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Post-Colonial Space and Australian Identity in Richard Flanagan's *Sound of One Hand Clapping* (1997)

Space and Place

According to many critics, space and spatiality have become the most significant aspects of literary representation in the 20th and 21st centuries. For example, Joseph Frank (1945) spoke about spatial form in literature (Frank, 1945). And although a French philosopher, Michael Foucault, was rather interested in analyzing a more general than a specific literary space in his well-known study *Of Other Spaces*, he also emphasizes its importance in the last century arguing that "[T]he present epoch will perhaps be above all the epoch of space" (Foucault, web reference).

The theory of literary representation of space acquires an even more significant position in post-colonial literatures in English. In many post-colonial novels written in English, space becomes a symbolic site of both contest and conflict between the colonizing and colonized nations and cultures. Space also becomes a symbolic site in the formation of post-colonial identities of the formerly colonized nations and it expresses a complicated nature of the transition of formerly marginalized cultures from the marginalized to a dominant position. Space is also closely connected to physical place. Physical place becomes a symbolic site of the relationship between space and identity. In Paul Smethurst's view, place

is the foundation of our experience in the world, serves as a site of for national and imperial placing and indoctrination of value, and can be a testing ground for new possibilities. ... Places are therefore incorporated into all the structures of human consciousness and experience, and consciousness includes an awareness of objects in their place (Smethurst 2000:61).

Smethurst further understands place as a site of home and memories (61). Post-colonial thinkers often associate a depiction of place and space as some of the most important aspects of post-colonial literature and associate it with the formation of identity. In Bill Ashcroft's, Helen Tiffin's, and Garreth Griffith's view,

A major feature of post-colonial literatures is the concern with place and displacement. It is here that the special post-colonial crisis of identity comes into being; the concern with the development or recovery of an effective identifying relationship between self and place" (Ashcroft, Tiffin, and Griffith 1989:8-9).

The above authors emphasize a crisis of the formation of particular cultural identities connected with particular locality, place and territory. This crisis is perhaps most apparent in the former settler societies such as the United States, Australia, Canada, New Zealand and other post-colonial countries. Seen from the perspective of the settlers, immigrants, and new colonizers, one of the most problematic aspects their cultural belonging is an artificial acquisition of a new identity of these nations in a new, and for them foreign environment by colonizing and settling it. The other aspect of this crisis of identity is the conflict between an institutionalized identity of new settlers organized and constituted by a distant 'mother country' and their feeling of belonging to a different cultural sphere that is different from their colonizers. In the past, political and cultural institutions in a new colony were thus understood as an extension of the mother country's cultural identity. The colonial practices of Great Britain, Spain, France, the Netherlands and other countries serve as examples. But, in opposition to it, an attempt of the new English-speaking settlers to define and create a new identity that would express its uniqueness in a new place, space, and cultural environment can be observed. On the other hand, a transition of the status of the colonized to a colonizer (i.e. settlers who were 'colonized' by their mother countries but later became the colonizers of an indigenous population themselves) in their relationship to the domestic population after acquiring their independence from their mother countries expresses another

problematic aspect of the formation of cultural identity. This complicated and problematic relationship between space and identity is expressed in Michael Foucault's understanding of space. Foucault distinguishes between utopia and heterotopia to define different kinds of space. In his view, utopia has no real place and direct connection to reality and it is an unreal place (Foucault, web reference). On the other hand, Foucault identifies the places which he calls heterotopias "which are something like countersites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted" (Foucault, *ibid.*). Foucault understands utopia as an imaginary, ideal space that has no parallel in reality. On the other hand, he understands heterotopia as a space that physically exists in real societies, but is suppressed, marginalized and avoided. Thus despite its physical existence, such space is almost invisible, intimate, and tabooed because it expresses its undesirable status (as examples he cites toilets, hospitals, or cemeteries).

Foucault, however, uses the metaphor of a mirror to point out a space that lies between utopia and heterotopia. In his view, the mirror is utopia because

it is a placeless place. In the mirror, I see myself there where I am not, a sort of shadow that gives my own visibility to myself, that enables me to see myself where I am absent (...) But it is also a heterotopia in so far as the mirror does exist in reality, where it exerts a sort of counteraction on the position that I occupy. From the standpoint of a mirror I discover my absence from the place where I am since I see myself over there... I begin again to direct my eyes toward myself and to reconstitute myself there where I am. The mirror functions as a heterotopia in this respect: it makes this place that I occupy at the moment when I look at myself in the glass at once absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal, since in order to be perceived it has to pass through this virtual point which is over there (Foucault, web reference).

Foucault implies here that the identification of the self with a stable entity represented by space is never clear or stable, but rather a transitory composite of various spaces. Looking in the mirror indicates also a connection between the self (personal identity) and

the other, which never seems to be a clear one between two stable entities or poles. One pole can be defined only in relation to the other, the physical one in the relationship to the virtual, and both necessarily influence each other. Looking in the mirror means one's identification of both the "other" object of the mirror itself and myself in it as the reflection of my "otherness" in the mirror. Otherness, because my reflection in the mirror takes place on the other side from where I am standing. A specific ability of the mirror to reflect/express a virtual space (my image) enables the seer (myself) to perceive it not as a separate physical object evoking a distance, but as an object closely connected to myself since I define/perceive my identity through my relationship with it.

Geographical Space and Identity of Characters

The main focus of Richard Flanagan's novel *The Sound of One Hand Clapping* is not only about the life of a Slovenian family in Tasmania, but especially on the relationship of Slovenian family members to geographical space represented by Europe, Tasmania, and the Australian city of Sydney. In their relationship to these places creating geographical space they perceive, define and try to understand their cultural identity. Most of Flanagan's novel is set in Tasmania, some of it in Sydney, and through the protagonists' flashbacks, in Slovenia. The main focus is, however, on the social and moral development of Bojan Buloh and his daughter Sonja. The relationship between Bojan and his daughter is not narrated chronologically. Sonja's childhood and Bojan's early years in Tasmania in the 1950's and 1960's are juxtaposed to the narrative that deals with their fictional 'present,' especially the 1980's and 1990's. These juxtaposed narrative lines express the protagonists' attempt to reconcile with both a tragedy of the war in Europe, particularly Maria Buloh's rape by members of an SS unit, and the immigration present in Australia. Thus Maria represents not only an absent love Bojan and Sonja try to regain, but also a tragedy of European history and, symbolically, an impossibility of acquiring a new cultural identity in a different country. Looking at the construction sites in Tasmania where Bojan started to work in the 1950's does not evoke hope and optimism in Maria, but rather frustration and despair. Her understanding of a new place and her

relationship to it is influenced by memories of the past, that is the old country, and by her desire for success in a new country. It seems, however, that her identification with both places is impossible because she associates Slovenia and Europe with war, fascism, violence, and rape, and a new place with poverty, despair, and an unhappy life with a violent husband. It can be seen in the following passage in which Maria observes a Tasmanian landscape:

She continued looking: seeing it all anew, as if it had no connection with her. She saw[...]how to some who lived there it brought back all too painful memories of forced labor camps in the Urals or Siberia. But she knew it wasn't Stalin's USSR. Knew it wasn't Kolyma or Goli Otok or Birkenau. Knew it wasn't even Europe. Knew it to be a snow-covered Hydro-Electric Commission construction camp called Butlers Gorge that sat like a sore in a wilderness of rainforest.

In this land of infinite space, the huts were all built cheek by jowl, as if the buildings...might possibly even not care about people[...] (Flanagan 1997:4).

This passage shows Maria's tragic past and her impossibility to cope not only with this past, but also with the present in a new country. Flanagan further develops his imagery of place and its connection to his characters' identity in the following passage:

In those cowering corrals of huts had to live the workers, for in this remote highland country of the remote island of Tasmania that lay far off the remote land of Australia, there was no other human settlement for many miles[...].The time the new Australians came to such wild places to do the wog work of dam-building because work in the cities, which the new Australians would have preferred, was Australians' work (5).

Geographical imagery of space plays an important role in this passage. Tasmania is presented as a remote and distant part of already remote (to Slovenian and European characters) Australia, rather than as an extension of it. Thus, on the one hand, geographical imagery of Tasmania points out a double displacement of the immigrants – from Europe because of the geographical distance and the tragic past, and from Australia and the present because Tasmania is understood as having an inferior position in its relation to Australia – that is only as its extension and supplement. Nor does it help that the immigrants are excluded from better jobs.

Maria's death is thus not only a result of her unhappy personal life, but also a symbolic expression of her inability to achieve a mirror-like spatial position which would enable her to continue to live in a new country with less ambitious goals but, on the other hand, it also represents a symbolic rejection of the essentialist concept of both identity and space. Maria's oscillation between Europe and Australia, between past and present results in her inability to identify with any of these positions, spaces and identities. On the other hand, her transient position between these places opens the possibility for her to occupy any of these places and positions. This implies an openness and, if we develop this idea further, a non-essentialist, culturally constructed and transitory concept of identity and space, although only in a negative sense. Negative, because she wants to achieve ideal personal and cultural integrity possibly represented by a unified concept of space and identity, although in this sense represented by Australian citizenship. From Flanagan's perspective however, this integrity and unity cannot be achieved.

Bojan and Heterotopic Space

Both Bojan and Sonja may symbolize a connection between identity and place/space Maria has left unfulfilled and unoccupied after her death. While Flanagan's depiction of Maria points out her inability to achieve a mirror-stage position and utopia, Bojan occupies a typically heterotopic position. For him, Europe represents both a nostalgic and tragic past. He does not reject his European cultural heritage, but its tragic past – war, fascism and violence. He illustrates this by telling Sonja about the pigs which were saved by the villagers during the fire but which, paradoxically, ran back into the fire. This scene creates a metaphor for the complexity of the nature of European identity. When Sonja asks for the reasons for the pigs' running back to the fire, Bojan replies: "You ask me why? Who knows why? That's Europe" (Flanagan 1997: 227).

This idea of Europe as a tragic and inexplicable place is confirmed by another, this time a Polish immigrant who argues that "*Europe is a cancer...It spreads death everywhere*" (394). Although Bojan's identity is closely connected to the European space, he mostly holds, like Maria, a heterotopic position of an outsider. Despite being

a Slovene who used to live in his mother country, and despite acquiring Australian citizenship later, he cannot consider either to be his home. In connection with Europe because of his collaboration with the Nazis and in Tasmania because he has the status of an uneducated and despised 'reffero'. This double displacement from both Europe and Australia helps Bojan realize his position. He also realizes and understands the value and usefulness of education in a new country, of which he tries to convince his daughter Sonja. Bojan's realization of his own position represents a symbolic turn, that is his change from the heterotopic to the mirror-stage position as defined by Foucault. If we slightly simplify it, looking at himself as if in the mirror makes him realize that he is both present and absent in Tasmania. Present because he is physically present in the country and absent because he occupies only a marginal place in his society, despite his newly acquired citizenship. He symbolically represents the extension of Maria's heterotopic space to the mirror-stage position which could represent a fulfillment of the utopian project of acquiring a new cultural identity in connection with a new land. This project, however, fails because of the reasons given above. Bojan's initial belief in a better life and in a new Australian identity also fails, which can be seen in one of the most dramatic scenes of the novel. He sees a river dam he had built (as perhaps he tried to build not only a new country but also identity) collapse and break during a flood. This may also imply Flanagan's critique of an essentialist concept of space and identity. Like the river dam, which is not natural but artificially constructed, also his cultural identity cannot be defined as stable and unchanging. Space is a transitory entity and a construct rather than a stable entity. The cultural identity is related to the space like the imagery of the fragments of Sonja's favourite tea-pot. This tea-pot is broken in the old place but gradually put together again in Tasmania by her father.

In his article on this novel and its film version, Adi Wimmer emphasizes the symbolic depiction even of Tasmania as a hostile space and meditates on one of the most important scenes in the novel, a thrilling scene in which Bojan drives by the Butler George dam during a flood and watches its collapse. He views it as possibly being a product of Bojan imagination: "it is not quite certain

whether[the scene takes place] in reality or only in his imagination" (Wimmer 2003:136). His mirror-stage position in connection with his relationship to space and identity also creates another space for his daughter Sonja. In this sense, Sonja can become a symbolic fulfillment not only of the immigrant ideal, but also of the essentialist concept of identity. Bojan understands the value of education and language which, however, also means integration to the dominant culture through mastering its language and cultural practises. For Bojan, however, education does not mean a fulfillment of humanistic ideals, but of an immigrant hope of a symbolic path to prosperity. The artificiality of high immigrant hopes can be seen in one of the humorous scenes in which he buys Sonja a 24-volume of *Encyclopedia Britannica* and says:

"No, Sonja, you will go nowhere if you speak Slovene, you will end up like me. From now on you speak English proper. Then maybe you have a chance."

"English is no good for jokes."

"English is good for money." (214)

"Now you learn the English good," said Bojan with pride...Curious and alien as the gift was, Sonja felt a certain thrill both with it and more so by her father's obvious pleasure in giving it to her. But she also felt somewhat apprehensive. Without reading a word she wondered if she could ever understand all or any of it (215).

From Essentialist Identity to Postmodern Space

In this novel, essentialist concepts of cultural identity can be understood as an individual's integration to a particular cultural space achieved through the acquisition of a new language and new cultural practices. Essentialist concepts of space can be defined by stability and uniformity. Despite Bojan's hopes, the above passage does not point out Sonja's essentialist position of a clearly defined cultural subject, but indicates her doubts about integration as a means to prosperity. Her identity and her connection to place is not unified but transitory, like the fragments of the broken tea-pot she liked and which was finally reconstructed by her father. A depiction of this symbolic identity manifests itself in Flanagan's depiction of Sonja, her partner and their new-born baby daughter. Sonja can be understood, on the one hand, as the symbolic

fulfillment of her parents' ideal of success in a new country by becoming integrated into Australian society by mastering a new language and accepting its cultural practises. This is a utopian position close to Foucault's understanding of utopias. Foucault argues that Utopias are sites with no real place. They are sites that have a general relation or direct or inverted analogy with the real space of society. They present society itself in a perfected form, or else society in turned upside down, but in any case these utopias are fundamentally unreal spaces" (Foucault, Web reference).

Despite Sonja's integration in a new country in which she is best of all her family members, Flanagan undermines her potential utopian position by a depiction of Sonja's relationship to a place and to other characters. In addition, Flanagan uses a fragmentation and the imagery of absence and travelling which break the concept of unity and imply instability and transitoriness. Sonja's partner and the father of her daughter seems to be an honest immigrant. A marriage with him would perhaps secure Sonja a more stable and better position in Australia. But she rejects marriage, which can indicate, on the one hand, her rejection of a continued immigrant status. But on the other hand it can symbolically imply her rejection of integration, unity, stability and thus also of an essentialist concept of identity understood and represented by integration. A rejection of this concept is emphasized by a metaphor of absence (of a father and husband), a blank space which is further enhanced by another absence, that is of Sonja's mother and father with whom she can never achieve an ideal relationship and who had always been missing when she needed them most. Similarly, Sonja's new-born daughter remains without a father. Thus her identity is never complete and it seems as if it has symbolically remained open, always postponed and waiting for possible future fulfillment. The stability associated with the essentialist, unchanging concept of identity and place are further undermined by Sonja's travelling and changing localities.

First she leaves her father and home in rural Tasmania, then a suburb of Hobart and, finally, Sydney. Adi Wimmer considers the flight to be one of the central characteristics of Sonja's life. In his

view, "...*Sonja's existence can be summed up in that one word, flight.*" (Wimmer 2003:137). This metaphor evokes a metaphor of movement, changeability and transitoriness associated with both her identity and belonging to place. Sonja rejects her belonging to any stable place as she rejects the identity which could be characterized as essentialist, clear and homogenous. Her identity is shifting and changing, and depends on circumstances which construct both her identity and belonging to particular place and culture. This identity consists of many fragments representing her European and new Australian cultural heritage she oscillates between. Sonja's father's repairing of Sonja's favourite tea-pot may also imply a symbolic representation of her identity. Like the tea-pot, her identity is fragmented and consists of the past and present, European and Australian cultural heritage that are gradually put together. Despite its wholeness, the tea-pot still consists of the repaired fragments that form a whole and that represent a symbolic construction of Sonja's identity. This is not identity understood as essentialist, stable, and unchanging, but rather as hybrid and transient. In one of the scenes in the novel Sonja is staring in the mirror at a service-station:

Sonja looked at herself in a mirror behind the counter, realised she was staring, not listening...She saw in the mirror a woman approaching middle age, in her late thirties, elegant in what was almost office attire, as if off to some formal engagement with a stranger...She glanced back up at the mirror and saw reflected not herself, nor an angel, but a small frightened child holding a teapot. She involuntarily trembled. But when she looked back the child was gone and only her own image remained (18-19).

On the basic semantic level Sonja's looking in the mirror represents her realization of a vanished childhood. Seen from the perspective of Foucault's understanding of space, this scene represents a literalization of Foucault's concept of the mirror-stage as part of his understanding of space. The mirror, like in Foucault's concept of the mirror-stage of spatial experience, enables Sonja to realize both her presence and absence from space and time. It is a presence of her maturity, but also a presence of her identity constructed of the European past and Australian present. This identity is never stable, essentialist, and unchanged but rather composed of fragments – like a newly repaired tea-pot. And it is also an absence from the tragic

European past and Australian/Tasmanian childhood. This creates her moving and changing identity which she carries with her as a burden of her ancestors' tragic past and unhappy immigrant presence. Her identification with any place which would create a stable identity thus becomes problematic since her belonging to a particular place creating a stable space and identity never happens. Depiction of Sonja's belonging to place is thus close to Paul Smethurst's understanding of postmodern place. In his view,

Like a text, place is a never 'finished' construction, but reaches backwards and forwards in time, and the experience/reading is a subjective, cultural and historical activity... Place never has complete presence, both because it is always disappearing and being reproduced, and also because much of its presence is conditioned by representational spaces which are properly absent from the concrete structures and spaces that constitute physical place (Smethurst 2000:55).

Sonja thus seems to occupy a postmodern space within postmodern places oscillating between Europe, Australia and Tasmania. Like the space she occupies, also her identity is never complete, but rather transitory, fluid, and open to further contests and interpretations.

Conclusion

In his novel *Sound of One Hand Clapping* (1997), Richard Flanagan does not only depict a tragic fate of the Slovenian immigrant family in Australia, but also undermines traditional and essentialist concepts of space and identity through a depiction of his characters, but also through his imagery of place, absence and travelling. Bojan's life, hopes, and ideals represent a utopian space which can never be achieved and which manifests itself in his relationship with his wife and daughter as well as to a new country. Maria's, Bojan wife's premature death in a new country leaves a symbolic blank space to be occupied by Bojan, who may be understood as a symbolic continuation of Maria's fulfillment of her hopes. Bojan understands his success can be achieved only through an essentialist concept of identity, that is when he integrates into a new Australian society. This, however, never happens since his ideals are never fulfilled. Bojan's integration to a new society which would

represent a possible unified, essentialist (Australian or Tasmanian) identity is never achieved. Bojan, however, leaves a blank symbolic space for his daughter Sonja, who is to fulfill his essentialist concept of identity. But despite Sonja achieving a relatively secure and integrated position and identity in Australian society, it is symbolically undermined by her rejection of integrity and unity through a marriage with another immigrant. Thus the absence of her husband may imply the absence of unity. It also points out the fragmentary nature of her identity. Oscillating between utopian and heterotopian positions, she rejects a utopian position and achieves a mirror-like position in Foucault's understanding. It enables her to symbolically occupy a critical distance from an essentialist concept of identity. Her identity thus symbolically occupies a space composed of many different fragments (cultures) that are transient, flowing, changeable and that finally create a new identity which cannot be associated only with a physical presence in a place, or in a country (Australia, Tasmania, Slovenia, Europe). This identity is much more complex and consists not only of individual's perception of physical place and space, but also of culture and history related to them.

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