
From Space to Place: Humanistic Geography and Place-Making in Kavery Nambisan's *The Hills of Angheri*

¹G. Thenmozhi

Ph.D. Research Scholar, PG & Research Department of English, Sri Sarada College
for Women (Autonomous), Salem, Tamilnadu , Affiliated to Periyar
University,Salem

²Dr. C.G. Sangeetha

Assistant Professor, PG & Research Department of English, Sri Sarada College for
Women (Autonomous), Salem, Tamilnadu , Affiliated to Periyar University, Salem

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Abstract

This article uses Yi-Fu Tuan's humanistic geography to analyze Kavery Nambisan's *The Hills of Angheri*, emphasizing how lived experience, memory, and emotional attachment transform abstract space into meaningful place. The village of Angheri and its surrounding hills function not merely as a physical backdrop but as a formative “place” that shapes the protagonist Nalli’s identity, aspirations, and ethical grounding. Angheri's natural environment serves as an emotional anchor for Nalli, providing continuity and a sense of belonging while she travels through strange and frequently alienating urban spaces in pursuit of medical education. It does this by drawing on Tuan's distinction between space as freedom and place as security. Her attachment to the landscape is strengthened by sensory encounters and inherited stories connected to it, transforming undifferentiated rural space into a unique and culturally rooted world. The article further analyzes Nalli’s departure from and longing to return to Angheri as an enactment of Tuan’s dialectic between exploration and refuge, culminating in her aspiration to establish a hospital that reaffirms her bond with the place. The paper also engages with ecofeminist concerns by linking women’s lived experiences to environmental care and place-based identity. Ultimately, the paper argues that *The Hills of Angheri* presents place as a dynamic force that shapes individual identity, memory, and purpose.

Keywords: space, place, identity, memory, environment

Introduction

The places that people live in and the interpretations they make of them are intrinsically linked to their experiences. Yi-Fu Tuan's distinction between space and place provides a fundamental understanding of this relationship in humanistic geography. In *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (1977), Tuan defines space as openness, movement, and possibility, while place signifies stability, security, and emotional attachment. According to Tuan, space becomes place when it is infused with human experience, memory, and value. Rather than viewing landscapes as neutral physical settings, he emphasizes that places are produced through sensory perception, cultural narratives, and repeated interaction over time. "Space is experienced directly as having room in which to move. Moreover, by shifting from one place to another, a person acquires a sense of direction" (Tuan 12).

Tuan emphasizes lived experience as the primary source of spatial meaning in his humanistic approach. He argues that people understand place through physical movement, emotional connection, and memory. This process changes general environments into intimate and meaningful locations. Home, homeland, and familiar landscapes become safe havens that provide a sense of continuity and identity, especially when compared to unfamiliar or alienating spaces faced during travel and migration. This interplay between freedom and security, between moving through space and feeling connected to place, is a key part of Tuan's spatial theory.

This conceptual framework provides a valuable lens for literary analysis, particularly in narratives where landscape plays a crucial role in shaping character and identity. Kavery Nambisan's *The Hills of Angheri* presents such a narrative, where the village of Angheri and its natural surroundings function as more than a backdrop to the protagonist's life. "A great example of a novel containing characters that are inspired by a landscape that has been altered by a patriarchal, exploitative, and destructive way of life is Nambisan's *The Hills of Angheri*, which is situated in Kodagu" (Sathiyakala and Sharmila 2342). Through Nalli's lived experiences, memories, and emotional bonds with the village, Angheri emerges as a meaningful place that anchors her identity amid her journey through distant and impersonal urban spaces.

Yi-Fu Tuan argues that place emerges through emotional attachment, sensory experience, and memory, transforming abstract space into what he calls a “Place is a special kind of object. It is a concretion of value, though not a valued thing that can be handled or carried about easily; it is an object in which one can dwell” (Tuan 12). Nalli’s relationship with Angheri in *The Hills of Angheri* exemplifies this process of place-making. Although she is physically present in the city and engaged in demanding hospital work, Nalli’s emotional world repeatedly returns to Angheri, demonstrating Tuan’s view that place persists even in absence through memory and imagination. The narrative notes that “sometimes memories of home would slide before her eyes” (Nambisan 163), indicating that Angheri continues to exist as a lived and emotionally charged place in her consciousness rather than as a distant geographical location.

Nalli’s departure from the village represents an entry into *space*, where education and medical training open up new possibilities and allow her to exercise individual agency. Madras, and later foreign locations, operate as spaces of ambition and advancement, facilitating her intellectual and professional growth; however, they remain emotionally detached and fragmented, lacking the intimacy and affective depth associated with Angheri.

At the same time, Angheri continues to function as *place* in Tuan’s sense: a site of emotional security, memory, and rooted identity. Even as Nalli navigates distant cities and countries, her sense of self remains anchored in Angheri through memory, sensory recall, and moral obligation. This strain between physical mobility and emotional rootedness reflects what Tuan identifies as the dialectic of freedom and security: while individuals pursue the openness of space for expansion and self-realization, they continue to rely on place for emotional grounding, continuity, and a sense of meaning. Nalli’s migrations therefore do not weaken her bond with Angheri; instead, they intensify it, as separation heightens her recognition that professional autonomy acquires meaning only when it is directed toward a place that provides belonging and rootedness. Her eventual aspiration to return and serve Angheri by building a hospital resolves this tension, transforming spatial mobility into place-based responsibility and affirming Tuan’s view that movement through space ultimately deepens, rather than negates, attachment to place.

Nalli's imagination reconstructs Angheri through deeply sensory images, "She had left her happiness in Angheri, among the light green leaves of the guava tree, in the atta amidst the jars of pickled mangoes, in the sweet breath of the rice fields" (Nambisan 163). Such images of touch, smell, and sight show how repeated sensory experiences turn the landscape into a place filled with personal meaning. In Tuan's terms, such memories transform Angheri from undifferentiated space into an intimate place of refuge, offering emotional comfort and continuity set against the alienating urban environment of hospital life. The city functions as abstract and impersonal space, whereas Angheri survives in Nalli's imagination as a secure and meaningful place shaped by lived experience.

Tuan also emphasizes that human beings experience space through movement (kinesthesia), sight, and touch, and these sensory modes are clearly reflected in Nalli's bond with Angheri. Her kinesthetic engagement with the village is suggested through her bodily intimacy with the natural environment, as the narrative recalls how she would sit on the branches of the tree. This physical interaction with the landscape reflects a lived, bodily intimacy that strengthens her sense of belonging. Visual perception further strengthens her attachment as "She would sit on one of its branches, look at the hills and dream her impossible dreams" (Nambisan 10), showing how the surrounding landscape becomes a source of imagination, aspiration, and emotional grounding. Touch and material interaction with domestic and village spaces further reinforce this attachment, giving concreteness and permanence to her experience of Angheri.

In this way, Angheri is transformed into a "concretion of value," (Tuan 12), where memory and embodied experience allow Nalli to inhabit the place emotionally as well as physically. When Nalli moves away from Angheri, the loss of direct sensory intimacy with the village intensifies her sense of alienation within impersonal urban spaces. According to Yi-Fu Tuan, this displacement shows that place is maintained by embodied memory and emotional attachment developed through lived experience in addition to physical presence. Nalli's identity is rooted in Angheri even in her absence, highlighting the lasting power of place that extends beyond physical distance. According to Yi-Fu Tuan, location serves as a source of purpose and action in addition to being a place of memory and attachment, giving people confidence, moral guidance, and a sense of accountability. This concept is best illustrated by Nalli's

resolve to construct a hospital in Angheri. When her colleague Jai dismisses the possibility of returning to the village, insisting that doctors remain in cities and remarking that “All the doctors crowd in the cities and forget the villages where most of our people live. Something like seventy or seventy-five per cent. If we don't go to Angheri, no one will, except quacks” (Nambisan 282), Nalli's attachment to Angheri intensifies. Nalli views Angheri as a significant location that requires care and service, while Jai's rejection reflects a view of the village as marginal and professionally restrictive.

Nalli's confidence stems from her deep-seated attachment to the village as a lived place rather than from institutional support or urban opportunity. Her dream of starting a hospital is an attempt to turn her emotional connection to place into an ethical obligation. Her confidence stays strong despite doubts and obstacles because it is grounded in her place-based identity rather than relying on outside validation. Thus, Nalli's resolve demonstrates Tuan's assertion that attachment to place can generate resilience, moral clarity, and the courage to act against dominant spatial hierarchies that privilege urban spaces over rural ones.

In *The Hills of Angheri*, Nalli's feeling that “Angheri was different” (Nambisan 321), marks a crucial emotional and psychological turning point in the novel. This difference results from both the loss of the emotional support that once gave the place meaning and the gradual loss of childhood steadiness, rather than just physical change. As Nalli reflects, “For me, Angheri was different not just because of changing times but because of the fading away of the permanence of my childhood. It had slipped away, somehow, while I was not looking” (Nambisan 321). This awareness marks a change in her connection to place, moving from a sense of unquestioned belonging to a thoughtful understanding shaped by experience of loss. Yi-Fu Tuan argues that place is deeply bound to memory, continuity, and emotional security, and when these elements weaken, a sense of dislocation emerges even within familiar surroundings. For Nalli, Angheri no longer offers the same emotional completeness it once did, largely due to the absence of her father. She notes that “Appa was gone and the hills, with their vigilance and strength, were too distant and unconnected with living” (Nambisan 321). Although the hills remain physically present, their symbolic power has altered; they no longer provide immediate comfort

but instead highlight the emotional distance created by grief. This reflects Tuan's idea that place is not static, it changes as human experience changes.

Nanji feels that, "A darkness settled in my mind and refused to go away," (Nambisan 321). It shows that Angheri does not lose its significance. Rather, it becomes a place of emotional confrontation, where memory, longing, and unresolved grief coexist. Nalli's confession is that "I missed Appa terribly and told Amma of my desire to try self-hypnosis, which would enable me to call his spirit" (Nambisan 321), reveals her intense need to restore emotional connection. Her longing to speak to her father shows how place functions as a site where past and present intersect. In Tuan's terms, Angheri remains a place not because it offers comfort alone, but because it holds accumulated emotional meaning. Thus, Nalli's feeling of difference does not signify detachment from Angheri but a deepening of her relationship with it. The village becomes a space where loss is felt most acutely and memory resists erasure. Through Nalli's experience, Nambisan illustrates Tuan's assertion that place is shaped as much by absence and pain as by presence and joy. Angheri continues to live within Nalli, not as an unchanged refuge, but as a place transformed by time, memory, and emotional growth.

Nalli's bond with Angheri is not abstract or symbolic alone but is rooted in everyday practices, sensory memory, and emotional care. Her attachment to the village landscape, trees, fields, hills, and domestic spaces reflects an ecofeminist understanding that women often relate to nature through nurturing, responsibility, and sustained interaction rather than domination or exploitation. Nalli's desire to serve Angheri by establishing a hospital demonstrates a form of environmental and social care that emerges from her intimate relationship with place. This aligns with ecofeminist thought, which argues that women's experiences and ethical perspectives are closely linked to the protection and preservation of life-sustaining environments: "Place is security, space is freedom: we are attached to the one and long for the other" (Tuan 3).

The Hills of Angheri presents place as a dynamic force rather than a static setting. Angheri actively shapes Nalli's identity by influencing her values, aspirations, and moral choices across different stages of her life. As her experiences change from childhood belonging to adult loss and professional struggle the meaning of Angheri

also evolves. Memory, absence, and return continuously redefine her relationship with the village. Place, therefore, becomes a living presence that participates in Nalli's emotional growth and sense of purpose. By highlighting the active relationship between person and environment, the novel shows that identity doesn't develop alone but arises through ongoing connection with place, memory, and a sense of responsibility.

Angheri functions as a source of continuity and ethical direction, guiding Nalli's personal and professional journey. Tuan further emphasizes that places are formed through experience, noting that "space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value" (Tuan 6). Nalli's repeated sensory interactions with Angheri, its trees, fields, hills, and domestic spaces transform the village into a place of moral and emotional significance. Her care for Angheri is inseparable from her identity as a woman shaped by memory, loss, and responsibility, aligning with ecofeminist thought that emphasize interconnected identity and ecological awareness.

Nalli's deep connection with nature in *The Hills of Angheri* finds a clear parallel in Kavery Nambisan's *The Scent of Pepper*, where the protagonist Nanji similarly experiences the natural environment as an intimate and formative presence. In both novels, nature is not treated as a passive backdrop but as a lived space that shapes the protagonists' identities, values, and emotional worlds. Nalli's attachment to Angheri, its hills, trees, fields, and domestic landscapes anchor her sense of belonging and moral purpose, just as Nanji's relationship with the Coorg landscape in *The Scent of Pepper* is rooted in sensory memory, inheritance, and everyday interaction with the land. Nanji's experience of pepper plantations, forested hills, and seasonal cycles parallels Nalli's connection to Angheri's natural surroundings, highlighting Nambisan's recurring vision of place as something known through touch, smell, and memory rather than abstract geography.

Both protagonists experience displacement when confronted with social change and modern pressures, but their bond with nature provides stability and strength. For Nanji, the land becomes a sensory marker of heritage and identity, much like Angheri functions as an emotional anchor for Nalli. Through these parallel portrayals, Nambisan emphasizes a recurring theme: women's identities are deeply interlinked with the landscapes they inhabit, and nature serves as a repository of

memory, belonging, and ethical responsibility. Thus, Nalli and Nanji together exemplify Nambisan's broader literary vision in which place and nature actively participate in shaping female subjectivity across different regional and cultural contexts.

The Hills of Angheri presents place not as a passive setting but as an active force shaping identity, memory, and ethical purpose. Drawing on Yi-Fu Tuan's humanistic geography, the study shows how Angheri evolves from abstract space into a meaningful place through Nalli's sensory experiences, emotional attachment, and sustained memories. Her migration for education and work embodies the tension between freedom and security, space and place, while her longing to return affirms the enduring power of place-based identity. Thus, Nambisan powerfully affirms that women's identities are inseparable from the landscapes they inhabit, with place and nature functioning as active forces that shape memory, resilience, and ethical responsibility.

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