

Theses of Doctoral (PhD) Dissertation

Space, Movement and Identity in Contemporary British Asian Fiction

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Focus and Objectives

My dissertation addresses the issues of space, movement and identity and investigates the complex nature of their interconnectedness 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 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.

The comparative analysis of seven novels is obviously not sufficient to provide a comprehensive account and complete picture of the whole of British Asian diaspora fiction, nor is it aiming to offer generalised statements about, or case studies of, the

interconnectedness of space, movement and identity. Instead, my choice of novels adopts a roughly chronological pattern, following the past three decades of the evolution of British Asian fiction from post-colonial to post-postcolonial and post-ethnic, from male-oriented to gender-inflected. The novelty of the dissertation lies in the fact that it provides new perspectives on reading frequently analysed novels (e.g. the cultural aspects of spatiality and the spatial aspects of identity) and calling attention to works hitherto more or less neglected by critics. Furthermore, although these novels all feature prevalent tropes of diaspora fiction, I approach these tropes from different angles (such as cultural positioning and gender) that reveal further layers for possible interpretations. By doing so, my aim is to emphasise the diverse perspectives and cultural insights of British Asian authors and their works that both represent newly emerging identities in British cultural space and shed light on dimensions remaining hidden in dominant discourses, thereby enabling and initiating new arguments about the interconnectedness of space, movement and identity.

The dissertation is built on four main hypotheses. The first is already obvious from the decision to narrow the focus of my investigation to British Asian diaspora literature rather than looking at the entirety of British diaspora literature: I argue that there exist certain recurrent patterns in this body of fiction – such as the portrayal of the hybridization of identity and space, identity crisis, cultural positioning and identity performance, and various forms of mental and physical movement –, and one major aim of the dissertation is to map these patterns. On the other hand, the relatively narrow focus enables me to explore differences within the community. Thus, my second argument is that the spatial configuration of diasporic identity even within a relatively clearly defined community like that of the British Asian diaspora is far from homogeneous, and that the dissimilarities depending on differences of gender, class, age and physical location can be best grasped through a treatment of the relationship between spatiality and subjectivity.

My third hypothesis is that different spaces and locations not only define identity but also serve as triggers for movement, journeys of discovery of a fluid identity, enabling subjects to play upon and with the multiplicity of their identities in a continuing act of identity performance. I assert that while what I call *locational mimicry* is frequently seen as a source or symptom of disempowerment, rootlessness or non-attachment, it can also be understood as a conscious strategy of identity performance. The final main argument that informs my dissertation is 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.

Methods

The core of the theoretical background of my investigations and arguments is situated at the intersection of cultural, postcolonial and diaspora studies. My general approach is primarily inspired by cultural studies, drawing upon the critical insights of theorists such as Homi K. Bhabha (1994) and Stuart Hall (1996) on cultural identity, ethnicity and in-betweenness, and particularly on their respective theories of hybridity, which I find essential for the study of cultural identity in British Asian diaspora fiction. The notion of hybridity will appear as the primary recurring trope throughout my dissertation, as I concentrate on the ongoing interconnections and mutual implicatedness of subjectivity and space, starting with a broadly phenomenological conception of this relationship and superimposing on it a detailed reading of the cultural aspects of spatiality.

My dissertation enters the critical debate at a moment in which space and movement are becoming significant aspects of analysis. My work places a special emphasis on providing a new interdisciplinary perspective and introduces a complex theoretical-critical approach that has not been applied to the study of this particular field yet. The second theoretical base of my dissertation is provided by various theories of space and spatiality. Within this area, I mainly draw upon phenomenological, psychoanalytical and cultural theories of space and subjectivity, such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty's (1945) insights on the phenomenology of space and Gaston Bachelard's (1958) poetics of space.

To understand the spatiality of diasporic experience and subjectivity, I also make use of Avtar Brah's (1996) complex concept of diaspora space. In my dissertation I use the terms diaspora and diaspora space both in its particularity and as a theoretical term – denoting a Bhabhaian third space, which is hybrid and hybridizing – and spatially, as the primary *locus* of processes of diasporic identity formation, as well as of the concomitant confusion of cultural identity and state of in-betweenness. Throughout the investigation of the various alternative ways of being and belonging, I primarily draw on Elspeth Probyn's (1996) theories on belonging in movement.

My third theoretical base is provided by various theories of performance and mimicry, such as René Girard's (1965) mimetic theory and Roger Caillois's (1936) work on psychastenia, but first and foremost on Bhabha's notion of mimicry as an imperfect copying,

a partial representation of a desired identity. I link the concept of mimicry with various theories of performance and 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. Throughout my dissertation I use the term *identity performance* as a kind of social display at the intersection of (or shifting to and fro between) performance (as role-play) and Butlerian performativity (as a construction and a display of [a gendered] cultural identity), with the diasporian being both the subject and the agent of his or her own performative actions. Linking these notions to theories of movement, I examine how performances, self-positioning and various forms of movement generate and facilitate identity formation from performative behaviour to what Kathy E. Ferguson (1993) calls "mobile subjectivities," a term I borrow and apply to encompass *flâneurs*, tourists, travellers, cosmopolites and nomads as varieties of (post-)post-colonial subject positions.

My fourth theoretical input is provided by diverse theories of movement, firstly, by anthropological approaches to travelling and tourism: Michel de Certeau's (1988) work on travel as a spatial practice and a way of uprooting, James Clifford's (1997) notion of dwelling-in-travel, as well as John Urry's (1990; 1995) theories on tourism, the tourist subject and the tourist gaze. Secondly, I make use of cultural theory's treatments of travelling and migration: Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) nomadology as a movement of deterritorialization and reterritorialization, and Rosi Braidotti's (1994) concept of the female nomad. Investigating the act of walking in urban space, I draw upon Walter Benjamin's (1972) idea of the *flâneur*, and the concept of the *flâneuse*, as it has received gendered inflections in the work of theorists like Deborah L. Parsons (2003), Elizabeth Wilson (2001) and Janet Wolff (1990).

Results

The first important finding of the research carried out in my dissertation is that, at least in the context of diaspora, the interconnectedness of space and identity involves a mutual hybridization, a transfusion and transmutation of both cultural spaces and identities through a constant, though often unwelcome, interaction. Hybridization is responsible for the creation of diaspora space and it is an unavoidable aspect of diasporic identity formation. My analysis of *Maps for Lost Lovers*, *Anita and Me*, and *Brick Lane* shows that first-generation diasporians are generally characterised by a performed, lenient collective memory of, and a longing for, a Rushdie-esque imaginary homeland, as well as by a "homing desire" (Brah, 1996) for a place to

belong to. This need for a sense of belonging is a primary factor in the creation of diaspora spaces: a place may be produced as a diaspora space by a diasporic community's collective expressions of identity and belonging. The portrayal of space in the novels analysed in my dissertation suggests that these practices also foster the creation of multicultural space, while urban, suburban and rural space trigger the creation of diaspora spaces and hybrid subjectivities, who hybridize diaspora space from 'the inside.' As diaspora spaces are constantly in formation and do not have fixed boundaries, they may take up various shapes, sizes and locations within multicultural spaces and may also intersect with them, that is, their hybridity has both spatial, cultural and human quotients. In chapter 1 I identified three levels of diaspora space – the home, the immigrant neighbourhood and the city or the village, and examined two aspects of the creation of diaspora space. The first is the hybridization of traditional English cultural space, which takes place in a constant interplay of deterritorialization and reterritorialization; the second is provided by the various cultural, social and religious practices which appropriate diaspora space. The hybridization of space and identity may involve fears of abjection (Kristeva, 1982) and the consequent drawing of borders, yet, due to the various degrees and forms of interaction between the two cultures, it is a metamorphosis that proves to be unavoidable.

Similarly to immigrant experience, diaspora experience – encompassing the creation of hybrid diaspora space and subjects – necessarily brings about a sense of dislocation, placelessness, and in-betweenness, generated by the discrepancies between the dominant culture and the roots. These spatial aspects of diaspora experience may be approached from the perspective of belonging – my second main argument is that there are diverse ways in which diasporians search for a sense of belonging. In *Maps for Lost Lovers* the diasporic community displays a strong attachment to the lost homeland and a certain Weilian *déracinement* or rootlessness, that is, unbelonging in their own diasporic community. *Brick Lane* and *Anita and Me*, on the other hand, emphasise the sense of belonging created by the diaspora community, and the rules and traditions it has 'imported' from the homeland. Belonging, in this case, is first and foremost understood both as a way of self-identification and as imaginary shared belongings. While *Maps*, *Brick Lane* and *Anita* portray the diasporian's search for a sense of belonging to a certain ethnic, religious or local community, Shahid of *The Black Album* chooses belonging in pop culture and in movement as an alternative for belonging to a fundamentalist group.

As regards diasporic subjectivity, one of the most important attributes of movement is its ability to turn spaces into lived places and to foster one's sense of belonging to a place: in

Aslam's novel, for instance, these processes are facilitated by the act of mapping. On the other hand, the rigidity and stasis of a place, accompanied by situatedness and rootedness experienced as a threat, a spatial confinement, a paralysis-like state, may in fact serve as a trigger for movement. Thus, movement can be read as the spatial manifestation of the diasporian's in-betweenness and search for identity. Furthermore, movement may also signal the inability and unwillingness to be attached to place or to belong – in Gupta's novel the heroine's wanderlust and cosmopolitanism displays a unique love-hate relationship with places, as well as temporary attachment as a possible way of a Cliffordian "dwelling-in-traveling." Dhaliwal's *Tourism* takes this notion one step further in his protagonist and the figure of the tourist, who is "just looking" but never staying in one place for long enough to call it home. Puppy's example shows that movement may not only be an essential tool of resistance to stasis and fixity, but also a symptom of urban alienation and voluntary homelessness. For Shahid and Karim of *The Buddha*, on the other hand, movement seems to generate what Doreen Massey (1993) calls "a progressive sense of place," resulting in the perception of the metropolis as their "manor," as a nomadic territory marked out by routine paths and temporary abodes.

Thirdly, I came to the conclusion that the various notions of mimicry, performativity and performance are crucially important in studying and understanding the British Asian diaspora subject's identity formation and construction. These concepts may provide an exciting aspect of the diasporians' sense of self and, by extension, their sense of place as well. The various places and cultural spaces that the protagonists of the novels I analysed inhabit, frequent or strive to belong to, invite and generate diverse forms of role-play, mimesis, masquerade and theatrical performance of a constructed, longed for, or assimilated self.

The concept of belonging is interconnected with performativity and identity performance inasmuch as they all serve as points of reference in terms of one's self-identification (e.g. performing identity as essentialised and fixed, belonging to a certain location, as is the case in *Maps*), and can become important tools in the diasporic subject's Bhabhaian mimicry for survival and mimicry as resistance as well. As for the former, the figures of Meena in *Anita and Me* and Shahid, for instance, suggest how mimicry and identity performance form an indispensable part of identity construction, signalling the desire to conform to dominant discourses on the body and to create a sense or illusion of belonging. Identity performance as a mimicry involving repetition and masquerade may also be interpreted as necessarily theatrical, positing and positioning diasporians as performers, consciously playing on and with their projected identities, as Karim's and Puppy's figures

also indicate. On the other hand, Karim's role-plays and performances suggests the possibility of the diasporic subject's mimicry as resistance, mocking and subverting dominant discourse through exaggerated stereotypes.

The fourth claim made in my dissertation derives directly from the third – I found that the various identity performances may lead to different identity positions and variations on diasporic identity: as immigrant or diasporian, Indian, Muslim or British Asian, a tourist or a traveller, to name but a few. As I asserted in Karim's case, identity performances may also be perceived as light-hearted games, playful try-outs of various subjectivities, and possible aspects of a fluid identity. Metaphorised by the metamorphosis of the immigrant and the transmutation of the South Asian diaspora subject, the various diasporic identities and identity positions, then, suggest a hybrid and multiple identity in fluidity, and may manifest in individual choices of self-identification, as well as of belonging in alternative ways, especially in movement, which, in my view, results in the creation of mobile subjectivities.

For me, one of the most thought-provoking aspects of mobile subjectivities is that there is a thin line between interpreting them as roles (forms of mimicry and identity performances) or as different identity positions, revealing actual traits of the diasporic subject's identity. Due to their decadent lifestyle in the metropolis, I read Shahid's, Karim's and Puppy's figure as pleasure trippers (a certain kind of tourists); yet, Puppy's self-identification as a tourist in the city suggests that his tourism is a mask to hide his otherness and to justify his detachment, as well as a state of mind testifying to a post-ethnic diasporic consciousness. In my view, Puppy's and Karim's identity performances in urban and suburban space are not only part of a defensive and a Bhabhaian mimicry, but also point to the acknowledgement of a multiple self with shifting boundaries, a hybrid self in fluidity; a transgressive subjectivity both rejecting and playing upon racial and national stereotypes, and casting off dominant ideas on family, nation and home to engage in various forms of movement.

My fifth, final finding is concerned with the intertwining of movement and subjectivity. Based on their movement within and between urban and suburban space, I argued for the following mobile subjectivities as possible varieties of the characters' identity: tourists, *flâneurs*, travellers, cosmopolites and (female) nomads. Karim's figure in *The Buddha* is prone to different interpretations – he has been read as an embodiment of all the above mentioned subjectivities, due to his complex relationship with places and his different journeys: his local migration to the city, commuting between the suburb and the city, nomadic movement in Greater London, and his tourist trips to London and New York. My analysis

most emphatically argued that Karim is a nomad in a Deleuzian and Braidottian sense, following routine paths in his marked nomadic territory of London, transgressing established dominant discourses on sexuality and subjectivity. While Karim's and Shahid's first steps in London, as well as Chanu's late sight-seeing tour posit them as tourists, Puppy becomes a tourist during his weekend trip to the countryside and also through self-identification. On the other hand, strolling the streets of London, observing its inhabitants and urban architecture, and enjoying his anonymity in the crowd, which enables him to make the sarcastic and subjective remarks of the insider, yet remain detached and hidden, Puppy's figure also emerges as a postmodern *flâneur*, only to transform into a 'real' tourist and a traveller, a so-called global nomad, at the end of the novel – subject positions also detectable in Shahid's figure at the end of *The Black Album* –, suggesting that these subjectivities may intertwine and intersect.

At the end of *Brick Lane*, discovering the pleasures and possibilities of the city, Nazneen also appears as a postmodern, post-postcolonial urban walker, a twenty-first century *flâneuse*, though I first and foremost consider her to be a Braidottian female nomad, who can change her subject positions and determine her own paths. Her nomadism is characterised by transgressing boundaries and subverting conventions, by resisting fixity and attachment, and by the ability to experience belonging as becoming. Similarly, the heroine of *The Glassblower's Breath* is characterised by defiance and transgression, and she inhabits the world as a home with no rules. Her female nomadic consciousness also intersects with a certain Cliffordian travelling identity, creating a fluid social identity, a cosmopolitanism manifested in movement to and within transnational spaces, and pointing to the reconsideration of traditional ways of belonging and rigid conceptions of home. These interpretations, I argued, may enable a better understanding of the multiple identities and diasporic subjectivity of British Asian women, especially in light of my claim that in Gupta's and Ali's novels cosmopolitanism and nomadism appear as indisputable factors in transforming a double subaltern identity as an ethnic and gendered other into a multiple feminine subjectivity. This female agency would not be possible without the enabling, emancipatory city, providing what Adrienne Rich (1984) called a politics of location, and an open space for a new gendered British subject.

My findings call attention to the large variety of kinds of identity formation and (re-) construction across a range of cultural spaces and geographical locations in England; by looking at different forms of movement, I have highlighted the numerous aspects and possible

interpretations of the interconnectedness of space, movement and identity, and argued for the possibility of further interdisciplinary research on British Asian diaspora literature.

Publications of the Author within the Theme of the Dissertation

Articles:

1. “Mozgásban: a turista és a *flâneur* Nirpal Singh Dhaliwal *Tourism* című regényében.” *Filológiai Közlöny* 2 (2014): 183-197. Web.
2. “On the Move: The Tourist and the Flâneur in Nirpal Singh Dhaliwal’s *Tourism*.” *The AnaChronisT* 17 (2012/13): 264-278. Web.
3. “Spaces and Topographies in British Diaspora Fiction.” *Cultural Imprints in the Age of Globalisation: Writing Region and Nation*. The Research Centre for the Study of the British Contemporary Novel (CCRBC). Eds. Sanda Berce, Petronia Petrar, Erika Mihálycsa, Elena Pacurar, Rares Moldovan. Cluj-Napoca: Presa Universitara Clujeana, 2012. 203-13. Print.
4. “‘The Wilderness of Solitude’: Diasporic Spaces and Subjectivity in Nadeem Aslam’s *Maps for Lost Lovers* and Meera Syal’s *Anita and Me*.” Accepted for publication by HUSSE 11.
5. “‘Going somewhere’: The Nomad and the Tourist in Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane*, Hanif Kureishi’s *The Buddha of Suburbia* and Nirpal Singh Dhaliwal’s *Tourism*.” *The Round Table* (2012): n. pag. Web.
6. “I Am Where I Am: Location as a Symbol of Identity in Two British Asian Novels.” *HUSSE10-LitCult. Proceedings of the HUSSE10 Conference, 27-29 January 2011. Literature and Culture Volume*. Eds. Kinga Földvály, Zsolt Almási, Veronika Schandl. Magyar Elektronikus Könyvtár, 2011. 160-166. Web.
7. “Az vagyok, ahol vagyok – A lokalitás mint identitás-szimbólum két brit-ázsiai regényben.” *Szkhonion* (2011 spring): 75-83. Print.
8. “Caught Between Two Worlds: The Confusion of Cultural Identity in Three British Asian Novels.” *The Round Table* (2010): n. pag. Web.

Reviews:

1. “Újfajta britség – Hanif Kureishi: *A kültelki Buddha.*” Book review. *A Vörös Postakocsi* 1-4 (2012):131-3. Print.
2. “A Transnational Approach to Contemporary Anglophone Literatures.” Silvia Schultermandl and Sebnem Toplu, eds., *A Fluid Sense of Self: The Politics of Transnational Identity*. Book review. *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies* 17.2 (2011): 403-406. Print.