www.TLHjournal.com The Literary Herald ISSN: 2454-3365
An International Refereed English e-Journal
Impact Factor: 2.24 (IIJIF)

SPACE AND SUBJECTIVITY IN ANITA DESAI'S CLEAR LIGHT OF DAY

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The present paper proposes to explore the concept of space and subjectivity with reference to Anita Desai's female search for identity and its implication in her novel *Clear Light of Day.*This thesis focuses on Anita Desai's novel *Clear Light of Day*. While many studies of characters focus on the lyrical subject walking in the countryside, in this project, I follow two urban characters, Bim and Tara, and explore ways in which their walks disrupt stable or idealized conceptions of space and subjectivity. Far from expressing or recovering an essential innocence or ahistorical self, both of these characters demonstrate that subjectivity is deeply implicated in its social environment. In fact, both the characters of Desai's novel illustrate the cycles of violence and addiction that the longing for a recoverable or ideal self-perpetuates. Not only Bim and Tara, but also other characters of the novel like Raja, Baba and alcoholic Mira Masi do not clear "their own ideological space;" instead, they move within a space that is already determined—by others and through language— and in so moving, they seem to rupture authoritative ideologies even while making use of them.

Furthermore, in the novel, subjectivity arises in and through movement. This

movement is constrained by others' claims on language and on space; and in the text, movement is always a kind of transgression against these claims. It is only through this transgression, however, that writing becomes a process, not of recovering an essential self, but of displacing dominant ideologies—and, I shall suggest, of disrupting and making use of the practices that re-inscribe these ideologies—so that previously unimagined subjectivities might appear.

As both Bim and Tara encounter others on their walks, I shall discuss how these encounters might, as Langan suggests, posit a common ground and re-inscribe positions, and, on the other hand, how encounters with others might be mutually transformative. In the novel, for example, to encounter the other is a way of inspiring and being inspired; both subjects are transformed in an activity which disrupts clear boundaries between self and other and leaves both subjects radically displaced.

My reading of Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day* uses the theories laid out in Michel de Certeau's and Henri Lefebvre's discussions of space and practice. In both theories, space is a production, and subjectivity does not exist *a priori* but is measured by ways of practicing or making use of determining spatial frameworks.[1] Neither Certeau nor Lefebvre focuses specifically on the development of subjectivity, however; thus I shall also discuss Elizabeth Grosz's articulation of spatial production, as she further explores ways space and subjectivity might interact. Furthermore, Angela Esterhammer's theorization of language offers ways to think of language as an integral part of spatial production. Both Grosz and Esterhammer offer ways of thinking about how subjectivity and space arise together in movement; one

term does not precede the other. While this thesis is not a faithful reproduction of any one of these theories, these theorists' discussions certainly help to shape my own reading—my own walk—through these texts. I shall first discuss these theories, followed by a description of how these theories shape my reading of *Clear Light of Day.*

In his *Practice of Everyday Life*, Certeau explores ways in which everyday activity makes use of systems. He argues that "everyday life invents itself in countless ways by poaching in countless ways on the property of others" (xii). His study is concerned with the art of everyday life, the ways in which users move within already-defined places, and manipulate and recombine the elements of determining social systems. Certeau articulates this art by distinguishing between proper place and space.

For Certeau, the proper place is one of strategy; strategy is,

> the calculation (or manipulation) of power relationships that becomes possible as soon as a subject with will and power (a business, an army, a city, a scientific institution) can be isolated. It postulates a place that can be delimited as its own and serve as the base from which relations with an exteriority composed of targets or threats (customers and competitors, enemies, the country surrounding the city, objectives and objects of research, etc.) can be managed. (36)

Proper place is mappable (by its own cartographic rules), regulates the operations within its boundaries (and defines relations with and through an "outside"), and is "a mastery of time through the foundation of an autonomous place" (36) Furthermore, the law of the proper

defines knowledge; the proper, for example, has the "ability to transform the uncertainties of history into readable spaces" (36). The proper already wields power, and has the ability to define knowledge; "a certain power is the precondition of this knowledge and not merely its effect or attribute. It makes this knowledge possible and at the same time determines its characteristics. It produces itself in and through this knowledge" (36). Moreover, the proper is a storehouse; it hoards information and assets for future plans and raids. Self-mastered, place re-inscribes its own stable position by defining itself in its difference from others, by defining and channelling knowledge, by planning, and through its powers of surveillance. The law of the proper transforms "foreign forces into objects that can be observed and measured, and thus [might] control and 'include' them within its scope of vision" (36). This mastery of sight allows proper place foresight, and transforms other forces into readable objects and into subjects of proper place's law.

Within this place is the space of the tactic, or "practiced place" (117). For Certeau,

> The space of the tactic is the space of the other. Thus it must play on and within a terrain imposed on it by the law of a foreign power. It does not have the means to keep to itself, at a distance, in a position of withdrawal, foresight, and self-collection: it is a maneuver…within enemy territory…It must vigilantly make use of the cracks that particular conjunctions open in the surveillance of proprietary powers. It poaches in them. It creates surprises in them…It is a guileful ruse. (37)

Lacking an established base, the space of the tactic is one in which movements are dependent

upon time, and "cracks" in the systemized place, and the tactician must be on the lookout for "opportunities" which might be made use of. The tactic, for Certeau, is "an art of the weak" (37). The tactician is a trespasser; one whose quick movements elude the proper law's surveillance and determining measures. Unrecognized, the tactician poaches on proper place, making use of and disrupting its systemized operations. As proper place channels movement, it also channels and defines knowledge and language. Thus, to poach on proper place is to use and re-appropriate knowledge and language. This use and re-appropriation, I shall suggest, ruptures and diffuses the power of place to delimit territories and to define subjects.

Certeau uses the example of walking in the city to articulate further the space of the tactic. Walkers are without a place; however, they make use of the proper, institutional topography of the city. That is, the institutional map, "like a proper name…provides a way of conceiving and constructing space on the basis of a finite number of stable, isolatable, and interconnected properties" (94). The mapped city, like a proper name, orients, and makes walking possible, even while restricting it. According to the delimited spaces of the city, walkers' movements might be channelled through paved streets, or around prohibited areas, and these walks might be traced on a map of the city. Certeau points to what is missed in this re-tracing, "the act itself of passing by" (97). Certeau argues that mapping these walks, and assuming this "tracing" is the walk, "causes a way of being in the world to be forgotten" (97). He also suggests, however, that when practices are unmappable, they are "without rational transparency, they are impossible to administer" (95). They are un-readable practices; thus, they are able to proliferate, invisible to disciplinary systems. These practices, these "indeterminable trajectories" resist the mapping of systematized place, without having

recourse to another place or an "outside."

Certeau further suggests that "space is like the word when it is spoken," and he draws an analogy between walking in the city and the speech act. He writes that walking

> has a triple "enunciative" function: it is a process of appropriation of the topographical system on the part of the pedestrian (just as the speaker appropriates and takes on language); it is a spatial acting-out of the place (just as the speech act is an acoustic acting-out of language); and it implies relations among differentiated positions, that is among pragmatic "contracts" in the form of movements (just as the verbal enunciation is an "allocution," "posits another opposite" the speaker and puts contracts between interlocutors into action). It thus seems possible to give a preliminary definition of walking as a space of enunciation. (97-8)

In his use of the city, the walker makes a selection; the city as walked is not the "clear text" of the city as planned (93). Similarly, the speaker's language is a selection, the speaker makes use of, indeed, actualizes possibilities. As the walker or speaker moves, he or she

> actualizes some of these possibilities. In that way, he makes them exist as well as emerge. But he also moves them about and invents others, since the crossing, drifting away, or improvisation of walking privilege, transform, or abandon spatial elements. (98)

Thus, the practice of place might reiterate and reinforce the operations of "proper place," but also might traverse place and language to invent new spaces of enunciation, spaces that are

temporary (as walkers are without the storehouses of place, but must best utilize time), but that might open radical possibilities. While spatial practices "secretly structure the determining conditions of social life," they might also be movements that manipulate or elude the disciplinary practices that re-inscribe the "place" of a disciplinary society (96).

Certeau's tactical space offers a way of thinking of both walking and writing as a tactical maneuver; it is a way of being in and re-appropriating place and language. Because, as I shall argue, neither Bim nor Tara stands apart from his surroundings, they are both, tacticians and transgressors through already-appropriated systems. Furthermore, the tactical use of place is an activity, as Certeau suggests, which eludes the law of the proper; it is unreadable and therefore able to proliferate. Thus, making use of "cracks" in the systemized operations of place might produce deviant threads of activity that further rupture place; this use might, as I shall argue is the case in Baba, perpetuate transgressive activities which opens possibilities for re-generation and revolutions.

Henri Lefebvre in his *The Production of Space*, also explores ways in which social space is practiced; his comments elucidate the practice of space theorized by Certeau. Lefebvre argues that space is not an abstract and absolute container, nor is it a transcendental structure, "an a priori realm of consciousness (i.e. of the subject)" (2). He offers a conceptual triad for articulating the production of space: (1) "representations of space"; this is "conceptualized space, the space of scientists, planners, urbanists, technocratic subdividers and social engineers…all of whom identify what is lived and what is perceived with what is conceived;" (2) "spatial practice," which "secretes a society's space; it propounds and

presupposes it, in a dialectical interaction; it produces it slowly and surely as it masters and appropriates it;" and (3) "representational space", which is "space as directly lived through its associated images and symbols, and hence the space of 'inhabitants' and 'users'… [It is] space which the imagination seeks to change and appropriate. It overlays physical space, making symbolic use of its objects" (38-9). For Lefebvre, spatial practice reproduces the conceptualizations of representational space. Spatial practice is similar to, in Certeau's terms, the "proper" use of "proper space." Thus, in spatial practice, perceptions and subjects are determined and channelled by conceptualizations that these practices reproduce. Lefebvre's spatial practice is the "correct" reading of a text; it is the "appropriate" use of language is a given situation. Lefebvre suggests that spatial practice demonstrates competency; that is, one has learned the rules of the game (has, for example, learned to define the perimeters of a situation), and can take on, to some extent, one's own position within this system. Thus, in spatial practice, the subject's position is already determined by the rules he or she has learned; the subject re-inscribes this position, and these rules, through regulated practice.

Representational space is conceptualized space put "through the bath of madness" (232). While this space, for Lefebvre, tends to be non-verbal, both the spaces of Bim and Tara might be considered representational spaces insofar as they re-appropriate spatial practices, expose the limitations of conceived space, and interrupt the reader's habits of reading. Indeed, Desai demonstrates the limitations of spatial practices which re-produce conceived space, by showing that Bim's channels for proper activity have become so narrowed that any movement is impossible; Bim's conceptualized or proper place tends towards stagnation and death. The novel illustrates an undermining of Desai's command of

language, or competency at spatial practices, thus complicating the writer's position as a self-possessed commander of linguistic and spatial practices.

Lefebvre's analysis highlights space as a complex building process that cannot be imposed by an outside agent, but that arises through the practices, perceptions, and conceptualizations of a society. Indeed, for Lefebvre, space is a process, a product, and a range of possibilities. Space is produced through the process of the inter-workings and movement of representational spaces, representations of space, and spatial practices, and it is the range of possible spatial practices and experiences within this process and production.

Neither Bim nor Tara walk outside this production; they are interwoven in the patterns of spatial practices. Their building displaces regulated spatial practices, even while depending on them. Furthermore, both walkers reproduce and expose the constructedness of space through which they move, and therefore, expose the limitations and constructedness of concepts and subjects that might define themselves through an abstract and absolute space.

By examining practices of space, Certeau and Lefebvre allow questions about subjectivity to surface: how, for example, does the practice, production, or re-appropriation of space define the boundaries of the practitioner? Elizabeth Grosz, in *Space, Time, and Perversion* writes that,

> It is our positioning within space, both perspectival access to space, and also as an object for others in space, that gives the subject a coherent identity and an ability to manipulate things, including its own body parts, in space. However, space does not become comprehensible to the subject by its being

> the space of movement; rather, it becomes space through movement, and as such, it acquires specific properties from the subject's constitutive functioning within it. (92)

Space exists only as practiced; and space and subjectivities (indeed, for Grosz, bodies) are mutually defining. Grosz suggests that "[h]istorically, it can be argued …that as representations of subjectivity changed, so too did representations of space and time. If space is the exteriority of the subject and time its interiority, then the ways this exteriority are theorized will effect notions of space and time" (*Space, Time, and Perversion* 99). These notions, or conceptions, of space and time, as formally practiced (Lefebvre's regulated spatial practice) reproduce subjectivities that are, in fact, predetermined by the rules and codes these spatial practices re-inscribe. On the other hand, unregulated practices of space—the "poaching" on and re-appropriation of these conceptions—are activities that continually transform space, so that subjectivities which are not preconceived might appear. Indeed, Lefebvre describes representational space as "directly lived." That is, representational space is a space of experience without pre-conceptions, in which a subject might appear anew in spaces continually transformed through movement.

Language is an important practice in producing space. That is, one might practice a language that re-inscribes the ordering of Certeau's proper place or Lefebvre's conceptions of space, but one might also poach on language, re-appropriating the system, so that the foundations of place and language are disrupted, making way for further unregulated movements and the appearance of un-preconceived subjectivities. In her work, *The Romantic*

Performative, Angela Esterhammer articulates a distinction between two ways of conceiving the speech-act. J.L. Austin's and John R. Searle's theories represent one model. Esterhammer argues that both Austin and Searle distinguish between language that represents and language that communicates. Esterhammer stresses that these theories operate under the assumption that there is a "privileged, indeed idealized" speaker, who is a "fully formed independent responsible agent" who might communicate, from this stable position, clearly formed intentions to a listener (11). The listener's role, then, is to understand the speaker's intentions by discerning what type of speech act the speaker is making, and by being aware of the conventions or rules that govern this type of speech act. In discerning the proper course, the listener demonstrates, in Lefebvre's terms, a competency in spatial practices.

On the other hand, a Romantic philosophy of language, for Esterhammer, does not distinguish between representation and communication; these things happen together in an utterance. That is, the speaker is not stable and pre-defined with set intentions; instead, the speaker, and, in fact, the world in which the speaker operates, only come into being in the act of utterance. Esterhammer suggests that "a Romantic speech-act theory considers utterance as an event that before all else shapes the subject's consciousness, determines the subject's relationship to the world and the hearer, and changes the environment that surrounds, and includes, the one who speaks" (13). The formation of the speaking subject, then, "takes place through utterances and responses to utterances, generating a continual re-adjustment of the speaker's relation to other speakers, to objects, and to language itself" (20). The subject is shaped—acquires a kind of meaning—within this dialogue, which is an activity of "continual re-adjustment." When this dialogue ends, however, the subject too passes away. In this way,

the space which activity ushers into existence is what Hannah Arendt calls a "space of appearance." Arendt suggests that the peculiarity of this space is that

> It does not survive the actuality of the movement which brought it into being, but disappears not only with the dispersal of men…but with the disappearance or arrest of the activities themselves. Wherever people gather together, it is potentially there, but only potentially, not necessarily, and not forever. (*The Human Condition* 199)

If space is always a production, a production that involves subject-formation, then the fully-formed independent speaker does not exist before speaking. Yet a way of practicing language might posit and re-affirm an independent speaker, one who takes up a position as a competent user of language. Esterhammer's first model of language restricts movement and change, as speakers and listeners take up positions and re-iterate the pre-established laws of discourse. On the other hand, to practice dialogue is to be continually re-shaped, and shifted. Dialogue is a movement which re-creates spaces, so that subjects might appear anew in various spaces of appearance.

Clear Light of Day is a novel that examines the spaces of the female characters through the interactions of two middle-aged sisters, Bimla ("Bim") and Tara Das, during a visit by Tara to their ancestral home in Old Delhi whereBim still resides. The story jumps back and forth between the present day (1980) and the sisters' childhood memories of Delhi during the traumatic partition and independence of India. Throughout the novel, Desai reveals more and more details about Bim and Tara's childhood which eventually shape how the

reader characterizes the adult versions of the sisters and their actions. In this novel, Desai also explores how female identity is formed and how self-reflection and memory operate in the female psyche.

Throughout the story, Bim Das is the person who holds the entire Das family together. She has to nurse her brother Raja back to health, take care of her other mentally-challenged brother, Baba, and keep an eye on her self-destructive, alcoholic Mira-masi all while trying to assert an independent self and oversee the affairs necessary to keep the house in order. At one point Bim laments, "I wish there was someone else who would go [on an errand]….there is never anybody except me" (61). From a very young age, Bim is under the burden of a number of responsibilities, and there is a constant tension between what the family requires of her for its survival and what Bim wants for herself. At one point in the novel Bim proclaims, "I don't understand the insurance business. Father never bothered to teach me. For all father cared, I would have grown up illiterate and – and cooked for my living, or swept. So I had to teach myself history, and teach myself to teach," illustrating exactly how she feels about her upbringing and the lack of preparation it gave her for her actual future responsibilities (155). It is not only Bim's father that makes her feel she is unprepared, but later in her life her brother Raja also does not understand the encumbrances Bim has. Leaving her to care for the insurance business and renouncing any duties he would have had as the eldest son, Raja ignores how vulnerable she is economically as a single woman, "binding her to the very familial system she has wanted to escape. Bim's attempts to deal with her femininity as a controllable obstacle that can be overcome through education and willpower

have not changed the fundamental distribution of social and economic power which ultimately demands that she pay the price for her brother's freedom" (Valjento 188). Like the house in Old Delhi, she remains static even when everything around her is changing.

Clear Light of Day starts with a reference to the old house where the characters analyze their past while confronting the present. The novel can be studied as Anita Desai's projection of house as 'space'. Desai says;

> With her inner eye she (Bim) saw how her own house and its particular history linked and contained her, as well as her whole family…giving them the soil in which to send down their root… always drawing from the same soil, the same secret darkness. That soil contained all time, past and future… it was where her deepest self lived, and the deepest selves of her sisters and brothers and all those who shared that time with her. (42)

But Tara, the younger sister, feels victimized to the heavy spirit of the old house that clutches her motionless. Bim looks after her brothers and sisters sacrificing her own life. Books are her only companion. So the books provide her the psychological space with which she can identify herself. Sometimes to escape from reality, Bim constructs her dream-houses by fantasizing imagination during her memory-making. Like Nanda, in the real house, Bim had never been the proprietor, but the housekeeper. Adult Bim is shown different from Bim of youthful days. It is worthy to be mentioned that though Bim searches for her own space. Ultimately she gets no 'space' as she is finally torn between acceptance and resentment, love and hostility understanding and misunderstanding of all those who become a part of her and

she weighs down with exhaustion.

The characters like Bim and Raja in Desai's *Clear Light of Day* are trespassers and poachers; that is, they make use of proper places and positions to make spaces of appearance possible. Poaching is the art of lifting, misreading, and making use of place; it is also, of course, trespassing on private property. Indeed, in the eighteenth century, poaching in the countryside threatened propertied interest; and while crime in cities was often interpreted as the inevitable outcome of overcrowding and the mixing of different classes, poaching was a rural crime, one that caused great anxiety, as it was not a result of the relatively new arrangement of the city, but a crime perpetrated in the established (and, to some, the supposedly harmonious) social order of the countryside. Furthermore, as a member of the House of the Lords remarked, in 1828, "there could be no doubt that poaching was the initiation for other crime—that it accustomed the lower orders of the people to midnight adventures, and to habits the most remote from regular, and wholesome industry" (qtd. in Payne, par. 2). Like poaching in the countryside, poaching on place and language is not easily curtailed, and fuels much anxiety.[3] Moreover, I shall suggest, poaching on place and on language does incite further activity, further transgressions and digressions, as "foundational" concepts are destabilized, making way for new movements and practices. And, as private property defines boundaries and limits rights of access, the regulation of language and of spatial practices limits one's range of experience, channelling one's movements and experiences into readable paths. That is, instead of being the readable paths of "wholesome industry," Bim and Tara in *Clear Light of Day* poach on regulated spatial and linguistic practices to wander into the deviant spatial and linguistic practices of disruptions

and digressions, initiating practices that multiply the possible range of experiences.

In my reading of Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day* , I shall explore ways in which Bim, uses tactics to rupture the proper—and oppressive—place of Old Delhi. Delhi is both a place and a subject. As a proper place, Delhi is clearly delimited and its operations are strictly regulated; it is a territorialized place that must defend its boundaries and re-inscribe its law. Likewise, as a subject, Delhi conceives of itself as clearly defined and inviolable. Throughout the novel Delhi re-produce this territorialized place, and re-inscribe the conception of the autonomous subject, or "First Speaker." This conception is a production, but one that limits severely possibilities for movement, change, and re-generation. Thus, in Desai's *Clear Light of Day*, place and subjects are productions, but Delhi reproduces a place, and a subjectivity that is restricted and restrictive as well as petrified.

Mira-masi does not have a proper place; she trespasses in the household of Bim in Old Delhi. She poaches on the systematized place of Bim's house, making subversive use of the spatial practices that define the place through which he moves. This disruption of the re-production of Bim's house in Old Delhi, I shall suggest, opens new spaces of appearance, spaces in which new subjectivities appear and new storylines unfold. To articulate further Bim's movement and Baba's stagnation, I shall also discuss the use of language within the novel. Bim utters the pronouncements and mandates of her law, re-iterating her position as sovereign speaker, and re-inscribing the boundaries between herself and others. On the other hand, Baba does not posit a stable self; he moves and is moved through dialogue, a dialogue that produces further possibilities for the re-adjustment of spaces and the regeneration of

subjectivities.

In the vegetative world, Bim, too, is without a proper place; she is at a loss in a world that is increasingly fixed and prohibitive. And yet this loss marks an opportunity. Certeau argues, for instance, that

> The discourse that makes people believe is the one that takes away what it urges them to believe in, or never delivers what it promises. Far from expressing a void or describing a lack, it creates such. It makes room for a void. In that way, it opens clearings; it "allows" a certain play within a system of defined places. (105-6).

To reframe this in spatial terms, the place that makes Bim's movement possible is also the place that continually frustrates this movement, producing a lack. This lack is not an impasse, but a clearing for re-creation. Unlike the loss of an ideal world, which is mourned by Tara, Bim's loss and frustration perpetuate movement, movement which is not securely channeled, but which is continually disrupted and redirected. This movement exposes various possibilities for play and dialogues.

In both the characters of Bim and Tara in Desai's *Clear Light of Day*, spaces appear in movement, in the use of and trespass on, in Certeau's terms, the law of the proper, the regulated operations of language and place. The production of spaces and subjectivities in this text is an activity that does not operate in concert with nostalgic or ideal notions of place and identity, but is instead a process of improvisations, which make use of and deviate from the repetitious practices that would merely re-inscribe the idealized and stable foundations of

a generative world. Both Bim and Tara appear in spaces opened by performances, and their trangressive walks construct new spaces in which "forces, affects, energies, [and] experiments" might be actualized (Grosz, *Architecture* 155).[4] Desai's novel is a kind of construction, a way of walking within and making use of narrative constraints, memories, and social practices to perpetuate mobility. This movement itself generates unexpected appearances.

Bim and Tara are made up of both the practices that re-iterate and reinscribe a "proper" subject and a "proper" text, and of deviant driftings, which unhinge and problematize a proper narrative, authority, or self-possessed subject. As Lefebvre argues that space is a process, product, and a range of possibilitities, the spaces of Desai's novel are likewise productions constructed through a process of both re-inscription and digression, and are a range of appearances made possible through this activity.

NOTES

1. Certeau writes that "each individual is a locus in which an incoherent (and often contradictory) plurality of…relational determinants interact;" yet, the focus of his study "concerns modes of operation and schemata of action, and not directly the subjects (or persons) who are their authors and vehicles" (xi). For Lefebvre, the "subject," (always in quotations), is both a body and a range of practices and experiences, which are possible within a society's space. Furthermore, Lefebvre usually speaks of the subject in terms of a social group to which he or she belongs.

2. Edmund Burke, for example, argues that the unregulated use of language means

that "every thing is to be discussed," including society's timeless law, which, for Burke, protects the right to property and sanctions hierarchical authority (Reflections 91).

3. I take this from Grosz's discussion of a radical architecture, in which she suggests that "[a]rchitecture is not simply the colonization or territorialization of space," nor is building itself merely a way of sheltering and containing a subject; instead, she argues, architecture is "at its best, the anticipation and welcoming of a future in which the present can no longer recognize itself" (166).

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