Exploring Space

Exploring Space: Spatial Notions in Cultural, Literary and Language Studies; Volume 1: Space in Cultural and Literary Studies

Edited by

Andrzej Ciuk and Katarzyna Molek-Kozakowska

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PREFACE

The notion of space is as old as the history of human thought. Spatial categories used to predominantly connote immensity, unfathomableness, indeterminateness, or unlimitedness. However, with the passage of time, our perception of space has been substantially modified. Inhabitable space has proved to be insufficient and to have flexible borders, and even outer space, once beyond human reach, has turned out to be conquerable. The space of knowledge has been expanded considerably, although it has also remained impenetrable at points. As is commonly noted, now space seems to be "shrinking" proportionally to the increase in speed and the spread of technology. Consequently, any explorations into the notion of space inevitably reveal oppositions, paradoxes, ambiguities and unresolved questions related to our various perceptions of space.

If we follow the meanders of thought on the nature of space as an ontological-epistemological concept, we will encounter the ancient Greek myth about the creation of the universe. Here, the world emerged out of Chaos. Space was soon betrothed to time, and both generated an insatiable human desire to fathom and order the universe. In Western culture, one of the pioneers of this endeavor was Democritus, "the father of modern science", who formulated an atomic theory for the cosmos, and for whom space was a vacuum. The renowned Greek philosopher Aristotle claimed that space, likewise time, was a "quantity", i.e., it was a whole dividable into parts. Moreover, it was a "multiplicity"—a countable amount of parts in a continuum. To mention other influential conceptions of space, Bernardino Telesio, an Italian philosopher and natural scientist, regarded space as a system of relations between things. Isaac Newton created a theory of absolute space, whereas his contemporary, Gottfried Leibnitz, was the author of a theory of relative space. For Immanuel Kant, the knowledge of space was "synthetic"; by contrast, Ludwig Wittgenstein, in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, introduced the notion of logical space and the "ensemble of possible states".

Apart from the philosophy of space (and time), which has greatly influenced modern science, certain spatial categories have penetrated and shaped Western culture and the humanities. The present book demonstrates how the notion of space can be treated as a common axis for research in such diverse disciplines as literary studies, linguistics and

cultural studies, and how it has inspired a variety of analyses of textual, linguistic and cultural phenomena from the perspective of English Studies. *Exploring Space: Spatial Notions in Cultural, Literary and Language Studies* falls into two volumes and is the result of the 18th PASE (Polish Association for the Study of English) Conference organized by the Institute of English of Opole University and held at Kamień Śląski in April 2009.

The first volume embraces cultural and literary studies and offers papers on narrative fiction, poetry, theatre and drama, and post-colonial studies. The texts and contexts explored are either British, American or Commonwealth. The second volume refers to English language studies and covers papers on lexicography, general linguistics and rhetoric, discourse studies and translation, second language acquisition/foreign language learning, and the methodology of foreign language teaching. The book aims to offer a comprehensive insight into how the category of space can inform original philological research; thus, it may be of interest to those in search of novel applications of space-related concepts, and to those who wish to acquire an update on current developments in English Studies across Poland.

By exploring various space-related categories, such as distance, proximity, territory, locality and movement, the contributors to both volumes of this book have managed to show that space is a powerful concept capable of conveying human experiences and perceptions across cultural, linguistic and temporal boundaries. It is not to say that space is treated here only in metaphorical terms. In fact some contributions have focused on very physical spaces: from the representations of particular localities (i.e., London or Dublin) in literary texts, to spatial arrangements on stage in theatrical performances; from space-related aspects of dictionary-making and film-subtitling, to classroom spaces that enhance English language learning.

The notion of space has also turned out to be instrumental to insightful analyses of the domain of human psychology. Some contributors have chosen to explore the human psyche with a range of space-related categories: from “neural” and “mental” spaces in our cognitive processing, to spaces that enable emotional “self-discovery”, “growth,” or, on the contrary, psychological “confinement” or “self-handicapping”. This is why some studies in this collection treat space as liberating, blissful and identity-enhancing, whereas others point to its oppressive, sinister or alienating aspects, which only confirms the inherent paradoxes of this concept.

Finally, a large proportion of papers in this collection investigate various social implications and cultural specificities of spatial notions. By applying space-related categories to the analysis of social communication and rhetorical expression, for example, some contributors have demonstrated how the "topos" of space can be used to guide our evaluations of and engagement in social reality. Space has also been shown to inform certain national, religious, moral, aesthetic and epistemological conceptualizations that are still pervasive in the English-speaking world despite its cultural openness and hybridity. Thus, some contributions shed new light on long-standing spatial dichotomies, such as public and domestic spaces, urban and rural landscapes, homeland and diasporic communities, and Western and Eastern geographies.

A conclusion that can be drawn from these studies is that space is by no means a homogeneous category. That is why spatial notions should not be taken for granted, as any attempt at defamiliarizing them makes us discover new meanings in canonical literary texts, linguistic structures and popular cultural phenomena, for example. This is also what this collection hopes to achieve.

—Andrzej Ciuk
Katarzyna Molek-Kozakowska

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PART I:

SYNCHRONIC AND DIACHRONIC APPROACHES TO SPACE IN LITERARY STUDIES: DEFAMILIARIZATION OF THE NOTION

CHAPTER ONE

IMAGES OF DIASPORA IN CONTEMPORARY BRITISH WRITING: THE ISLAND AND THE HOMELAND[1]

FERNANDO GALVÁN

1. Introduction

Travelling, space and settling are notions inherent to the concept of diaspora[2]. Writing recently about the relations between postwar black British writing and space, British critic James Procter has made reference to this by using the image of sowing in association with the term of diaspora, recalling an interesting parallel between *roots* and *routes* initially employed by another Black author, Paul Gilroy, in his 1993 book *The Black Atlantic*. Procter says:

> To sow is not simply to disperse, it is also to deposit, it involves an act of plantation and presumes a ground, land, soil, territory or 'field'. To put it another way, the etymology of diaspora suggests both routes (scattering) and roots (sowing). Diaspora in this sense is inseparable from, and dependant upon, dwelling. A deconstruction of the concept 'diaspora' provides a means of returning to the politics of place, location and territory

[1] This article is part of a larger research project on the metaphors of the postcolonial diaspora in Britain, financed by the Spanish Ministry of Education and Science (code HUM2007-63028/FILO). I am grateful to Dr Jonathan P.A. Sell for comments and suggestions on a first version of this paper, as well as to members of the audience at the 18th PASE Conference (Opole, 19-22 April 2009) who heard and made stimulating suggestions on a shorter version of this text.

[2] I have discussed the meanings of this term in connection with postcolonialism and migration in my recent "Metaphors of Diaspora: English Literature at the Turn of the Century", *ELOPE (English Language Overseas Perspectives and Enquiries)* V (2009) (forthcoming).

> within diaspora literature –a politics that too often gets endlessly deferred within its journeying metaphors. (Procter 2003, 14)

This probably explains why Procter's book is entitled *Dwelling Places* (2003), a book which deals with this second aspect of diaspora, that of sowing, or of finding places to settle down. A constant and common topic in the classical Jewish diaspora has been that of space, from the first exile in Babylonia in the year 586 BC to the Sephardic or Ashkenazi diasporas in more recent times. Finding a place to settle and escape from persecutions also means defining and redefining concepts such as the homeland, and that involves a process of imagination and mental construction. Procter explores specifically the places created and recreated by some diasporic writers coming to Britain from the Caribbean or Asia after the Second World War. This is also the aim of this article, although my focus will not be upon the physical locations of those dwellings, but rather on the metaphorical or imaginary spaces inhabited and developed by these writers.

Certainly the physical places are very important, since they constitute a starting point for the process of adaptation to the new environment: how such domestic spaces as bedsits or basements, but also public places like cafés, streets, railway stations, suburbs and the city, London and provincial towns and so on are presented in their writings. Paul Gilroy's book of photographs *Black Britain. A Photographic History* (2007) is an excellent visual record of all these issues. Through these pictures we can contemplate the different phases of adaptation, assimilation, fighting against racism, etc. from the early 20th century—but mainly after the Second World War—until our days.

The immigrants who travelled to Britain after the Second World War, principally to help in the reconstruction of the metropolis, at a time when many of their places of origin were becoming independent from the British Empire, settled in the UK and started a very hard struggle to achieve the status of fully-fledged citizens. From the very beginning this implied asking questions about their own identity, because although many of them believed that they were British citizens and members of a powerful empire—a belief that had been inculcated in them in Asia, or Africa, or the Caribbean—they very soon discovered, upon their arrival at the coasts of Britain, that the "other" British, the white European inhabitants of the island, did not consider them as their equals. This search for identity was closely associated with space and displacements, and involved not only themselves, the exiled people from the former colonies, but also their descendants, their children who came with them, or who were born in Britain after their arrival, and were to be brought up in a place very

different from their places of origin. For many decades their children would have to answer questions such as "Where do you come from?" or "Where are you from?", and if the answer was "Bradford", or "East London", or "Leeds", or any other location in Britain, they would immediately have to face a second question like "But where do you *really* come from?", "Where do you *originally* come from?", or "Where are you *really* from?", meaning that those British places were not the "real places", were not the "original places", were not really *their* places. No matter whether they had been living there for many decades, or even if they had been born and brought up there, their "real places" were somewhere else.

This concept of "real places" is, then, firmly tied up with the historical memory of who they are and where they belong. My aim is thus to explore some of the configurations that this search for an answer takes in writers of African, Asian and Caribbean origin belonging to these diasporas in contemporary Britain. In fact, this will enable us to discover that what is usually referred to as "real places" (the "where are you *really* from" question) are paradoxically mental reconstructions, configure deterritorialized locations, and allude more to the imagination than to factual accounts related to geography. For this purpose I will be using two main aspects of diaspora, namely the search for emancipation or liberation –sometimes from the colonial yoke, or from a totalitarian and violent regime, or simply from a miserable life in a third world country; and the search for identity and memory, for the consciousness of belonging. Thus I will explore how some contemporary British writers –migrants themselves or descendants of migrants—have engaged with and given imaginary/imaginative answers to those two issues. These answers will take the form of: a) the image of the island; and b) the image of the homeland.

2. *Diaspora* as an "imaginary": Avtar Brah and Vijay Mishra

In this connection it is relevant to quote a British sociologist, Avtar Brah, who in her 1996 book *Cartographies of Diaspora* stressed the imaginary aspect of the concept of *diaspora*. She said that this concept "delineates a field of identifications where 'imagined communities' are forged within and out of a confluence of narratives from annals of collective memory and re-memory" (Brah 1996, 196); that is to say, *diaspora* as a term is not completely synonymous with *immigration* or *migrancy*, although they are of course connected. For her, in the concept of *diaspora* "historical and contemporary elements are understood in their *diachronic relationality*" (197) and thus she separates two ideas that may

apparently look the same: that of "home", which is related to the origins, to where one comes from, and that of "feeling at home", which "is not the same as the desire for a 'homeland'" (197). I need to quote further from her to clarify this. Brah writes:

> Contrary to general belief, not all diasporas sustain an ideology of return. Moreover, the multi-placedness of home in the diasporic imaginary does not mean that diasporian subjectivity is 'rootless'. I argue for a distinction between 'feeling at home' and declaring a place as home. Processes of diasporic identity formation are exemplars *par excellence* of the claim that identity is always plural, and in process. The relationship between the two is subject to the politics in play under given sets of circumstances. In other words, the concept of diaspora refers to *multi-locationality* within and across territorial, cultural and psychic boundaries. (Brah 1996, 197)

These ideas, which are at the foundations of the arguments of this article, are basically common to other well-known formulations of diaspora in the last decade. For instance, also in 1996, Vijay Mishra published his essay "The Diasporic Imaginary: Theorizing the Indian Diaspora", where he emphasized the imaginary aspect of diaspora in connection with the way the term "imaginary" has been used by both Lacan and Zizek[3], and which he has further developed in other works to which I will refer later, particularly his more recent version "The Diasporic Imaginary and the Indian Diaspora" (2007). Another critic who has followed this path is Monika Fludernik, who writes in the introductory essay to her book *Diaspora and Multiculturalism: Common Traditions and New Developments* (2003) that "people who identify themselves as part of a diaspora are creating an 'imaginary'–a landscape of dream and fantasy that answers to their desires" (Fludernik 2003, xi). This emphasis on associating *diaspora* with the creation of "imaginary" spaces, because physical spaces are not enough to account for that feeling or need of a place to be identified with, has certainly gone beyond the field of literary

[3] This is Mishra's definition of "diasporic imaginary": "The diasporic imaginary is a term I use to refer to any ethnic enclave in a nation-state that defines itself, consciously, unconsciously, or because of the political self-interest of a racialized nation-state, as a group that lives in displacement". He also explains that he uses the word 'imaginary' "in both its original Lacanian sense and in its more flexible current usage, as found in the works of Slavoj Zizek". Thus he quotes from Zizek, remarking that his definition of imaginary is the state of "identification with the image in which we appear likeable to ourselves, with the image representing 'what we should like to be'" (Mishra 1996, 423).

studies and has permeated other areas of the humanities and social sciences.

Naturally a direct consequence of this fact is that metaphorical spaces and metaphorical communities keep springing up in the literature produced by the different contemporary diasporas. Writers belonging to these diasporas and willing to narrate those feelings of belonging, the fight for emancipation and liberation, the search for identity, and so forth, have seen that they cannot simply restrict themselves to the description of their surroundings, their "real" communities, but they need to express the imaginary, the dreams, the fantasies, the allegories, the desires, that usually find expression through metaphors.

3. The image of the island

Ashley Dawson opens his book *Mongrel Nation. Diasporic Culture and the Making of Postcolonial Britain* (2007), with a quotation from Lord Kitchener, a calypso singer who was very popular among the Caribbean immigrants to Britain after the Second World War. The words quoted by Dawson come from a song entitled "London Is the Place for Me":

> London is the place for me
> London, this lovely city
> You can go to France or America
> India, Asia, or Australia
> But you must come back to London City
>
> Well believe me, I am speaking broad-mindedly
> I am glad to know my mother country
> I've been travelling to countries years ago
> But this is the place I wanted to know
> London, that's the place for me
>
> To live in London you're really comfortable
> Because the English people are very much sociable
> They take you here and they take you there
> And they make you feel like a millionaire
> So London, that's the place for me
> (Dawson 2007, 1-2)

The words of this popular song evoke the metaphorical constructions of London and Britain, as well as of its people, developed by the immigrants who came to the country after the Second World War. Books like those by McLeod (2004) or Sandhu (2004) provide countless

examples of how London has been imagined and reconstructed by these immigrants. Similarly many other sociologists, political scholars and literary critics have, particularly in the last twelve years, dealt with the constructions of the concepts of Englishness and Britishness (see, for instance, Gikandi 1996, or Mandler 2006). The conception of London as "the place for me" and of Britain as "my mother country" was widespread among the colonized subjects under the British Empire. Within the context of this formulation I wish to tackle the issue of the fight for emancipation and liberation, for becoming independent and more affluent, or in the words of the song, "making you feel like a millionaire". This is linked in the metaphorical constructions of the diaspora to the space of the island. Many diasporic writers make use of this metaphor, but I will concentrate only on two of them, both originally from the Caribbean: one male, Caryl Phillips, and another female, Andrea Levy.

Caryl Phillips, although born on the island of St Kitts, came to Britain with his parents when he was just a few months old. He was brought up near Leeds, and later went to Oxford, where he graduated in English Literature. His first novel, *The Final Passage* (1985), narrates the experience of a young married couple, Leila and Michael, who decide to leave their tiny Caribbean island and change it for the big island of Great Britain.[4] At the bottom of this decision is the utter necessity to escape from a suffocating atmosphere, because Leila feels that her life on the island is, and will always be, a life of humiliation and frustration. Everybody around her knows that her husband does not really love her, and that even after marrying and having their baby Calvin he still likes and goes on visiting Beverly, a former fiancée. Leila is unhappy and senses the commiseration of her fellow countrymen; she is convinced that nothing will really change if she does not leave the island and finds/founds a home elsewhere. Thus this tiny Caribbean island is presented as a sort of prison, whereas Britain, the big island, appears in her imagination as the great hope of liberation, the place that will enable her to start a new life.

This is a story set in the fifties, the period that later came to be identified with the *Windrush Generation* in homage to the ship that transported thousands of Caribbean people to Britain after 1948. The title Phillips chooses for his novel is strongly evocative, since "final passage" recalls of course the "middle passage" of millions of African slaves who were forcefully transported from their countries of origin to the Caribbean colonies of some European nations. Now Leila's decision to come to

[4] I have discussed this novel in some more detail, and in relation to other novels by the writer, in my article "Crossing Islands: the Caribbean *vs* Britain in Caryl Phillips's Fiction" (Galván 1997).

Britain is a sort of return, a "final passage", because Britain represents liberation from a prison, a new land of promise, thus reversing the "middle passage", which led to slavery. She dreams and fantasises with the idea that Michael will get a job, will become a different man, will love her again; she dreams that in Britain, where nobody knows her and their story, she will get her dignity back. The images that the novelist offers of the tiny island are gloomy. It is a place where nothing really happens; one day follows another without any change, seasons and years turn monotonously, but everything else remains the same:

> Leila woke up alone and feeling sick. Her body had slept but her head had not had a moment's peace. Her face felt old and crumpled, like a once-read, now-discarded newspaper. Outside a cock began to crow, unsure of whether it wanted to go through with another day in this powerful heat. The days were lengthening and again the island was preparing itself for a small rebirth. It was that time of the year. It had already rained, and the mushlike vegetation had rotted and devoured itself, and the winds had blown, and the hurricane warnings had been sounded, and the crickets had screeched in fear, but there was nothing to fear. (Phillips 1990, 67)

Leila needs to escape from this rotting, self-devouring island, which is also menacing her with suffocation. However, the story does not have a happy ending. The big island turns to be a disappointment. All Leila's expectations are in fact disappointed by a cruel reality: Michael is seduced by a white woman and abandons her, in another allegory of the white colonial exploitation of the Black man; her mother, who was already living in England, dies in hospital; and people around her begin to commiserate once more, feeling the same sort of pity for her as her fellow countrymen in the Caribbean. Phillips uses numerous images related to the idiosyncrasies of both islands to express this. We notice, for instance, that even as the ship that has taken her from her country to England approaches the English coast, all Leila perceives around her is gloomy, dominated—the novelist says—by "a colony of white faces":

> … she [Leila] watched the drama unfolding around her. The crew in their blue woollen hats were preparing to dock. On the decks of the smaller boats the owners took a break from their summer repairs. They stood up and watched as the emigrant ship slid smoothly past the beacons, the sea wall and the lighthouse. Then the ship's engines were cut, almost as a mark of respect, and Leila watched as they took their place among the cranes and cargo. A colony of white faces stared up at them. The men finished their conversation.
>
> 'Me, I don't never see so many white people in my life.'
>
> 'Well, I suppose they don't ever see so many coloured people either.'

> 'It's true,' said a wise man, 'but we all the same flag, the same empire' (Phillips 1990, 142)

The echoes of the calypso song are clearly heard here: "the same flag, the same empire" is the usual topical reference to "my mother country". But the description of the new atmosphere is indeed gloomy and "bleak":

> Leila looked at England, but everything seemed bleak. She quickly realized she would have to learn a new word: overcast. There were no green mountains, there were no colourful women with baskets on their heads selling peanuts or bananas or mangoes, there were no trees, no white houses on the hills, no hills, no wooden houses by the shoreline, and the sea was not blue and there was no beach, and there were no clouds, just one big cloud, and they had arrived. (Phillips 1990, 142)

Once she starts walking around she notices that there are announcements hanging everywhere from doors and windows saying "No trespassing", "No blacks", "No coloureds", and "No vacancies for coloureds". Getting a job is an equally grim prospect because racism dominates all social and economic relations. This big island is certainly not what she expected, not the "mother country", but an island of segregation and isolation. The final paragraph of the novel offers a very powerful image of what this island represents, namely old age, decadence, and ultimately death:

> A speckled, burnished light crept in off the street, piercing the awful inadequacy of the curtains. Leila caught sight of herself in a mirror. She looked like a yellowing snapshot of an old relative, fading with the years. She turned suddenly and saw that somebody had pushed a Christmas card through the front door. She stooped, with Calvin, and picked it up and read it, but it was from nobody. (Phillips 1990, 204-5)

The fact that this postcard pushed through the door has nothing written on it, that it comes from nobody, is indicative of the extent to which the imaginary space created by Leila, as by many other diasporians –in their need to construct a home—, is no more than a mirage, like that image of herself in the mirror: "a yellowing snapshot of an old relative, fading with the years".

In her popular novel *Small Island* (2004), Andrea Levy, also from the Caribbean (Jamaica), has similarly addressed this metaphor of the island. The novel starts with the account given by a white woman, called Queenie, of the Empire Exhibition, which took place in London in 1924-1925 and showed an idealized view of the Empire as the domesticated strange places Britain had civilized, all of them contained in a small place, all of them completely under

control in a good example of the effectiveness of the exercise of colonial power. The contrast with this idealization comes immediately because Levy presents the encounter of an educated black woman from Jamaica, Hortense, with the "Mother Country".

Hortense had been trained as a teacher in Jamaica and married Gilbert Joseph, formerly a soldier during the Second World War, who had migrated to Britain with the hope of improving their miserable life in the Caribbean. It is an imaginary reconstruction—mentioned explicitly by the narrator (Levy 2004, 99)—of the *Empire Windrush* generation, of those who came to Britain after the War in order to make their contributions to the physical reconstruction of the war-ridden nation. Like Leila in Phillips's novel, Hortense is full of the most optimistic expectations when departing from Jamaica bound for England. We hear her voice as she imagines what will happen to her in the big island:

> I did not dare to dream that it would one day be I who would go to England. It would one day be I who would sail on a ship as big as a world and feel the sun's heat on my face gradually change from roasting to caressing. But there was I! Standing at the door of a house in London and ringing the bell. Pushing my finger to hear the ding-a-ling, ding-a-ling. … Hortense Roberts married with a gold ring and a wedding dress in a trunk. Mrs Joseph. Mrs Gilbert Joseph. What would you think of that, Celia Langley? There was I in England ringing the doorbell on one of the tallest houses I had ever seen. (Levy 2004, 12)

But those expectations are very soon defeated when she finally arrives in Britain and looks around. She sees that only her fellow countrymen are happy with the arrival of the new ones, whereas the white people seem hostile. When she comes to her husband's dwelling place she also discovers that it is nothing like what she had dreamed on her small island. Gilbert speaks frankly to her, when he shows the ramshackle and dismantled room that constitutes all his lodgings: "This room is where you will sleep, eat, cook, dress and write your mummy to tell how the Mother Country is so fine. And, little Miss High-class, one thing about England you don't know yet because you just come off a boat. You are lucky" (Levy 2004, 32-33). This tiny and dismantled room is thus a metaphor of the big island, of Britain. The experience narrated here is very similar in many other diasporic writers, who have usually written about the shock of arriving and finding their lodgings in London or in other places in Britain[5].

[5] Shiva Naipaul does so in his autobiographical record *Beyond the Dragon's Mouth*, as his more famous brother V.S. Naipaul has also done in his autobiographical novel *The Enigma of Arrival*, both in connection with finding

In *Small Island* there is also a revealing example of how this big island of Britain, the Mother Country, turns into another secluded space, a restricted and anti-emancipatory location. It happens when Hortense, very proud of her credentials as a teacher, tries to get a job in an English school. She is of course rejected as her race and colour make her unsuited to perform the job. When after the interview Hortense understands that her studies and training are worth nothing in London, she feels deeply humiliated and makes to leave the room in confusion and anger; by mistake she turns the wrong way and walks into a cupboard, where mops and buckets are stored. That is *her space* in England. The big and promising island has turned into a dark, small, secluded and racist island, like the cupboard which symbolises manual labour, the only place and job for which she is considered adequate, given her race and colour.

Sociologist Avtar Brah has made reference to this racist aspect of the construction of Britishness in contemporary Britain in connection with nativism. She says:

> In the colonies, the Natives were excluded from 'Britishness' by being subjected as natives. But how does this particular nativist discourse reconfigure in present-day Britain? Of course, there is no overt evocation of the term 'native' but it remains an underlying thematic of racialised conceptions of Britishness. According to racialised imagination, the former colonial Natives and their descendants settled in Britain are not British precisely because they are not seen as being native to Britain: they can be 'in' Britain but not 'of' Britain. The term 'native' is now turned on its head. Whereas in the colonies the 'colonial Native' was inferiorised, in Britain the 'metropolitan Native' is constructed as superior. That is, nativist discourse is mobilised in both cases, but with opposite evaluation of the group constructed as the 'native'. (Brah 1996, 191)

4. The image of the homeland

If the island is used to project the most fantastic dreams and imaginary constructions of liberation, of emancipation and progress, only for those expectations to be ultimately defeated, as we have seen in the novels of Phillips and Levy analysed above, what all diasporic subjects also need is, of course, to construct their own image of the homeland. Wherever they live, they constantly feel the need to come to terms with their sense of space, the "real" space they occupy, but also with their history, their memories and traditions, so closely related to the "other space".

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accommodation in Earls Court in London. For relevant excerpts from those works cf. Phillips 1997, 152-60 and 186-95.

Salman Rushdie has written in very revealing terms about this concept of the "imaginary homeland" in an essay published in 1982. It is an explanation of how he had come to write *Midnight's Children*. He was living in North London at the time and was struggling very hard to put down on the pages of his manuscript his life in Bombay, the place where he had been born but which had disappeared from his factual reality, particularly since he had left it first for Pakistan and then for Britain. The feeling of distancing from Bombay is similar to that of those migrants who undergo diaspora or dispersion, especially when they have to escape from totalitarianism. Writing in North London about those spaces left behind was very difficult because it was really a search for lost time, and he understood then the utter impossibility of retrieving it as it actually was. What is involved here, as he tells his readers, is mostly memory and the difficulties that memory encounters when attempting to grasp the actual past: "what I was actually doing was a novel of memory and about memory, so that my India was just that: 'my' India, a version and no more than one version of all the hundreds of millions of possible versions" (Rushdie 1991, 10).

Another writer from the subcontinent, who emigrated to the United States and Canada, Bharati Mukherjee, has also discussed this aspect of the diasporic memory, how difficult and, to a certain extent, how artificial and counter-productive it can be to try and capture that reality which is no longer available to the diasporians in their new land. Her words in an interview with Bill Moyers, entitled "Imagining Ourselves", are I think self-explanatory:

> Letting go of the old culture, allowing the roots to wither is natural, change is natural. But the unnatural thing is to hang on, to retain the old world. What is the point of hanging on to a culture that's thousands of miles away, and that probably not you, not your children, not your grandchildren will ever see? Why not adjust and accommodate to the world around you? (quoted from Fludernik 2003, xxviii)

In her comments on these words, Monika Fludernik finds them paradoxical because all diasporic communities try to find their identities through the memories of their origins, but, at the same time, as Mukherjee declares, that seems unnatural. Fludernik wonders, in this respect, if there is a way other than "clinging to what one knows" which might enable one "to face the new and survive the challenge". For her, there's only one way to define one's identity, and that is through narrative, which "needs to start in the past and pace its way to a future that embraces and resolves the discrepancies between past and present". She clearly borrows Rushdie's

expression when she tries to explain how that can be achieved: "the memory of the past and its re-invention as an imaginary homeland are of the utmost psychological significance" (Fludernik 2003, xxviii-xxix).

An interesting image Rushdie uses in the above mentioned essay, in order to describe this sort of imaginary homeland, is that of broken mirrors[6]. He sees himself, as I have said, writing from outside India and making an effort to reflect that lost world, but in trying to do that he becomes aware that is dealing with "broken mirrors" (Rushdie 1991, 11), never with the complete and actual reality. The image of mirrors suggests of course substitution (the replacement for the real thing), but as the mirrors are broken, it is also very aptly suggestive of fragmentation. Diasporic migrants are necessarily fragmented, as a consequence of their being dispersed and torn away from their country of origin and their fellow countrymen. Thus, like memory, which is faulty and partial and may lead us into distortions and falsifications of history, the diasporic writer is faced with the challenge of remembering and rewriting the past left behind, which for him are like "broken mirrors". Rushdie then is creating fictions, "not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind" (Rushdie 1991, 10). In this way fragmentation, which initially might be regarded as a weakness, turns into a strength, allowing the writer to imagine his past, and giving him more freedom to create and to recover lost time and the lost home. Writers like him, who have experienced this sort of diaspora in Britain, feel empowered by precisely the tradition of migration and diasporas of the past. The list of writers he claims as his predecessors in writing in that tradition is revealing of the dimensions of that diasporic condition:

> Let me suggest that Indian writers in England have access to a second tradition, quite apart from their own racial history. It is the culture and political history of the phenomenon of migration, displacement, life in a minority group. We can quite legitimately claim as our ancestors the Huguenots, the Irish, the Jews; the past to which we belong is an English past, the history of immigrant Britain. Swift, Conrad, Marx are as much our literary forebears as Tagore or Ram Mohan Roy. (Rushdie 1991, 20)

The reference to the Jews cannot escape our attention in this context. Rushdie is also alluding to the classical diaspora, and clearly claiming that

[6] I have written about this recently in my "Metaphors of Diaspora: English Literature at the Turn of the Century" (forthcoming 2009), from which I adapt a couple of paragraphs.

the Indian, or South Asian, diaspora in Britain bears a strong similarity to that of the Jews.

Other authors, and chief among them Caryl Phillips, have made similar claims about their ancestors. In an anthology which he edited in 1997 (*Extravagant Strangers. A Literature of Belonging*), Phillips collected texts from a wide range of authors and periods. He started with 18th-century writers such as the African Olaudah Equiano but also included contemporary poets and novelists such as Linton Kwesi Johnson, Romesh Gunesekera, Kazuo Ishiguro, David Dabydeen or Ben Okri. He even put in well-known white authors such as William Thackeray, Joseph Conrad, Rudyard Kipling, Wyndham Lewis, or George Orwell, because all of them were born outside Britain and contributed their imagination, their 'imaginary homelands', to English or British literature. Phillips wanted to prove that Britain has always been a country of immigrants, where different diasporas have coalesced in shaping its peculiar identity, an identity that cannot be considered homogeneous at all. The reading of these texts demonstrates the wide diversity implied in the definition of *British*. In Phillips's words,

> readers will come to accept that as soon as one defines oneself as 'British' one is participating in a centuries-old tradition of cultural exchange, of ethnic and linguistic plurality, as one might expect from a proud nation that could once boast she ruled most of the known world. The evidence collected here confirms that one of the fortuitous by-products of this heterogeneous history has been a vigorous and dynamic literature. (Phillips 1997, xii)

In addition to Rushdie and Phillips, many other contemporary British writers could be mentioned, like Romesh Gunesekera, whose novel *Reef* (1994) presents a powerful recreation of an imaginary homeland, corresponding to his native Sri Lanka; or Abdulrazak Gurnah, whose *Admiring Silence* (1996) gathers together the protagonist's memories, but also his lies and fantasies (his mental constructions), about his original Zanzibar. Even writers who are British-born or British-bred have tried to imagine their parents' homelands: Monica Ali, Zadie Smith, Hari Kunzru could be mentioned as examples in the first years of the 21st century.

Let me briefly illustrate these ideas of the imaginary homeland through Monica Ali's successful *Brick Lane* (2003), but not before quoting again from sociologist Avtar Brah, who has tried to define the notion of "home" from a different non-literary perspective. Curiously enough, her conclusions are very much the same as those expounded by writers such as Rushdie or Mukherjee:

> Where is home? On the one hand 'home' is a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination. In this sense it is a place of no return, even if it is possible to visit the geographical territory that is seen as the place of 'origin'. On the other hand, home is also the lived experience of a locality. Its sounds and smells, its heat and dust, balmy summer evenings, or the excitement of the first snowfall, shivering winter evenings, sombre grey skies in the middle of the day… all this, as mediated by the historically specific everyday of social relations. (Brah 1996, 192)

When reading Ali's *Brick Lane* we notice that for the female protagonist, Nazneen, home is not her everyday reality, that of her pregnancy in her London flat, but another reality, that of the dreams and fantasies of another world:

> She looked at her stomach that hid her feet and forced her to lean back to counter its weight. She looked and saw that she was trapped inside this body, inside this room, inside this flat, inside this concrete slab of entombed humanity. They had nothing to do with her. For a couple of beats, she closed her eyes and smelled the jasmine that grew close to the well, heard the chickens scratching in the hot earth, felt the sunlight that warmed her cheeks and made dancing patterns on her eyelids. (Ali 2003, 76)

So space is used here to contrast, to oppose the everyday reality, that of her body, her room, her flat–which paradoxically have nothing to do with her, to what she really feels as home, which curiously enough are aspects linked to the same phenomena mentioned by Brah: smells, sounds of activity (the chickens in this case), and the heat of the sun. The space with which Nazneen identifies is an imaginary place, her imaginary homeland, where she can connect more closely with herself: "You can spread your soul over a paddy field, you can whisper to a mango tree, you can feel that earth beneath your toes and know that this is the place, the place where it begins and ends. But what can you tell to a pile of bricks? The bricks will not be moved" (Ali 2003, 87).

As this female character is initially very dependent, living in London in isolation, locked up in her flat because she cannot speak the language and consequently cannot move freely around, she desperately needs to claim that imaginary homeland as the source of her stability, her identity. That imaginary space gives her a feeling of safety. However, as she progresses and discovers that sewing provides her with money and thus economic independence, she feels more confident, and the appeal of the imaginary places loses ground:

> The village was leaving her. Sometimes a picture would come. Vivid; so strong she could smell it. More often, she tried to see and could not. It was as if the village was caught up in a giant fisherman's net and she was pulling at the fine mesh with bleeding fingers, squinting into the sun, vision mottled with netting and eyelashes. As the years passed the layers of netting multiplied and she began to rely on a different kind of memory. The memory of things she knew but no longer saw.
>
> It was only in her sleep that the village came whole again. (Ali 2003, 217)

But this is not always the case. For some diasporians, and particularly for some diasporic writers, the feeling of gaining safety and confidence in their new land does not obliterate the need for an imaginary homeland. On the contrary, as the African writer Abdulrazak Gurnah says, he left his country, Zanzibar, when he was a young man, eighteen years old, and settled in England. Escaping as he was from state terror, the only thing he wanted then was to forget about the hardships and anxiety, and "find safety and fulfilment somewhere else" (Gurnah 2004, 26). It was only after he had achieved that safety in England that he started writing. That act of writing was a way to reconcile himself with the memory of his origins, although that memory did not correspond exactly with the reality left behind:

> I realized that I was writing from memory, and how vivid and overwhelming that memory was, how far from the strangely weightless existence of my first years in England. That strangeness intensified the sense of a life left behind, of people casually and thoughtlessly abandoned, a place and a way of being lost to me forever, as it seemed at the time. When I began to write, it was that lost life that I wrote about, the lost place and what I remembered of it. […] I found myself overcome for the first time by the bitterness and futility of the recent times we had lived through, by all that we had done to bring those times upon ourselves, and by what then seemed a strangely unreal life in England. (Gurnah 2004, 26)

The writer is telling us that his life in England seemed "unreal" (he even refers to "the strangely weightless existence of my first years in England"), and thus the only thing that seemed genuine was the lost life he was recreating from memory. This curiously enough is what gave him the strength to write. Gurnah speculates about the theory that displacement and distance–such as the one he achieved by escaping from his country of origin and settling in Britain—are liberating for the writer, since distance, he says, "intensifies recollections, which is the writer's hinterland" (Gurnah 2004, 27). But at the same time, as he is also aware, distance can