

The Disharmonized Space in Postcolonial Memoirs: The Case for Said and Achebe

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Abstract

This research paper will attempt to understand how space is integral in the formation of the colonial/postcolonial subject through the memoir of Edward Said's *Out of Place*, and Chinua Achebe's *There Was a Country* and give justice to their spatial reality. The paper will respond to the primary texts through a focused theoretical understanding of Lefebvre's spatial triad that he develops in *The Production of Space*, and comparatively understand and analyze how spaces are (re)presented through (post)colonial memoirs. I argue that both texts, in their discourse, show a disharmony when dealing space in the memoirs; and through Lefebvre understanding of spatial triad, we see that both texts' spatial triads show dominance of one of the triads, creating a disharmony of space in the text. I find that in Said's memoir the dominant triad is the representational space, while in Achebe's memoir it is the representations of space. The question to be asked then, what does this disharmony does to space in memoir? In Said's memoir, the space became personal, and for Achebe's memoir the space is political. We, therefore, see the power that language has in creating the space that we want and need, and this freedom is itself the justice that a subject could have in his/her lives.

Keywords: space, postcolonialism, Said, Achebe, Lefebvre, memoir

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Introduction

Imagine an astronaut on the International Space Station (ISS) doing their spacewalk, and imagine that the only link they have with Earth is a piece of metal and a radio connection. One must wonder: what this spatial difference can cause to the astronaut's subjectivity? Space, in any form, is inescapable difference from us humans, whether we interact with each other or alone, there's almost always a space creating a difference, a precursor for subject formation when it comes to subject's relationship with space. This spatial difference between two subjects creates a *space*, a non-physical one, allowing for the processes of production of the physical space for the subject.

Nevertheless, the subject may have that difference interrupted, become incoherent and disrupted, and most importantly, fragmented. This is the dilemma of the (post)colonial subject where we see that the (post)colonial is *out of place*, and not exactly *in a place*. We see this fragmentary—and also ambiguous—nature in a colonial novella *Heart of Darkness*. Mr. Kurtz whom “[a]ll of Europe contributed to [his] making” screams at his death bed, “The Horror! The Horror!” It’s the voice that Marlow was obsessed with: the voice of Europe, his homeland. Both the colonizer and the colonized are (dis)placed in different categories when it comes to colonialism. The colonizer always yearns for home, yet at the same time is afraid with identifying with the colonized. The colonized, on the other hand gets (dis)placed, both physically and subjectively, and becomes out of place, out of his/her reality that they subjectively once knew, and without a voice. This then, if not immediately, causes the fragmented sense of self in the colonized.

The fragmentation that ensues here begins with the discourse. Marlow throughout the novella follows a voice with an obsession: Kurtz’s voice. It begins then with the discourse, as it does with colonialism it begins with a discourse of superiority with a power structure imposed on defenseless. This discourse has imposed the sense of space for the colonized, in Marlow, we see him calling the Congo River as a “snake,” and that as they go down deep in the Congo he calls it, “the heart of darkness.” It is merely a matter of discourse, a voice, in the case of Marlow.

Besides discourse in fiction, and how the colonized space is represented in the text, what can the reality of a postcolonial subject can tell us about space? Memoirs perhaps have the ability to show to their readers how a postcolonial subject is experiencing his/her reality, and particularly space. The basic premise of the memoir is that the subject of the memoir reminisces over their past reality. It can be interesting to see how colonialism affects these subjects in their lives, and how it developed their conception of space. Perhaps the two big names that come up when mentioning postcolonialism as a field are Chinua Achebe and Edward Said.

Both Said and Achebe are known authors and scholars in the field. Edward Said, a Palestinian, is scholar and his well-known book *Orientalism* is a well-established book in the field. Achebe did not begin his career as an academic, but rather as a novelist, and his famous one that is almost studied in every university and schools is *Things Fall Apart*; a counter-narrative for the colonialist narrative. Interestingly, both at the end of their lives have written memoirs describing their experiences, during wars, after the wars, exile, and going through a history of colonialism in their respective regions, Palestine/Egypt/Lebanon for Said, and Nigeria for Achebe. Both *Out of Place* by Said, and *There Was a Country* by Achebe carry a title where space is very relevant to them.

The question is then: what happens to space in the text of a postcolonial memoir, and how space (re)presents itself to the reader?

Said's memoir begins with his grandparents, both maternal and paternal. But it is rather to pinpoint a structure for the memoir, since the memoir jumps around in time. Yes, there is progression from beginning to end, but within the chapters themselves we see Said referring to later years while discussing a certain year's memories. Said is meticulous with his recollection of his memories, and mentions very specific details. We see him at an early age that his private life is controlled by his own mother. For example, how he had restrictions to enter his sisters' rooms. Moreover, his public spaces were also controlled by colonialism or at least cultural appropriation. This happens with his school, where he describes that his school Gezira Preparatory School (GPS) yard "constituted a frontier between the native urban world and the *constructed* colonial suburb" (Said, 1999, p. 40, emphasis added).

However, it is not until we reach the chapter where he speaks about his schooling in Egypt, and his move to Egypt, is where we see the instances of exile and displacement for Said, which was on his twelfth birthday as he began in chapter six. His education at St. George reflected his sense of displacement, his disconnect with space, and says that he feels "a general sense of purposeless routine trying to maintain itself as the country's identity was undergoing irrevocable change" (Said, 1999, p. 109). We see a fragmented self slowly losing the sense of himself trying to identify with a country.

Another significant move in Said's life is his move to the United States. His experience of American spaces becomes very different than what it was in Egypt, Palestine, and Lebanon. America for him becomes a dark and a desolate place for him, as he describes New England as a desolate and an alienating place; however, beautiful at the same time (Said, 1999, p. 226). Moreover, besides his dark experience with American spaces, his relationship with his mother became less frequent and not as it used to be as it was in Egypt. In America, he extremely misses his mother which could be a reason of why he views American spaces in a dark view.

As Said loses his sense of his place, Achebe is driven by his memory of a country that did not last very long, which is Biafra. This what the title of his memoir refers to: that that there *was* a country. The memoir rekindles Achebe's audience with memories of the country and what it meant to him personally as a writer, and what it meant for him as an Igbo person. The memoir begins with his formative years, writing *Things Fall Apart*, the role of the writer, and the events that occurred before the Nigerian-Biafra war.

Since this paper discusses mostly space, I found that Achebe hardly ever writes in detail about space like Said does. Rather his focus of space we see is about national space, borders, and sovereignty. Even at the beginning of his memoir, he describes the manner that Great Britain "handed that would later become Nigeria, like a piece of chocolate cake at a birthday party" (Achebe, 2012, p. 1). Clearly this tone sets the focus of the rest of the memoir: he's concerned about his country and its future. Nigeria as it gets its independence from Great Britain, Achebe describes the feelings and the expectation of the Nigerian people at the time. Achebe (2012) says, "The general feeling in the air as independence approached was extraordinary" and about the expectation of the Nigerian people he says, "[w]e [are] going to inherit freedom—that was all that

mattered” (p. 40). Six year into Nigeria's independence, Achebe describes the country's status as “declining.” The memoir constantly highlights and gives light to the national space and its sovereignty and Achebe's concerns about it.

During times of war there has to be a group that talks about it and these people are intellectuals and writers of the country. Achebe (2012) believes that “intellectuals play an active role in various capacities during the war years” (p. 108). Achebe mentions the names of well-known intellectuals and their contribution to the Biafran cause such as Wole Soyinka, the first African to win a Nobel Prize in Literature. As the country's dreams grew bigger, Achebe (2012) realizes that “[i]t did not escape Biafra's founders that a great nation needed to be built on a strong intellectual foundation” (p. 143). This realization has made the Republic of Biafra to write the Ahiara Declaration, and Achebe himself was invited by Ojukwu to the committee that drafted the document. Thereby creating a new sovereign state, a *new national space*.

It is undoubtedly that space is a very important to both subjects of the memoir, Said and Achebe. This research paper, then, will attempt to understand how space is integral in the formation of the postcolonial subject through the memoir of Edward Said's *Out of Place*, and Chinua Achebe's *There Was a Country*. The paper will respond to the primary texts through a focused theoretical understanding of Lefebvre's spatial triad that he develops in *The Production of Space*. The aim of this paper is to analyze both primary texts comparatively and understand how spaces work through (post)colonial autobiographical texts. I argue that both texts, in their discourse, show a discordance in the spatial triad through dominance of one of the triads. I argue that in Said's memoir the dominant triad is the representational space, while in Achebe's memoir it is the representations of space.

In his book *The Production of Space* Henri Lefebvre (1991) bases his whole argument that “(social) space is a (social) product” (p. 26). He elaborates on this idea and sees that “space thus produced also serves as a tool of thought and of action; that in addition to being a means of production it is also a means of control, and hence of domination, of power” (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 26). It remains then that space for Lefebvre carries a powerful position in social production, and by extension, I argue, it is also important to subjectivity.

For Lefebvre for space to work and to be produced he extrapolated from his readings of space a triad. For space to be produced and be in the process of production the triad must work in harmony with each other. The triad are the following: 1) Spatial practice, 2) Representations of space, and 3) representational space. According to Lefebvre (1991) spatial practice “embraces production and reproduction, and the particular locations and spatial sets characteristic of each social formation” (p. 33). In other words, he means this part of the triad is the experience of the space itself, hence the word “embrace.” Moreover, Lefebvre (1991) sees that spatial practice “ensures continuity and some degree of cohesion” (p. 33). This “some degree of cohesion” can only be experienced through space itself as is. The second triad is representations of space which “are tied to the relations of production and to the ‘order’ which those relations impose, and hence to knowledge, to signs, to codes, and to ‘frontal’ relations” (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 33). In a strictly professional sense, this means the discourse *on* space. That means, maps, and plans are a part of representations of space. But, at the

elementary level—and hopefully not to be a reductionist—it is a discourse that is “tied to the relations of production” of space.

The final triad in Lefebvre is representational space and Lefebvre (1991) explains that representational space “embod[ies] complex symbolisms, sometimes coded, sometimes not, linked to the clandestine or underground side of social life” (p. 33). Here we see that representational space is a discourse of space, in other words it is the space that is lived through “complex symbolism.” The mode of discourse here then determines the kind of space that is lived through the subject. The triad work dialectically with each other, meaning in order for a subject to interact, and thereby produce a space, the triad must work harmoniously with each other for that to happen.

The problem we still have is in language. Lefebvre addresses this issue as well. Lefebvre (1991) sees that we cannot see that “(social) space is a (social) product” (p. 26) and this is because of the double illusion as he calls them, the illusion of transparency and the illusion of reality. Both illusions work together to conceal that “(social) space is a (social) product” (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 26). The illusion of transparency is that we as subjects imagine that there is nothing hidden about that space that inhabit, and conversely, the illusion of reality is that when we as subjects think that space is there as it is, that it is only there ready for us to grasp.

Since the focus of this paper is on discourse, I’ll focus on that aspect as well from Lefebvre. In the illusion of transparency, we see that the “encrypted reality” (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 28) becomes decipherable through language. Yet, it seems that Lefebvre questions language in fully representing the spatial experience. Language can be used to communicate those ideas: “It was on the basis of this ideology that people believed for quite a time that a revolutionary social transformation could be brought about by means of communication alone” (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 28). However, Lefebvre (1991) finds that “[s]uch agendas,” meaning revolutionary social transformation through communication and language, “succeed only in *conflating* revolution and transparency” (p. 28, emphasis added). This *conflation* seems to be a sign of failure for language to express and (re)present space through language, and it is precisely what both Said and Achebe memoirs show us.

Time and Place: Reasons for writing a memoir

Both Said and Achebe set out to write their memoir for a reasons that they mention in their introductions for the memoirs. However, it seems that their reasons for writing a memoir vary. Said, in his preface for the memoir seems very lost, is very much “out of place” trying to have a grasp of his sense of his self. Said (1999) says, “The main reason, however, for this memoir is of course the need to bridge the sheer *distance* in time and place between my life today and my life then” (p. xiv, emphasis added). It should be noted that Said started to write the memoir after his diagnoses with pancreatic cancer; he felt that his death was near. He needed something personal, and the experience of writing a memoir itself gives a way for the subject of the memoir to reminisce over their personal past.

However, it is quite a different case with Achebe. Achebe was indeed sick at the end of his life, and his memoir was the last book he ever published before his death in 2013. Yet, the memoir is not personal like Said’s memoir, it does not have that personal tone that Said sets at the beginning of the memoir. Instead Achebe (2012) feels “it is

important to tell Nigeria's story, Biafra's story, our story, my story" (p. 3). Achebe begins with the nation, and the nation he is nostalgic for, and the collective, and ends with the personal. Said does mention that his memoir has recollections of the political events that occurred during his life time, but it's not the same as Achebe expresses it which makes it the topic of his whole memoir. Said's memoir is more personal. While for Achebe his personal history comes second to the Biafran history.

These introductions set the tone of what is to come in both memoirs. Said is very personal, and even discusses his awkward teenage phase, while we never see this with Achebe; he simply glosses over his childhood and teenage years. This setting of tone creates the biases in both memoirs: the nationalistic Achebe, and the personal Said, which will inform us in how both texts are playing with space and how space is (re)presented in both texts as we shall see. And we see this in the titles as well. Both titles refer to a space; however, one is nationalistic and the other is much more personal. *Out of Place*: if he is out of place, what does it mean for him to be "in place"? And is out of place metaphysical rather than physical? Or is it both? For Said it seems both. He is literally out of his own hometown(s) Palestine (and Egypt), but also, even when he was in his own hometown(s) he never really fit in. He was always the outsider. While Achebe's *There Was a Country*, invokes a temporal loss in of a country by using the modal "was." Yet, the title still refers to a space, a country.

The Body through Space

When interacting with a space, there must be a body that deals with it, creating a difference. A subject production of space cannot arbitrarily occur without the experience of the body through the living space itself. In both memoirs we do get some sense of the body, but we see it much better in Said than Achebe. In Achebe's memoir we rarely see any moments where Achebe discusses his own body. It is almost as if the *There Was a Country* is disembodied, and much of the focus is on the discourse, on the past voice and history Biafra. We never, as readers, get to understand how Achebe's body reacted to what happened in the text, the language of nationalism here *conflates* the experience itself. The space in Achebe's memoir is not lived through, but rather it is idealized throughout the memoir, from beginning to end, of what Biafra was and what it meant to him. And this shows up when he speaks of the Biafra and the intellectual foundation (Achebe, 2012, p. 143). There is *no place* for the body, only the voice, the discourse. This disembodiment shows us a lack of a harmony in the Lefebvrian triad. We never see a representational space; we only get a discourse on space imposed on us by Achebe. The disembodiment never quite gives us as readers the whole experience of Achebe of Biafra, we are only seeing the snippets that Achebe wants us to see.

For Said, however, the opposite is true. His body becomes very central to his experience with space. And this really shows up in his formative years, and especially with his father. His father, for the most of time, always puts restrictions on him, how sit, walk, and stand properly. His body moves along the space that he is living through. Moreover, his mother doesn't allow to enter his sisters' room. Said (1999) says, "The closed door of Rosy and Jean's room signified the definitive physical as well as emotional gulf that *slowly opened* between us" (p. 58, emphasis added). This is a bodily restriction, although he reacts negatively, but it is reaction to an experience to a space, or a lack thereof. However, it is still a biased and subjective account of Said's spaces. It is his body, not ours that experiences the space, and secondly it is a memoir, and he is

reminiscing over his past: how can we be sure that he is having the same feelings he had 20 or 30 years ago? We cannot be sure, and this for the reader can *conflate* the experience of space perhaps in any memoir, not just Said and Achebe. We see with Said that his body is interacting with his emotional state, he is not just a disembodied voice; he is a voice that interacts with the space. Unlike Achebe, we see here that Said is having a more wholesome experience of space; however, the problem still remains in the language itself.

Discoursing Space: Form and Content

It is worth looking at the language of both memoirs, and how they treat space and generally how both memoirs approach perception especially when it comes reminiscing over the past. Both memoirs do carry different form that informs their content. Beginning with Said's form, his language seems to be a bit freer, and less rigid when compared to Achebe. Said's memoir carries a lot of vocabularies, and simply by choice of words Said gives us more of his experience than Achebe does. Said's text lingers, and he is very meticulous when it comes to small details. The next passage is a perfect illustration of how detailed Said's language is, and how he is careful with it:

Near the end of class Gately suddenly stood up, his great belly protruding out from his tight shirt and stained baggy trousers and, awakened from his torpor, lurched toward two chattering students whose insouciance prevented them from seeing the disaster looming near them. I had never seen anything like it before: a wide-armed heavy-set man flailing wildly at two pocket-size boys, he landing an occasional blow while trying to keep from falling, they nimbly dancing out of his way screeching "No sir, don't hit me sir" at the top of their voices, while the class gathered around the trouble zone, trying to divert his blows from the offending pair. (Said, 1999, p. 184)

Although this passage does not discuss space and place, but it does show how form is really important for Said. The scene when it is described it seems like it is a stand-still moment, and he captured brilliantly in writing. His word choice, and style remains similar when discusses spaces. When he leaves for the US, he talks about the New England as "alienating and desolate" (Said, 1999, p. 226) after he describes the scene to be beautiful. How come it is beautiful and at the same time "desolate"? There is the fragmentary nature of Said's memoir as well. His spaces are scattered all over the place, and he is "out," there is no place that he could piece himself together. Said mentions and talks about 1967 war and how this important event "brought more dislocations, whereas for me it seemed to embody *the* dislocation that subsumed all the other losses, [...] I was no longer the same person after 1967; the shock of that war drove me back to where it all started, the struggle over Palestine" (Said, 1999, p. 293). The fragmentary nature of the text shows us the Said who is the fragmentary postcolonial subject who due to the text's disharmonized relationship with space, nation, and the self.

For Achebe his memoir is still fragmentary. We see this in how he organizes the memoirs itself. Between chapters and parts in the memoir, Achebe gives his readers the experience of reading his poetry in his prose that he wrote during the civil war. This cuts in the flow of the memoir and give us an image, and break in the linearity of the memoir. Unlike Said's attention to detail, Achebe's language is almost masculine, rigid, and almost logical sounding. The language of Achebe's memoir does not give the experience in detail, but rather it is series of jump cuts into different scenes. We start

with his formative years, and suddenly we begin the war, and the coups that occur. The form in Achebe memoir is concise and to the point, and it never becomes as descriptive as Said's memoir. The prime example of this is the beginning of the memoir, "My father was born in the last third of the nineteenth century, an era of great cultural, economic, and religious upheaval in Igbo" (Achebe, 2012, p. 7). Simple, and to the point. Compared to the previous quote by Said, we can see the stark difference between the two. This difference shows us on what ideas both memoirs focus on, and what biases both memoirs carry.

With Achebe, the simple, to the point language serve its purpose in advancing a political idea, reminding people of Biafra. While for Said's memoir it does not carry any agenda, the memoir serves as a moment in his history and retells it to an audience. Yet, spaces are not harmonized, Lefebvre spatial triad perhaps was experienced by both Said and Achebe as subject in the world, but the moment of writing of those memoirs creates the disharmony in both memoirs. Achebe never shows us the experience of living in Biafra, he imposes onto us a discourse *on* Biafra, a voice that young Nigerians should hear. Said does not want to be heard as loudly as Achebe wants, but he wants to go back, holding on to every memory he can. But one must ask and wonder, how can a representational space, a discourse *of* his life, really tell us the full experience of space in his life?

Conclusion

To end this dry discussion, I want to return to "Mistah Kurtz" as the African has put it in the novella. Mr. Kurtz is the voice that Marlow longed for in Africa, it is the voice of Europe that he misses. Yet, we only know Mr. Kurtz through Marlow, and his obsession with him is only a discourse that Marlow has created for himself. Achebe does the same thing. Taking out the body in his text, we never see Biafra for what it is, we only see the idealized version, a voice and a discourse *on* Biafra that Achebe imposes on his readers. Marlow also, like Said, sees the space with his own subjective eyes. Much like the Congo becomes the heart of darkness, New York for Said (1999) is "unpleasantly overcast and dark" (p. 223). The memoir can never really give us a full experience of the subject's space; it is rather an experience of writing where the subject only recalls past memories imposed with emotions involved at the moment of writing. Marlow says, "The mind of man is capable of anything—because everything is in it, all the past as well as all the future."

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