

# Space, Affect and Identity: The Interconnectedness of the Urban Uncanny and the Self in Suhayl Saadi's *Psychoraag*

Éva Pataki

Institute of Modern Philology  
vicapataki@yahoo.com

**Keywords:** British Asian diaspora novel, cultural identity, affect, atmosphere, the urban uncanny

My main field of research – and the subject matter of my doctoral dissertation defended in 2015 – is the interconnectedness of space, movement and identity in contemporary British Asian diaspora fiction. Through the close reading of representative novels I focus on issues like the mutually interdependent and transformative relationship between space and identity, the types of movements generated by space, and the influence movements have on space and the sense of place. Within the scope provided by the framework and the chosen corpus, I explore ways in which space and movement are affected by one's identity formation and, conversely, how identity is transformed (transfused, transmuted, metamorphosed) by and through various forms of movement in diverse spaces and places. I look at how space, movement and identity become intertwined and inseparable within the context of British diasporic consciousness and subjectivity – all this in selected representatives of contemporary British Asian fiction: Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* (2004), Nadeem Aslam's *Maps for Lost Lovers* (2004), Nirpal Singh Dhaliwal's *Tourism* (2006), Sunetra Gupta's *The Glassblower's Breath* (1993), Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990) and *The Black Album* (1995) and Meera Syal's *Anita and Me* (2004).

Although, due to what is often referred to as the 'spatial turn' in criticism, the interconnectedness of space, movement and identity has received a great deal of critical attention in the past two decades, the study of British diaspora literature has in general neglected this approach. There have been a number of references to space, movement and identity (either individually or in conjunction) in the critical work on contemporary British Asian fiction, but a monographic treatment of their interconnectedness has never been attempted. To remedy this lack, my dissertation first and foremost examines the pivotal role of space *and* movement in identity formation and construction, identity performance and performativity, agency and subjectivity, as manifested and depicted

## The Interconnectedness of the Urban Uncanny in *Psychoraag*

in a selection of novels. The primary reason why my dissertation revolves around the notions of space, movement and identity is that they are the inseparable core elements of diasporic existence, and human existence itself, for that matter. Furthermore, I believe that investigating the complex interrelatedness of these concepts in British Asian diaspora fiction may in fact enable and contribute to a better understanding of the fundamentally social phenomenon and issue of diaspora and diasporisation in today's globalised world.

In the past five years, the research topic of my dissertation has been broadened by a new focus of examination due to another paradigm shift, the so-called 'affective turn,' which – in terms of the corpus chosen and analysed – means that concepts and phenomena related to identity are approached from the aspect of both movement in and between different spaces, *and* of theories of affect as well, thus enabling further interpretations and more complex research findings. The starting point for and theoretical basis of this additional research focus is provided by an interdisciplinary method connected to the notion of affect on one hand, and one thesis of my dissertation on the other: namely that a thorough exploration of literary representations of diasporic identity is possible only through the combination of various approaches to spatiality: in general terms, what we might call the phenomenological situatedness or facticity of the subject is inseparable from the subject's position and movement in cultural spaces.

The core of the theoretical background of my investigations and arguments is situated at the intersection of cultural, postcolonial and diaspora studies: particularly (but not exclusively) the critical insights of theorists such as Homi K. Bhabha (1994) and Stuart Hall (1996) on cultural identity and hybridity, Bhabha's (1994) notion of mimicry, Avtar Brah's (1996) complex concept of diaspora space, Judith Butler's (1988, 1993) theory of performativity, which I rely on both in terms of its implications for a gendered subjectivity and in relation to the diasporic subject's performance of cultural identity, Rosi Braidotti's (1994) concept of the female nomad, Walter Benjamin's (1972) idea of the *flâneur*, as well as various interpretations of the concept of belonging. In expanding the scope of my research, this list is complemented by interpretations of the concepts of affect and affectivity in fields of philosophy, psychology, architecture, urban studies and human geography. The studies I have published on the topic rely on Gernot Böhme's (1991) theory of the aesthetics of atmospheres, Tonino Griffero's (2014) concept of atmospheric affordances, Benjamin's (1999) notion of phantasmagoria, Steve Pile's (2005) corresponding theory of the emotional and phantasmagorical aspects of urban space and Sigmund Freud's (1919) concept of the *Unheimliche*, that is, the uncanny. Such broadening of my theoretical framework, and its application to the reading of British

Asian diaspora fiction in particular and to the exploration of the phenomenon of diaspora in general may facilitate a deeper understanding and more complex interpretation of the mutual emotional relationship of space and the self. The present study draws on this multifaceted theoretical background in investigating the interconnectedness of space and affect through the close reading of Suhayl Saadi's 2004 novel *Psychoraag*.<sup>1</sup>

The primary area of my research is thus the literary representation of the atmosphere of urban spaces, revealing the emotional tones or affordances, as well as the emotional work of urban imaginaries, exploring the city's state of mind and the city as a state of mind. Gernot Böhme German philosopher's theory of atmospheres is an essential starting point for the interpretation of the complex psychological and affective relationship between the self and the city. According to Böhme "Atmospheres are indeterminate above all as regards their ontological status. We are not sure whether we should attribute them to the objects or environments from which they proceed or to the subjects who experience them. We are also unsure where they are. They seem to fill the space with a certain tone of feeling like a haze."<sup>2</sup>

My paper attempts to nevertheless localize a certain atmosphere in Saadi's urban imaginary of Glasgow, as created in and by his novel *Psychoraag* (2004). The close reading of the text may provide a better understanding of how the bodily experience and mental perception of Glasgow is played out in different contexts and with various connotations, thereby producing a multitude of specific and highly subjective atmospheres and spatial imaginaries of the city. Investigating most specifically one out of the many, I focus on the double identity of self and space, and Saadi's image of Glasgow as an urban uncanny. In doing so, I rely on Freud's concept of the *Unheimliche* and primarily draw on Petra Eckhard's (2011) interpretation of the urban uncanny as "a cultural imaginary, influenced by factors of race, class and gender, and articulating subjective post-traumatic experiences."<sup>3</sup> I shall argue that there exists a mutually constructive relationship between the self and the city, and that the atmosphere of the latter is created by both its physical spaces and places, and the people inhabiting, experiencing or imagining them, thereby contributing to the image and imaginary of Glasgow as the urban uncanny.

---

<sup>1</sup> In the present study all quotations from the novel refer to the following edition: Suhayl SAADI, *Psychoraag*, (Edinburgh: Black & White, 2004) All page numbers are indicated in the text.

<sup>2</sup> Gernot BÖHME, „Atmosphere as the Fundamental Concept of a New Aesthetics“, *Thesis Eleven*, 36(1993) 113–126., 114.

<sup>3</sup> Petra ECKHARD, *Chronotopes of the Uncanny: Time and Space in Postmodern New York Novels: Paul Auster's City of Glass and Toni Morrison's Jazz*, (Bielefeld: transcript, 2011) 20.

## The Interconnectedness of the Urban Uncanny in *Psychoraag*

---

One recurring image of Glasgow presented by Saadi is that of “the liquid city” where “time wis always out of joint” (395, 8). Beyond a direct reference to the Clyde, the liquidity of the city may also denote constant changes in its physical shape and mental image, as well as the fluidity of its identity, which the protagonist of *Psychoraag*, DJ Zaf experiences as follows: [E]verythin seemed to be regressin – not so much into the past as into essences, sensations, concepts [...] The city seemed to be shiftin constantly [...] everythin was an illusion” (372). Zaf’s perception calls attention the illusory nature of Glasgow and highlights the process through which “[u]rban space becomes temporalized, as thus the city has to be viewed as an entity constantly in motion.”<sup>4</sup> Elsewhere he notes the deceptive buildings with “their shells done up to look as though they were something else or to create the impression that nuthin had changed in the course of two centuries” (370-71). This description seems to contradict the image of the city in flux but in fact indicates that any sign of stasis may only be a façade, a mask the city wears to conceal unwelcome changes. The “city of light and dark” (372), of change and stasis, thus becomes a city with a double identity, a city divided against itself, an urban uncanny, characterised by “a disturbance or conflict in the otherwise apparently smooth and efficient organisation” of urban space.<sup>5</sup>

Another prevalent portrayal of Glasgow in *Psychoraag* is connected to the point of view of Zaf’s parents and their fellow Pakistani immigrants, for whom Glasgow is “Migra Polis, the deepest layer ae hell” (310), where the first-generation’s immigrant experience involves a sense of alienation, isolation, and Weilian rootlessness (the loss of a common past). The portrayal of the traumatic experience of immigration may suggest that it is not only the city but its inhabitants as well that exist in temporal and spatial dislocation, contributing to the cultural hybridity of urban space. Let us take, for instance, the districts of Kinning Park as depicted in *Psychoraag*. As Zaf notes, “[t]he pavements hereabouts were all Punjabi” (373), marking the primal territory of a tribal group, “[p]rotectin their own. Keepin the others out. Imprisonin themselves” (23). Similarly to Kinning Park, Zaf’s native neighbourhood, “the Shiels wis a skin of sorts, an armour against the scaldin winds of an all-white Alba. [...] Halaal butchers, subcontinental grocers [...] religious bookshops [...] Silent churches with no visible congregations. *Masjids* [that is, mosques] secreted in tenement flats devoid even of Glasgow light” (379). The portrayal of both Kinning Park and Pollokshields points beyond or complicates the image of a culturally hybrid urban

---

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>5</sup> Lucy HUSKINSON, „Introduction: The Urban Uncanny”, in *The Urban Uncanny: A Collection of Interdisciplinary studies*, ed. Lucy HUSKINSON, (London and New York: Routledge, 2016) 7.

space, as they appear both familiar and different, protecting and suffocating, a shelter and a prison.

Such dichotomies evoke the concept of the urban uncanny yet again, an aspect of which Lucy Huskinson describes as follows: “The city is uncanny when it reveals itself in a new and unexpected light; when, for example, its familiar streets and buildings suddenly appear strange, even hostile.”<sup>6</sup> In light of this interpretation, these Glaswegian districts may be perceived as at once familiar and strange by both the white Scots and the Scottish Pakistani immigrants, as the former cannot retain the traditional image of these cultural spaces, while the latter cannot create the exact replica of their lost homeland – as a result, ‘home’ becomes unhomely, uncanny. Glasgow as an urban uncanny thus signifies “the slippage or mismatch between [the inhabitants’] expectations of the city” and the “often surprising and unsettling experiences it can evoke within them.”<sup>7</sup>

Furthermore, the uncanny, ambivalent atmosphere of the city may be generated just as much by being visibly other and wearing a mask to conceal its otherness as by the immigrants’ ambivalent affective relationship with it, as well as their identity crisis, signalling “an urban self that is fundamentally dislocated.”<sup>8</sup> The spatial, temporal and cultural dislocation of both Glasgow and its Pakistani diaspora is visible in Zaf’s recollection of the first Pakistani immigrants in Glasgow: “These were ... the *kisaan* who had powered the buses, the underground trains, the machines of the sweatshop underwear-manufacturers. The whole of Glasgow had walked in their footsteps and worn their clothes. With bare soles they had trodden out new, hard paths along the Clyde and they had clothed the lily-white bodies of whole generations of Scots and then, later, they had filled their stomachs, too. You eat what you are. If that wis the case, then Glasgae wis Faisalabad a hundred times over.” (242–243)

The *kisaan*’s [peasants] social practices transform it into some ‘immigrant city’ and the urban imaginary of a marginal space which disempowers and dehumanises the diaspora subject. The process of dehumanisation makes the presence of first-generation immigrants basically invisible, metonymic – they may have been the predecessors of current native Glaswegians, but they have already vanished physically, leaving behind nothing but the paths they had trodden out, the clothes they had laboured on, and their cuisine to feed ‘Scottish stomachs.’ The invisibility of the first Pakistani immigrants in Glasgow may be

---

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>8</sup> Jo COLLINS and John JERVIS, „Introduction”, in *Uncanny Modernity: Cultural Theories, Modern Anxieties*, ed. Jo COLLINS and John JERVIS, (Houndsmills and New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008) 1–9., 7.

## The Interconnectedness of the Urban Uncanny in *Psychoraag*

---

read as a ghost-like quality: they 'haunt' the white Scots through the cultural products they have left behind, permeate urban space with their invisible but palpable presence and turn the city into an urban uncanny.

The portrayal of the *kisaan* as ghosts points to "Derrida's *hauntologie*, according to which "the present is always affected by (ghosts of) the past"<sup>9</sup> and evokes Benjamin's understanding of the modern urban experience as dream-like and ghostly – a ghostliness that may be attributed to "the multiplicity and juxtaposition of spatial and temporal markers."<sup>10</sup> In fact, the urban subject may be a ghost by definition, as it manifests itself as "an absent presence or present absence"<sup>11</sup> – the first Pakistani immigrants are long gone but their presence is still felt; the later generations are present but feel 'invisible,' unless they wear mask such as the Kinnin Park Boys in *Psychoraag*, a "mini Cosa Nostra" (104), who, "not knowing what mask tae wear, had acquired those of East Coast Gangstas" (253). Their identity performances indicate that "the urban subject as the familiar 'other' is uncanny per se as it epitomizes the ambiguity between the same and the other, the strange and the familiar."<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, the Kinnin Park Boys are a literary example of how the urban uncanny actually works: "[It] reveals the urban subject as one alienated from himself or herself, as a divided, repressed subject who reflects the situation of their environment as a place that promises the security and familiarity of a home, but cannot provide it. The urban uncanny thereby denotes an existential gap or mismatch between city and citizen."<sup>13</sup>

In Saadi's Glasgow fiction, the "divided, repressed subject" is the Scottish Pakistani immigrants struggling with a cultural identity crisis, generated by their experiences and visions of the urban uncanny, the creation of which they contribute to with their very presence.

The identity crisis of many of Saadi's characters is manifested in the wearing of masks, a kind of identity performance, as well as in the creation of alter egos. Zaf as DJ Zaf can become "immortal. Invisible, formless, perfect" (85), dissolving in the music he plays and creating himself a transcendental self. Interestingly, Zaf has three other alter egos in the novel: a Pakistani boy on a faded photograph who embodies Zaf's roots; Zafar, the gangster of Kinnin Park, who is Zaf's diasporic 'dark' self; and Zilla, a former girlfriend, his feminine side. Sometimes these alter egos merge into one, forming a 'mutant self': "Zaf-Zafar, the double-headed, mortal deity" (400). The alter egos of these characters may

---

<sup>9</sup> ECKHARD, *Chronotopes of the Uncanny*, op.cit., 11.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>13</sup> HUSKINSON, *Introduction*, op.cit., 5–6.

be interpreted as doppelgängers, a double identity or “double aspect of the self” which, in Huskinson’s words, “leads the subject to an uncanny experience of themselves, as something familiar yet other, as out of sorts or out of ‘place’, as fragmented, disturbed and de-familiarised.”<sup>14</sup> In Freud’s theory, the doppelgänger is created when “a person [identifies] himself with another and so become[s] unsure of his true self”<sup>15</sup> but it may pose the danger of eliminating the original self.

The various interpretations of the uncanny discussed here – the doppelgänger and the ghost, a strange or hostile atmosphere and a mismatch between expectations and experiences – are ultimately embodied in the city and bodily experienced in through its atmosphere. Glasgow as an urban uncanny thus breaks down the boundary between not only “the ‘then’ and the ‘now’” as Freud has shown, but also the ‘here’ and the ‘there,’ the strange and the familiar, the self and the other with the help of an affective relationship between the urban subject and the city. As a result, the formerly hostile, ghostly, unhomely atmosphere of the city, created by both its physical spaces and places, and the people inhabiting, experiencing or imagining them, may be subverted and may lead to the acknowledgement and acceptance of an double yet distinctively Glaswegian identity.

### **My major publications on the topic:**

Éva PATAKI, „‘Sounds from the Furthest Places’: Language, Music, and the Transfusion of Identity in Suhayl Saadi’s *Psychoraag*”, in *Space, Gender and the Gaze in Literature and Art*, ed. Ágnes Zsófia KOVÁCS and László SÁRI, (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017) 18–200.

PATAKI Éva, „Emocionális nagyvárosi terek: Atmoszféra, bűvölet és fantazmagória Sunetra Gupta *The Glassblower’s Breath* című regényében”, *Studia Litteraria*, 2016(2017) Nr. 3–4. 121–134.

Éva PATAKI, „Emotional Urban Spaces: Atmosphere, Fascination and Phantasmagoria in Sunetra Gupta’s *The Glassblower’s Breath* (1993)”, *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies*, 24(2018) Nr. 1. 51–64.

Éva PATAKI, „Homes and Belonging(s): The Interconnectedness of Space, Movement, and Identity in British-Pakistani Novels”, in *The Routledge Companion to Pakistani Anglophone Writing*, ed. Aroosa KANWAL and Saiyma ASLAM, (London and New York: Routledge, 2019) 274–284.

Éva PATAKI, „‘Nae blond wigs in Glasgae’: Urban Imaginaries and Affective Relationships in Suhayl Saadi’s Short Fiction”, *Skase Journal of Literary and Cultural Studies*, 1(2019) Nr. 1. 63–77.

---

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>15</sup> Sigmund FREUD, „The Uncanny” [1919], transl. David MCLINTOCK, (London: Penguin, 2003) 142.