimensions of urban inequality. Capitalist urbanization, Harvey argues, depends on dispossession, pushing vulnerable populations into precarious spaces that absorb environmental and social risk. In *Black River*, the expansion of Delhi necessitates the displacement of communities from formal land ownership, forcing them into informal settlements along polluted riverbanks.

These spaces are simultaneously essential and expendable. They house surplus labour while remaining outside the ambit of legal protection.

Harvey's framework clarifies how geography itself becomes a mechanism of injustice, producing zones where violence is normalized and accountability suspended.

#### TEETARPUR: GEOGRAPHY, ERASURE, AND EVERYDAY VIOLENCE

Teetarpur embodies the contradictions of peri-urban existence. Roy describes it as a settlement bypassed by progress yet consumed by its consequences. A place close enough to the city to suffer its pollution but distant enough to be denied its services. Dust, noise, and infrastructural absence mark the village as disposable:

"The village was a collection of brick and mud, a place that felt discarded by the highway that roared past it just a few kilometres away" (Roy 14).

This spatial abandonment creates conditions in which violence can occur without provoking institutional urgency. Munia's disappearance initially registers as an inconvenience rather than a crisis, reflecting how the lives of the poor are hierarchized within the moral economy of the city. Lefebvre's notion of lived space underscores this disparity: for Teetarpur's residents, space is intimate and embodied; for the state, it is abstract and fungible.

#### THE YAMUNA AS ARCHIVE OF DISPOSSESSION

The polluted Yamuna referred to in the novel as the "Black River" operates as both a literal and symbolic repository of urban injustice. Once central to agrarian life, the river has been transformed into a dumping ground for industrial waste and displaced populations. Its banks house those expelled from



formal space, rendering ecology inseparable from social exclusion.

“To the police, this was a reservoir of suspects” (Roy 114).

Harvey’s concept of spatial injustice illuminates how environmental degradation and social marginalization reinforce one another. Those forced to live near the river are criminalized not for their actions but for their location. Geography itself becomes evidence, collapsing the distinction between poverty and criminality.

#### **POLICING, BUREAUCRACY, AND THE ILLUSION OF CLOSURE**

The police station in *Black River* epitomizes institutional fatigue. Officers operate within a system that values closure over justice, producing what Matthew Hull describes as the “government of paper,” where documentation substitutes for ethical responsibility. Reports, files, and procedural rituals create the appearance of action while obscuring structural failure.

Khalid’s targeting reflects this logic. As a migrant without spatial or social anchorage, he becomes a convenient narrative solution. Foucault’s insight into disciplinary inscription is evident here: the suspect’s body becomes a surface upon which institutional anxieties are written.

“Justice here was a matter of logistics, not ethics” (Roy 201).

The emphasis on logistics accentuates how bureaucratic systems prioritise administrative closure over truth in spaces already marked as disposable.

Within such a framework, ethical accountability is displaced by paperwork, timelines, and jurisdictional convenience.

#### **CRIME WITHOUT RESOLUTION: ETHICAL DISQUIET AND NARRATIVE REFUSAL**

Unlike conventional crime fiction, *Black River* refuses to restore moral order. Munia’s death is not redeemed through punishment or revelation; the river remains polluted, Teetarpur remains neglected, and the structures that enabled violence persist. This refusal challenges the genre’s investment in closure, aligning the novel with what might be called an ethics of discomfort.

By exposing crime as a spatially produced phenomenon, Roy shifts responsibility from individual perpetrators to systemic arrangements. Justice, in this narrative, is unevenly distributed contingent upon land ownership, documentation, and proximity to power. The novel’s unresolved ending thus becomes a political statement, refusing to offer consolation in the face of structural harm.

#### **CONCLUSION**

*Black River* redefines Indian crime fiction by situating violence within the material and spatial conditions of urban expansion. Through its attention to peri-urban geographies, polluted ecologies, and bureaucratic institutions, the novel reveals how crime emerges from the uneven production of space. Drawing on Lefebvre, Foucault, and Harvey, this paper has argued that Roy presents justice not as a universal principle but as a spatial privilege unevenly allocated across India’s fractured urban landscape.



In refusing closure, *Black River* compels readers to confront the persistence of injustice beyond narrative resolution. Crime, in Roy's vision, is not solved; it is mapped and etched into the city's margins, riverbanks, and forgotten villages. The novel thus stands as a powerful critique of both urban development and the literary conventions that seek to contain its violence.

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