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The Central European journal of Canadian studies. 2001, vol. 1, iss. [1], pp. 18-23

ISBN 80-210-2704-5

ISSN 2336-4556 (online)

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/116106>

Access Date: 16. 02. 2024

Version: 20220831

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SPACE NARRATED IN RECENT MULTICULTURAL LITERATURE IN CANADA (ONDAATJE AND MISTRY)

Abstract

The question I would like to raise in my paper is how spacialization is manifest in recent Canadian writing. Spacialization has always been part and parcel of the literary fabric of Canada but I think it gained new dimensions particularly in the writings of immigrants. Their Canadian experience has changed their view of the "old world". Existence be it individual or communal is spacial, and space is a continuum in more than one sense of the word. To my knowlege the spatio-temporal level of identity formation still needs further investigation, therefore my paper would fill a gap in ethnocriticism. I shall concentrate on two novels: Running in the Family (1982) by Michael Ondaatje and Such a Long Journey (1991) by Rohinton Mistry.

Résumé

La question dont je traite dans le présent article c'est la manifestation de la "spacialization" dans la littérature canadienne contemporaine. Cette problématique faisait toujours partie de la littérature canadienne mais je pense qu'elle présente d'autres dimensions surtout dans les écrits des immigrants. Leur expérience de vie au Canada avait changé leur façon de se souvenir du "vieux monde". L'existence soit individuelle ou commune est toujours liée à l'espace et l'espace représente une continuité dans le sens large du terme. A ma connaissance, ce niveau de l'identité spatio-temporelle n'était pas étudié en profondeur et par conséquence cet article pourrait combler une lacune. L'article présent concentre l'attention sur deux romans: Running in the Family (Michael Ondaatje, 1982) et Such a Long Journey (Rohinton Mistry, 1991).

The question I would like to raise in my paper is how spacialization is manifest in the Canadian multicultural literary fabric because it seems to have gained new dimensions. I would like to explore recent literature because spacialization has always been part and parcel of the literary discourse in Canada. I would like to re-conceptualize the often quoted observation of Northrop Frye: "It seems to me that the Canadian sensibility has been profoundly disturbed, not so much by our famous problem of identity, important as that is, as by a series of paradoxes in what confronts that identity. It is less perplexed by the question 'Who am I?' than by some such riddle as 'Where is here ?'". (iii) (emphasis added). I shall also rely on David Staines's argument: "The countries that used there were now coming here. Here a defined space, was now home to *there*, the imperial nations now seeking exhibit space in their former colony" (23). In my opinion both directions, the one formulated by Frye and the other by Staines take place in the literary imagination of recent literature. My investigation will be concerned with the latter phenomenon.

Existence is spacial, and space is a continuum in more than one sense of the word. Paradoxically space is temporal in that the conceptual category of space cannot be

separated from time while it is also imaginary, mythical, cosmological, empirical, and gender specific. In my view identity construction involves not only social, political, religious, and linguistic processes but also concrete spacial interaction with the environment: both the new world and the old world. However, I shall use the word "space" in more than one sense of the word: physical, temporal, linguistic, sociological, religious, historical because they intermingle in an idiosyncratic way in *ethnic* writing. The interrelationship between different spaces is emphasized in a special way. The aforementioned phenomena have been deeply studied but to my knowledge the spatio-temporal level of identity formation still needs further investigation. Therefore I intend my paper to fill a gap in ethnocriticism.

I shall concentrate on two novels: Michael Ondaatje's *Running in the Family* (RF) (1982), and Rohinton Mistry's *Such a Long Journey* (SLJ) (1991). Both writers belong to the fundamentally heterogeneous nature of South-Asian Canadian literature. The term comprises not only writers from different parts, linguistic, religious and other groups in India, but also authors from Sri Lanka, Pakistan or Bangladesh. There is also the diaspora that travelled from India to places like Trinidad, Guyana, South Africa, etc. as labourers made by requisition and then later on immigrated to Canada. Thematically this body of literature, of course, varies to a large extent; some talk about issues in the homeland, some about the Canadian experience, some about both, some about neither. What these works' cultural representation shares is manifested in their being in one way or another connected to India.

Michael Ondaatje, who was born in Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), went to England at the age of eleven, and moved to Canada in 1962. He is a poet, fiction writer, filmmaker, editor and critic. In an interview with Linda Hutcheon he says, that "he feels that he is a Sri Lankian Canadian writer more than anything else" (197). In another interview with Eleanor Wachtel he claims, "I feel very Canadian. As a writer I feel very Canadian. I became a writer here" (260). This state of in-betweenness is testified in (RF). This particular piece has gained much critical attention and has been regarded as a most formative creation in Ondaatje's oeuvre.

What forms the basis of (RF) is an attempt to reclaim the past be it personal, familial, communal or all of them at the same time. Ondaatje feels a compulsion to go back to Ceylon, "In my mid-thirties I realized I had slipped past a childhood I had ignored and not understood" (16). The work is an account of two return trips to Ceylon: one in 1978, the other in 1980 blurred into one. Thus it can be also considered as a quest novel comprising a personal quest for a physical place left behind, which is, however, also a mental space. The novel is a genealogical quest and a quest for a lost father as well.

Concerning the genre of RF one may wonder if it is a memoir, fiction, history, autobiography, or biography. Ondaatje hesitates as well, "I am not sure what that book is. I think all those things are there" (201). It is difficult to define the narrative matrix of the work because of its rather fragmented character into which interviews, notes, poems, songs, letters, dialogues, photographs, a map, taped records, quotations, journal entries, epigraphs, church ledgers, quotes from a visitors' book, journal entries, segments of diary-like remembrances of which some seem to have been written in Ceylon, some in Canada, etc. are imbedded. There are also references to judicial records, newspapers and magazines but basically the book is built upon oral testimonies: tales, jokes and gossips. Ondaatje selects and organizes these bits and pieces in his own idiosyncratic way. Smaro Kamboureli refers to Ondaatje's way of

writing as “generic slippage” (79). In an interview with Catherine Bush he claims, “Ideally I want that mental landscape and the personal story to wrestle against the documentary” (243). For Ondaatje the interaction with the Canadian environment both urban and rural changes the image of the old world and this results in creating metaphorical landscapes. This multivoiced novel also establishes an intricate linguistic space hand in hand with metaspace.

In the course of refamiliarizing himself with Ceylon, Ondaatje meets all sorts of people and sums up his experience in the following way, “I am the foreigner. I am the prodigal who hates the foreigner” (65). This unambiguously expresses the essence of his cross-cultural existence. Chelva Kanaganayakan regards Ondaatje’s trip back home “as a complex version of the familiar ‘been-to’ situation” (34). She adds as well that, “Running is as much about running ‘in’ as it is about ‘to’ or ‘against’” (35).

The tropical setting is described very sensually, the exotic flora and fauna just like the desert landscape in the *English Patient*. The reader is guided through Ceylon whose “outline is the shape of a *tear*” (122, emphasis added). The reader is involved in the perceiving process in a magic realistic way. We touch, smell, see, hear everything together with the writer, thus we are also part of the creative process. The place was almost like Eden, the place belonging to the past becomes to Ondaatje a recreated physical and psychological space:

The island was a paradise to be sacked. Every conceivable thing was collected and shipped back to Europe: cardamons, (sic), pepper, silk, ginger, sandalwood, mustard oil, palmyrah root, tamarind, wild indigo, deers’ (sic) horns, elephant tusks, hog lard, calamander, coral, seven kinds of cinnamon, pearl and cochineal. *A perfumed sea.* (67)

When they visit Kuttapitiya, where his parents lived for the longest time together as a married couple, his daughter says, “‘If we lived here it would be perfect.’ ‘Yes,’ I said” (121).

The “returned wanderer” also covers a long stretch of time in history with obvious gaps from 5th century B.C. up until the early 1980s. The narrative strategy is by no means linear or chronological but rather discursive moving back and forth in history. Occasionally a concrete time index is used. Ondaatje also provides the reader with an access to alternative realities, thus space enlarges. We get to know what happened in other parts of the world (America, France, Africa, or even within Ceylon) during his parents’ honeymoon.

Ondaatje emphasizes the multicultural character of the population from early on.

Everyone was vaguely related and had Sinhalese, Tamil, Dutch, British and Burgher blood in them going back in many generations. There was a large social gap between this circle and the Europeans and English who were never part of the Ceylonese community. The English were seen as transients, snobs and racists, and were quite separate from those who had intermarried and who lived here permanently. My father always claimed to be a Ceylon Tamil, though that was probably more valid about three centuries earlier. (32)

Going back to Ceylon triggers only a few autobiographical incidents in the writer's memory: early childhood school years at St. Thomas College, the childhood paradise in Kuttapitiya, a terrifying accident with the drunken father.

RF can be regarded as a personal saga of a dialogue between the space belonging to the colonial past and the space belonging to the postcolonial present.

Rohinton Mistry's relation to space is different from that of Ondaatje's which can be illustrated on more than one level. Rohinton Mistry went to Canada from Bombay in 1975. He committed himself to full-time writing. His short stories and novels have for the most part received only laudatory criticism. In his case spacialization is more socio-historically conditioned than in Ondaatje's. He focuses more on the reconstruction of history and culture. *Such a Long Journey (SLJ)* is entirely set in India and clearly reflects the author's spatial rootedness there.

SLJ explores the question of human responsibility at the time of strong political turbulences. Here, as elsewhere, too, his multidimensional prose evolves around the intricate relations between the universal and the particular. Eurocentric critics tend to emphasize his universal themes, while others argue that the importance of *SLJ* lies in how "his [the protagonist's] life is negotiated in the context of his total social environment" (Mukherjee 1994: 145). Mukherjee adds:

And this total social environment, I insist, is real, not realist. That is it attempts to make sense of actual historical events by narrativizing them, by extending them beyond the curtain of silence in which the official discourses have tried to enshroud them. (145)

What are these actual historical events? The novel centres around the time of war in East Pakistan and the military intervention of India, which finally led in 1971 to the establishment of an independent Bangladesh. The timespan, however, it goes back, however, to 1962, too, when India was at war with China. The novel is far from being simple, as it may seem because of its traditional realistic style. It reaches far beyond the concrete and tangible life of a five-member Parsi family living in the crowded apartment complex of Khodadad Building. We follow Gustad Noble on the journey of his everyday life, also his close family, friends and the community all living in the complex society of India, which becomes a fighting ground for world powers like the USA and the USSR. Mukherjee calls the narrative "double-coded":

And as a tale told by a Parsi, it examines Indian society from the perspective of this minority community. And because Mistry is now a Canadian, a Canadian belonging to a minority community called South Asian, the narrative becomes double-coded. (146)

The Parsi (meaning "craftsman" as Mistry is one himself) are a religious minority in India who live basically in and around Bombay and follow the teachings of Zoroastor, a Persian prophet of the 6th century B.C. The daily life of Gustad Noble's family and that of his community is very vividly drawn. The environment they inhabit becomes a textual protagonist. We smell the repulsive stench of the dirt-ridden streets in Bombay. We are lost in the maze of the colourful, lively bazaars. Bombay has certainly become fully integrated into Mistry's personal and racial identity and cannot be separated from it. One can only agree with Sharon Butala, who notes: "The evocation of a time and place is as complex and the major characters approach Dickensian fullness" (12). In

Mistry's case closed spaces are more in the focus in contrast with Ondaatje's open spaces. Mistry's concern is more with urban space, Ondaatje's with small town existence and the natural landscape. Metropolitan development is given much attention to in the course of the novel. It is claustrophobia and certainly not agrophobia (as psychologically pathological states and spaces) that characterizes Bombay's inhabitants' relation to their environment. At one point Mr. Noble, who tries to live up to his name "noble", encourages the pavement artist to paint the wall surrounding the crowded apartment complex in order to protect it from people who urinate against it. The artist turns it into a wall of gods. He says:

I can cover three hundred miles if necessary. Using assorted religions and their gods, saints and prophets: Hindu, Sikh, Judaic, Christian, Muslim, Zoroastrian, Buddhist, Jainist. Actually, Hinduism alone can provide enough. But I always like to mix them up, include a variety in my drawings. Makes me feel I am doing something to promote *tolerance* and *understanding* in the world (225-6 - emphasis added).

Race relations surface in establishing communal places which may easily lead to depersonalization but also to interaction of ethnic sensibilities. What Mr. Gustad and the painter share is tolerance towards others. The problem of linguistic, ethnic and religious minorities is voiced in the novel reminding one of the Canadian scene. On the whole, however, the question of multiculturalism seems not to be in the focus of Mistry's ideological dilemmas. In an interview his thoughts on multiculturalism are summed up this way:

Perhaps the multicultural concept is offering those bigots and racists a sounding board - at worst, it's doing that. At best, it could be in some way spreading the message that all races, all cultures are to be respected. That's what the goal is by constantly reiterating it, the bigots and racists are told that it is not fashionable to be very open about racism, that we do not look upon it kindly. So, it keeps a lid on and we do not have the sort of blatancy that is seen in the States. (262)

Ethnic pluralism in Canada as in other multicultural societies as well is inscribed in the narrative strategies. The narrative process oscillates between different languages and often produces bi-, or multilingual texts. The stylistic strategies tend to be individualized in different authors. In Ondaatje's narrative local dialects and idiolects are used, and Mistry together with those means carefully blends different languages as well in his primarily English-language narrative, which gives it a special quality. Similarly to Ondaatje, he also inserts letters, songs, newspaper clippings, prayers, which add to the colourfulness of his style hand in hand with the life-like dialogues. The messages gained from newspapers keep going through numerous interpretations by the different characters and thus preserve the "oral story-telling tradition of India" as Mukheerje points out. (144).

Whatever you read in the paper, first divide by two - for the salt and pepper. From what's left, take off ten per cent. Ginger and garlic. And sometimes, depending on the journalist, another five per cent for chili powder. Then and only then, will you get to the truth free of *masala* and propaganda. (90)

Mistry's use of collages, orally preserved information together with documents reminds us of Ondaatje's strategies prompting the assumption about the relativity of

“truth” articulated in both novels. Thus the linguistic and narrative spaces in the two novels have much in common, too.

The novels selected demonstrate in their individual ways that the cultural representation of moving from one cultural zone to another creates a special landscape of the mind reflected both in the racial and individual metaspaces. This space is not permanent but is in constant transition. The transient nature of a multifaceted space formation is reflected in both titles respectively; while the protagonist is *running* in one case, he is on a *journey* in the other.

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