

Spatial Politics in the Postcolonial Novel

Sara Upstone

216 pages, 2009, 55GBP (hardcover)

London and Burlington VT, Ashgate

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Early in Sara Upstone's study of the representations of space in postcolonial writing, she turns to the common distinction made between space as an empty abstraction and place as a location with a name and therefore possessed of a history and able to evince meaning. Upstone is unhappy with the implication that place alone is therefore worthy of material study. For her, place in postcolonial contexts is too often implicated in regimes of power and control. In this study, place is read as an aspect of space; in the fluidity of space, Upstone finds the possibility of resistance, and of the creation of new possibilities for the postcolonial world. As she writes, "making space from place—reinstilling the undefined—may be as subversive as the more common focus on the action of redefining that place through territorial reclamation" (4). On first coming across this sentence I misread reinstilling as reinstalling, and only realized my mistake on a second reading. Yet the distinction between the verbs is indicative of Upstone's approach throughout the book: if fluid notions of space could be unproblematically reinstalled, then the imposition of colonial order could quickly be reversed; her recognition that it is actually reinstillation which must take place indicates her awareness of laborious process, a pained accumulation of subverting elements. Throughout *Spatial Politics in the Postcolonial Novel*, Upstone maintains a commendable caution: she is determined to highlight the potential of postcolonial re-envisioning of space, but sensitive also to the obstacles that beset this project.

Upstone openly acknowledges her considerable debt to J.K. Noyes's *Colonial Space* (1992). Noyes's Foucauldian interpretation of spatial discourse within German-colonised Africa explicitly sees the demarcation of space and naming of distinct locations as a writing of power and means to facilitate repressive machineries. To some degree, Upstone evaluates the success of postcolonial writings of space according to the extent to which they overturn the types of control identified by Noyes; while colonialism functioned through the imposition of order, postcolonial resistance must take the form of fluidity and even chaos. Upstone addresses a possible objection to this hypothesis which she finds in Hardt and Negri's *Empire*: that contemporary modes of international domination are mobilized much more easily in the promotion of fluidity than in reasserting fixed identities. Against this, Upstone argues that despite the surface fluidity, "Empire's ultimate desire is demarcation and the perpetuation of

difference” (9). However, convincing though this argument may be, Upstone does not directly address a parallel objection that postcolonial resistance movements might necessarily strive for order, and that chaos too often proves disabling rather than fruitful. Yet to her credit, her nuanced understanding perhaps shines through again when she reveals how she intends for the notion of chaos to be understood as, following the formulation of Chaos Theorist Edward Lorenz, “seemingly random and unpredictable behaviour that nevertheless proceeds according to precise and often easily expressed rules” (qtd 12).

This recognition that chaos may itself have its patterns of order, even as they remain wholly distinct from those of the colonial era, perhaps allows the study much of its structure. The five chapters of the book that follow the theoretical introduction are often as concerned with the creation of fresh understandings of space as with the confounding of colonial conceptions. It is also in these chapters that the book comes into its own; while the opening section moves very quickly (and occasionally a little confusingly) between extant models of spatial discourse, the thematic foci of the chapters allow the reader a far clearer way into the contested topic of space; equally, Upstone’s erudition seems more accessibly conveyed when dealing with the impressive range of novels explored in this book than when examining in detail the theoretical context out of which her study emerges.

The five chapters of the book explore distinct models of postcolonial space as represented across a range of canonical and less well known novels. The movement is mostly one that traces a diminishment of scale, beginning with an interrogation of the nation, and then moving through chapters that deal with the journey, the city, the home and then concluding with the individual body, labelled as the “last scale.” In the first of these explorations she is particularly concerned to challenge what she sees as the dominant spatial model employed by postcolonial critics, relying on the resistant capabilities of the postcolonial nation. After suggesting that the order of the national space is continually revealed as inadequate, Upstone argues that smaller spatial scales are more often able to bring about that productive chaos which disrupts the legacy of colonial rule. She ultimately finds that we might detect in the postcolonial body the strongest counterpoint to the aftermath of colonialism that haunts the structures of the nation state: “geographical scale is reversed, the smallest becomes the most significant” (179).

Three writers in particular are central to this book: Salman Rushdie, Wilson Harris and Toni Morrison. Despite the clear difference between these figures, they can, however, each be understood as working within a style broadly labelled magical realist. Many of the subsidiary writers most frequently analysed in the book, such as Ben Okri and Arundhati Roy, can equally be located within the genre. This can perhaps come to be seen as a limitation of sorts: as magical realism so often works through dismantling myriad traditional systems of logic, one wonders why space in particular should be highlighted; equally one might yearn for greater examination of the address of space in the realist postcolonial novel. Admittedly, this does

happen at times, with fascinating readings of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* and Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*. One does wish, however, for a more general discussion of the relationship between form and spatial representation. Nonetheless, this is an excellent study of a key issue in postcolonial literatures, and consistently displays both theoretical depth and critical acuity. Upstone's skills as a reader ensure that this book will hold interest not only to scholars concerned with postcolonial representations of space, but also to those who hold a more general interest in the works of the writers she discusses.

Works Cited

- Adichie, Chimamanda. *Half of a Yellow Sun*. London: Fourth Estate, 2006.
- Dangarembga, Tsitsi. *Nervous Conditions*. Seattle: Seal, 1988.
- Hardt, Michael, and Antonio Negri. *Empire*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2000.
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