ENTERTEXT

The Familiar Made Strange: The Relationship between the Home and Identity in Andrea Levy's Fiction

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Abstract

Angela Levy's novels are rich in atmospheric detail and construct powerful characters that are placed within everyday contexts, contexts which change and develop alongside the characters. This paper examines the importance that the environment and spatial relations have to play in delivering pertinent commentary on events or characters as well as the politics of certain social or familial situations. Specifically, in Every Light in the House Burnin' (1994) and Never Far from Nowhere (1996), Levy focuses on the lifestyles and experiences of second-generation inhabitants residing in the 'Mother Country.' In these works, she sketches out environments through simple design, attention to small details and poignant events, and a focus on the mundanity of domestic life, especially in the context of council housing. Levy's subtle yet sophisticated formal methods draw attention to the starkness of the surroundings, the implications of the unsupportive environment, and ultimately the spatial meaning of home. Drawing on spatial and postcolonial theories, including those from Edward Soja, Jonathan Raban, Yi-fu Tuan, John McLeod, John Clement Ball, and Sara Upstone, this article shows that the relationship between spatial characteristics, changes in spatial dynamics and the central personalities of the characters are involved in a complex network of mutual exchange and transformation. Personalities are ascribed to the spaces themselves as they are developed so cordially as central tenets of the novels. Feelings of transience, disassociation, and defamiliarisation—all products of racial, social, and political exclusion—are represented through a comparison between materiality and perception in Levy's novels. Thus, home emerges as an ambivalent and precarious space of becoming, whether in reference to the domestic sphere or a sense of belonging and being at home in Britain.

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Jo Pready

> You will love again the stranger who was your self.
> Give wine. Give bread. Give back your heart
> to itself, to the stranger who has loved you […]
> —"Love After Love" by Derek Walcott[1]

> "All the familiarities made everything more strange."
> —Andrea Levy, Fruit of the Lemon[2]

Place is central to the structure and plot of any novel. David James observes that "every novel has to be set somewhere," adding that "[a]ll fictional worlds surely depend upon some indication of locality, named or anonymous."[3] Furthermore, James argues that "characters' decisions and their pivotal consequences are often intensified by the demands and opportunities of where they take place.[4] The "somewhere" that James describes is of prime importance to Levy's novels as the space of the home takes a particularly dominant role in informing the reader of the central concerns of the novel; identity, racial identity, the role of the family, work, education, and opportunity are all characterised through key events that are carefully placed or inscribed within the home, often through its everyday features. Levy's approach to space, as I will show, places emphasis on connections between the individual experiencing the space and the space itself, a phenomenon Julian Wolfreys has described as "the taking place of a process between the materiality of location and the immateriality of the perceiving mind."[5] Specifically, I will focus on Andrea Levy's early novels, Every Light in the House Burnin' (1994) and Never Far from Nowhere (1996), which are united by style, content, formal characteristics, and an exploration of the spatial meaning of home.

My reading will focus on the negotiation of space, identity, and relationships in postcolonial Britain. Henri Lefebvre asserts that understanding a space means breaking down its "image of immobility," transforming it into a "nexus of in and out conduits."[6] As will be seen, Levy's spaces are malleable and rely on subjective interpretations; a large part of this theory is influenced by Jonathan Raban's work on soft spaces,[7] a philosophy which demonstrates how spaces become flexible when subjected to scrutiny or interpretation. Yet, in Levy's fiction there is never a continuous sense of fluidity because there are breakages and disruptions in thought and meaning throughout her texts. This rupture occurs in both the interiority of the characters, and within their perception of the space around them. Each of her novels are concerned with a journey, a process of self-discovery and a dialogue between different parts of the self. As Walcott's poem, "Love

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after Love," reflects there are moments when you can "greet yourself arriving," "smile" and "peel your image from the mirror," regaining ownership of a sense of self.[8] Levy's novels focus on moments of completion between self and space as well as within competing aspects of space: moments of 'arrival' are anticipated throughout her novels.

experience of a “new place, which, by their very presence, has itself been made new.”[16] Proctor confronts traditional locations of black post-war writing—basements, bedsits,

In many postcolonial British novels, the imagined distance between people and places becomes a tangible and concrete barrier to harmony. For instance, in his reading of the spaces of Buchi Emecheta, Chinua Achebe, and M. G. Vassanji, John Clement Ball observes that generality becomes a discernible reality:

> the London of such texts is largely unseen: known indirectly and by reputation. A distant, mythologized object of dream and desire, a signifier of Britain's claims to political authority, cultural quality and centrality vis-à-vis the colonial periphery, it is constructed from impressionistic, repetitiously circulated images.[19]

Consistently Levy presents and deconstructs images of the home-space in her novels. There are two ways this disruption occurs: firstly, the role of the home is disrupted by philosophical questions, the nature of which often centre around a real/imaginary dichotomy, or, conversely, memory and nostalgia for other spaces that have been left behind. Secondly, a sense of home is disrupted by other spaces with which the characters come into contact, spaces such as streets, pubs, dole offices, hospitals, shops, hairdressers, youth clubs, schools, and other homes. Spaces outside the home are often scenes of extreme violence: Carl and the rest of the family are bullied in the yard outside their house in Every Light in the House Burnin'; Olive is sexually abused by a man she meets in a bar while Gary gets a glass smashed in his face in a pub in Never far from Nowhere; Faith witnesses racial violence towards a shop owner in Fruit of the Lemon (1999). Yet, despite this focus on fear outside the space of the home, the interior of the homes never seem to offer the protection they superficially exude. Olive sums this up when her mother fears for her safety outside the home: "she worried about me she said, it wasn't safe outside. Well it wasn't safe inside either."[22] The lack of safety provided by all familiar spaces, highlighted by this juxtaposition of interior and exterior spaces, creates a porous network of spaces that equates to a constant feeling of escape and return making attachment almost impossible.

Never Far from Nowhere has a unique narrative framework, juxtaposing the viewpoints of Vivien and her sister, Olive. The references to home begin on the first page with the description of the "marks on the door-frame that led into the living room."[23] These marks are classified simply as "Olive's and mine," and this is in essence what the story is about: Olive and Vivien and the home in which they grew up. These marks on the door introduce a simple but effective method for establishing a sense of place, a sense of belonging, and nostalgia. The sisters' lives and development are visually coded by these marks that stay forever and attach them to the space.[24] The focus on development—initiated by the description of the marks on the wall—is continued by the almost rhythmic fluctuations between the two first-person narrators who offer a kind of split subjectivity. The stories are undeniably united, but show subtle and interesting differences. The sisters go to the same school, have the same parents, and live in the same space, but their very distinctive and often contrasting experiences create a dramatic feeling of separation between the girls.

Shared spaces are experienced differently in these twinned tales of the coming-of-age experience in Britain. Vivien is in awe of her older sister, but their relationship fails to generate a real sense of closeness because of their age difference: "three years meant Olive in the juniors with me one of the baby new girls in the infants. Her at secondary school in a smart new uniform, me in the juniors with scuffed knees and marbles."[25] In tracing their development at different stages, the novel has an almost lilting effect due to the constantly switching narrative point-of-view from one sister to the other. Significantly,

sustained comparison of her experiences of suffering and her sister Vivien's opportunities in life. As a result, the sisters' relations to place and space are dramatically different in later life: while Vivien moves to a picturesque and fairly luxurious student house, Olive, who becomes pregnant as a teen, comes to live in a council house. A deep sense of fatalism, connected to racism and racial hierarchies in Britain, pervades these dramatically different lives that begin from the same space, the same parents, and the same roots. Levy highlights the interplay between race/class in Britain through the contrasting life stories and spatial experiences of lighter and darker skinned sisters.

disappointment in her sigh drifted round and round the room."[31] The room becomes magnified as a response to these feelings and the words "I don't know" are left echoing in the vacuum of emptiness created by this admission. The fatalism of the repetitious phrase, circulating round and round the room, leaves the novel hanging in a moment of suspension. The representation of space–through the blank emptiness of the room–reflects Vivien's and Olive's misgivings about home and a sense of belonging. The apparently simple (some might say simplistic) style of Levy's narrative gives ways to a richly layered array of responses to space and its meanings: to home and a sense of (un)belonging.

The Dislocations of Family and Home

On a more functional level, the home is a space where mundane tasks take place and where the quotidian activities of eating, sleeping, and watching television take on more significant proportions due to the implication of philosophical questions about identity, race, adulthood, family, and relationships. In terms of narrative structure, Every Light in the House Burnin' is divided into simple vignettes or discrete moments; every sub-heading is given a minimalist title that begins with a section on Angela's family: "my dad," "my mum," "my brother," "my sister," and even "the cat." She then moves onto certain aspects of the house, either physical or material aspects, or titles that relate to memorable events, such as "the telly," "the dream," "the meatballs," "the yard," and "the holiday," to offer a few examples. Through this formal technique Levy manages to separate and categorise but also simultaneously draw together different aspects of Angela's life, including her home, its material features, her family, and their relationships. Her memory flits between spatial features and personal relationships. The titles are stagnant, everyday features that offer a framework for or outline of Angela's life. This outline is filled in and complicated through the novel's interior stories, which weave together to create an impressionistic view of a child coming to terms with her identity.

Levy's spatial descriptions are contingent on action and focal details. She pays more attention to the interior details of spaces, which she fills with surplus features. The interiors afford the opportunity for personalised, familial, and subjective accounts while the exterior is a common, institutionalised, state-owned space, which serves to repeat the dynamic of domestic order. We do gain insight into what the houses look like from the outside, but these descriptions are often repetitive and featureless as they detail the rows of tall, angular buildings, the "concrete"[32] worlds that make up the landscape of the estate. In Levy's novels, the attention to furniture, and specifically the over-accumulation of furniture, is managed in a simplistic fashio

associated with domestication in Levy's early novels as more than a mere ritual. For Levy, the systematic ordering of home becomes a way of self discovery, a means of evaluating or controlling psychological disturbances.

with “the multiple voices within;” it is “not

mundane staple food, and feel let down: “it was us and him.”[49] The bread rolls come to signify misplaced feelings through a kind of ritual that centres on food; in a similar method to the over-abundance of furniture these everyday articles represent misguided desires and needs that cannot be met. The father, as the care-giver and also the significant figure who controls the experience of the holiday, disappoints the children and fails to meet their expectations, distancing them from him in the same way as he was distanced from the ‘Mother Country.’

When they reach the chalet the tone changes to one of excitement due to the luxury of the “palace”[50] in which they are staying. Levy sets up the space as one of grandiose proportions, and yet there is a real melancholia attached to this excitement, again due to the simplicity of the materials described. This is elucidated by the image of the whole family clustered in the doorway of her brother’s room while they “wondered at the sight”[51] of the wash-basin in his room. This bathroom “was just a room dedicated to your cleanliness.”[52] The pure functionality of the room and the lack of unnecessary detail is what elicits pleasure: there were “no old TVs waiting for repair” and no “crumbs in the cutlery tray.”[53] Levy brings this narrative focus to a climax with the revelation that “our excitement at our new temporary home was hard to contain.”[54]

> [...] then we went into our flats. Red brick with long open balconies built round a grey, concreted yard [...] we went inside our little council home, choked full of furniture [...] in need of decoration, in need of being ten times the size, in need of a staircase. And the row started again.[58]

The focus on temporality—the reversion to family rows—foregrounds the shift from the promise of life in a better home to the realities of life in the council home. Through shifting spatial relations—the depiction of hopes, desires, and disappointments—Levy offers a rich depiction of how family life and character are shaped through the disconnections between people, place, time, and reality.

Moreover, this trip is linked to a discussion of a real space that approximates a domestic ideal when Angela visits her teacher's house. She offers the following account of the journey:

> I watched the road where I live go by. I watched the boarded-up shops

intentions, and from our unique circumstances."[77] Levy's narratives depict the unique circumstances of each individual, creating a highly personal account of what living in a space actually entails. Idealization of space versus the reality of existing is constantly in conflict. As Atkinson et al. have argued, "it is important to move beyond the idealisation of

Endnotes

1 Derek Walcott, “Love after Love,” Collected Poems 1948-1984. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1992, 328.

2 Andrea Levy, Fruit of the Lemon. London: Review, 2000, 101.

3 David James, Contemporary British Fiction and the Artistry of Space: Style, Landscape, Perception. London: Continuum, 2008, 1.

4 Ibid.

5 Julian Wolfreys, Writing London: Inventions of the City, vol. III. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, 43.

6 Henri Lefebvre, The Production of Space. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Limited, 1974, 93.

7 Jonathan Raban, Soft City. London: Pan Macmillan, 2008.

20 Maria Helena Lima, "'Pivoting the Centre': The Fiction of Andrea Levy," Write Black, Write British. From Postcolonial to Black British Literature. Kadija Sesay, ed., Hertford: Hansib Publications Limited, 2005, 60.

21 John Agnew, Place and Politics: The Geographical Mediation of State and Society. Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1987, 6.

22 Andrea Levy, Never Far From Nowhere. London: Headline Book Publishing, 2004, 39. Sara Upstone equates this lack of safety to a colonial bypass where the "home forms a microcosm of colonial tabulation of space. Acquisition of territory, and its association with violence, is replaced with the establishment of home, and–rather than violence–as association with the natural and timeless processes of settlement" (Sara Upstone, Spatial Politics in the Postcolonial Novel. Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2009, 117).

23 Ibid., 1.

24 Elsewhere, Levy presents a dichotomous repr

49 Ibid., 1.
50 Ibid., 70.
51 Ibid.
52 Ibid.
53 Ibid.
54 Ibid.
55 Ibid., 39.
56 Ibid., 41.
57 Rob Shields, Place of the Margin: Alternate Geographies of Modernity. London: Routledge, 1991, 32.
58 Levy, Every Light, 42.
59 Ibid.,184.
60 Ibid.
61 Ibid., 185.
62 Levy, Never Far From Nowhere, 6.
63 Ibid.
64 Ibid.
65 Ibid., 112.
66 Ibid., 77.
67 Ibid., 101.
68 Ibid., 220.
69 Levy, Every Light, 8.
70 Levy, Never Far from Nowhere, 237.
71 Ibid., 252
72 Ibid.
73 Ibid.
74 Ibid.
75 Ibid., 253.
76 Levy, Fruit of the Lemon, 53.
77 Edward Relph, Place and Placelessness. London: Pion Ltd., 1976, 36.
78 Atkinson et al., eds., Cultural Geography, 42.
79 Ibid., 3.
80 Kirsten Holst Peterson and Anna Rutherford, “Fossil and Psyche,” The Postcolonial Studies Reader. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, eds., London and New York: Routledge, 1995, 188.