

Postcolonial Urban Isolation: Clarke's Toronto as a Cold Continent in *The Question*

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Abstract: Postcolonial urban isolation is experienced by people in postcolonial cities and is characterized by marginalization and dislocation, and this is usually a consequence of historical, social and cultural turmoil. The city is not only a physical space, but also a cultural and political space in the context of postcolonialism, where the former colonial territories struggle against the traces of imperialism. As individuals with different cultural backgrounds relocate to these urban centers, they are often confronted by alienation, in the way they are socially positioned as well as in their efforts to be assimilated into the prevailing cultural discourses. Systemic inequalities, racism and the legacies of colonial systems add to this isolation which persists up until now. Within such surroundings, people might end up being torn between all identities, as they become confused with having to move in between the past experience of the colonial rule and the present life in an urban setting. The postcolonial city, thus, turns into a symbol of disrupted belongingness, where isolation is not only about a personal issue but it is also a shared state of affairs, which is caused by the complications of migration, displacement and uneven spread of power in the postcolonial societies.

The symbolism and the literal landscape of alienation, dislocation and postcolonial trauma are critically explored to depict the urban Canada and Toronto in particular in *The Question* by Austin Clarke (1999). The novel anticipates the problem of the invisibility of race, divided identity, as well as physical marginalisation of space and diasporic rootlessness. These features show the complex interrelationship between the geographic location of the city and the psychological interior of a main character who is a Caribbean immigrant and addresses the issue of social erasure. Rather than the multicultural belonging ideal, the account given by Clarke reveals us the ugly faces and exclusions that lurk beneath the much-billed Canadian diversity. The article asserts using the postcolonial and spatial theory that Toronto is not multicultural utopia but rather a world of colonial violence. The city and its very shape and tone, the chilled nature of the streets and the impersonalism of the institutions, the cultural unresponsiveness to the immigrants of the Black world, all become allegorically the landscapes of exile. Depending on the theoretical assumptions of Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, Rinaldo Walcott, and Katherine McKittrick, the analysis has shown how the city world seems to the protagonist of Clarke as a product of building and symbolical threat.

This paper examines how the author Austin Clarke depicts urban Canada and Toronto to be or symbolise alienation and postcolonial trauma in the question. The city of Toronto, which has been romanticised as a diversity paradise, is depicted in the novel by Clarke as a polarised continent; the black Caribbean migrants are challenged with cultural alienation, and institutional obliteration. This disrupted urban subject experience of the protagonist is revealed with the help of literary and spatial theory expressed on the medium of this paper with its further application to the theme of diasporic subjectivity.

Keywords: *Postcolonial city, Diasporic identity, Black Canadian literature, Racial alienation, Spatial displacement, Symbolic geography, Urban coldness, Black diaspora, Cultural dislocation, Canadian multiculturalism, Postcolonial trauma.*

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Introduction

Urban Alienation and Clarke's Vision of Toronto

Toronto as the so-called global mosaic is described by Clarke in another dimension as cold continent in which everything is reserved to warmth, memory, and human touch. The issue is that without certain spatial and emotional grounding, the identity of the protagonist becomes completely disintegrated. His urban journey becomes more like a search not only to a notion of homeliness but also to identity and control in a geography that rejects him. *The Question* is a stinging critique of the Canadian urban modernity and also presents Toronto as a wasteland, emotionally and spatially, to the diasporic Black subject.

Austin Clarke fiction frequently exposes the Toronto downtown as an unwelcoming destination of the Caribbean immigrants. With *The Question*, Clarke has developed an unattractive picture of the city that breaks the myth about Canada being a place of refuge. This mind and space alienation of the protagonist is a symptom of a more universalised trauma of the city in failing to enable Black diasporic identity. The novel was published later in his life and therefore the subject of urban exile is more pronounced in the novel since coldness is perceived as a literal, and even a symbolic aspect.

Clarke is conscious and ideologically purposeful in the setting that he selects. Toronto is the so-called multicultural capital of Canada driven by the so-called opportunities; nevertheless, it is portrayed as the land of struggle where racial fears and the marginalisation of institutions exist. Toronto is not a locus of integration as it is defined to the Caribbean immigrant lead character, but a locus of psyche erosion. Clarke prefers to undercut the discourse of multiculturalism celebration of Canada by giving us a protagonist whom we cannot see socially and disenfranchise.

Not only social, but also spatial invisibility. The protagonist is roving about the city as a ghost, alive and buried simultaneously. He is not recognised and accepted by the city he lives in, and his identity is laced with the denial. The readers can experience the overwhelming tension between material existence and symbolic non-existence beginning on the first pages. Toronto does not appear to act as a reflection to provide him with a space of perception, of giving him a cultural echo. This paradox of visibility and disappearance, of a space-occupying and the cast-out-of-meaning is what Clarke identifies as the core of his criticism of urban multiculturalism.

In this aspect, *The Question* does not represent a novel of alienation of an individual; it is a story map of the urban space which is racialised. Clarke puts his protagonist in a location that rejects membership and reinforces marginality. Thus, the novel makes critiques of not only what the Canadian nation-state is supposed to promise but even in what way it is possible to seek refuge in a city that recreates the psychic trauma of colonialism in new, urban ways. Clarke does not just use the setting accidentally. Being called the so-called multicultural capital of Canada, Toronto is not talked about as a place of the opportunities, but rather about the arena of racial fears and exclusionary structural models. The protagonist has no familiarity or assimilation with the city; his relations are estrangement and rejection. Starting with the first pages, the reader can sense the opposition between bodily presence and social absence, the protagonist wandering around Toronto without being recognized and heard. It is this strain that lies at the heart of the criticism of the urban multiculturalism in the novel.

Theoretical Framework: Postcolonial Geography and Black Urban Diaspora

Numerous postcolonial spatial theories and discourses of Black diaspora challenge the production and performance of power within space, identity, and the geography of cities. It is through this concept of imagined geographies as perceived by Edward Said that one is able to understand how colonial and postcolonial regimes of power ideologically create space, to create territories of inclusion and exclusion, familiarity and otherness. What Clarke terms Toronto, is not a free city, but a prejudiced territory, in which the history of the colonisation is re-created in the reality of the space organization and the order of race. The alienation of the main character with the city may be seen as the implication, which is experienced in being dislocated in the space of domination.

The displacement of the psychic world of the protagonist might be interpreted in reference to such a concept as unhomeliness elaborated by Homi Bhabha (1994). The main character is divided between the world of the past and the world of the present the colonial past of the Caribbean and the postcolonial present of Canada. This is the fragmented consciousness of the diasporic identity. He is not at home in Toronto, yet he is not able to go back to a past that has been characterised also by trauma and loss. This non-belongingness and belonging at the same time are

referred to by the term unhomeliness where identity is never central and never constant.

Rinaldo Walcott (1997) and his critique of Canadian multiculturalism place Canadian cultural policy politics in an indispensable contextualization of the work of Clarke. Walcott tries to present the argument that multiculturalism may be perceived as a shallow exercise of diversity, which masks the current inequalities of race. This criticism can be traced in the portrayal of urban alienation by Clarke when one observes the ways in which the Caribbean immigrants are not permitted to be part of the national narrative but just being present. The city has their bodies, but it is their voices that are weakened in the civic conversation of the city.

The spaces that are not designed to accommodate the Black embodiment are critically mapped in *Demonic Grounds* by Katherine McKittrick (2006) to understand the ground that Black embodiment inhabits. Black subjects do not occupy space, according to McKittrick they reproduce and transform it, resist its parameters and reveal the ideological foundation of space. Clarke also employs his protagonist to disrupt the story of coherence and development within the city. Even his being out of place, his inability to integrate, takes on the air of criticism, a revelation of the hidden rules of who belongs and who does not.

The Black Atlantic (1993) is the transnational perspective based on the idea of the Caribbean-Canadian subject as the one related to the overall history of the diaspora which is affected by the slavery, displacement, and migration. This history is the baggage which Clarke has with him, and which spurts into his experience with Toronto. In his estranged relation to urban space all converge in the Middle Passage trauma, the disjuncture of colonialism and the issue of postcolonial identity. At the same time, the main character is not only a migrant, but a character of historical continuity whose appearance disturbs the whitened image of the Canadian urban modernity.

Taken altogether, these theoretical practices demonstrate the interaction between space, memory, and identity in Clarke novel to construct an image of alienation within the diaspora. The city itself is a palimpsest of the colonial history and the journey of the protagonist, exploring the city, is a personal and political survival and discovery. This is the criticism of Canadian multiculturalism by Rinaldo Walcott (1997). He says that multicultural policies are usually adopted as shrouds that conceal racial inequalities that dominate. This civic thinking is adhered to in the novel by Clarke, which depicts the structural nonrewarded citizenship of Black Caribbean immigrants. Katherine McKittrick, in her book, *Demonic Grounds* (2006) provides further details on how space is racialised and the lifestyle of Black bodies residing in a non-Black space. In *The Black Atlantic* by Paul Gilroy (1993), the Caribbean-Canadian subject is put into a transatlantic history of displacement, slavery and resistance that continue to haunt the characters of Clarke.

Spatial Displacement in The Question

The heroine is homeless, lost, and helpless as she rides across Toronto. Clarke provides the physical movement with a lot of narrative space: walking by themselves, standing at crossroads, occupying the cafe with nothing to do. These are not recreation movements but recreation symbols. The city is not accommodating of the protagonist; it is watching, peeping and chasing. His experience is senseless, and thus it introduces the emotional and

physical inhibitions which make him a stranger behind the city walls.

The houses in the novel are never the apartments, but the houses of the last resort. They are impolite, unsteady and unemotional. The sheer repetition of the movement of the main character is the sign of his internal fracture and inability to establish his roots in a stable set-up. Silence, shadows and isolation describe every apartment, meaning that the personal space does not offer any protection. The absence of family, community and continuity in these living spaces is a more severe provocative of a psychological and cultural homelessness. Public transport, and most importantly, the TTC (Toronto Transit Commission) turns out to be the image of impermanence. The loss that is inside of him is manifested in the fact that the main character rides buses and subways without any sense of direction. The reason is inertia and he is motivated by inertia. And on a single occasion he notes: The city had turned its back on me every morning, in that cold stillness of glacier (Clarke, *The Question* 51). This scene puts the city in its cold and machine-like impersonal and unkind form without mercy and compassion. This cold silence of city system becomes an image of institutional disregard of the life of Black immigrants.

Clarke is full of paranoia, surveillance, and menace in his portrayal of space. Normal locations, parks, streets, staircases and so on are transformed to unnatural and unsafe ones. It is due to this that the main character in anticipation of racial profiling and social stigmatisation seeks this at every turn, which demonstrates just how far the public space in Toronto goes in becoming the theatre of interrogation of the Black bodies. Even the silence does not appear to be free of violence. Such paranoia in space is not paranoid delusion but the result of structural racism in urban space and the police force, and in day-to-day experiences. Sense of space instability in the main character is also intertwined with a ghostly sense of time. The duration of the novel is suspended, circular and fragmented. Nights and days melted, seasons sank on each other, and the calendar is forgotten. He does not belong to the urban time. This dislocation of space and time order supports his dislocation of place and self as it is possible to say that displacement is not simply physical but existential.

Clarke is not portraying Toronto as a strollable, mixed-up city, however, as a violent and disintegrated landscape. The movements of the main character are not followed but repeated ostracism. His being out of place in space is an allegory of the more general diasporic condition (a life which is not that of arrival or acculturation, but one of ceaseless negotiation of nonbelonging and alterity).

Coldness as Metaphor: Weather, Emotion, and Belonging

The ubiquitous Canadian cold, which is more than a weathering context in *The Question*, is the main metaphor of a cold, deserted sentiment, of cultural marginalisation, and the loss of the voice of the diaspora. It is not just that Clarke is heaping the history of the winter upon itself, but that he is giving it an allegorical vigour, is solitude, is spiritual ruin of the protagonist. Snowstorms, ice winds, and snowy sidewalks do not only affect the body but also indicate the mood of indifference which envelops the city landscape. More than once, Clarke discusses the tightening of the body of the protagonist in relation to the elements, as a parallel to his conflict with the institutional marginalisation. Warming up to the cold is a survival routine in a society which is not very warm or

welcoming. One of the most exciting sentences that the main character writes is as follows:

I grew numb, yet it was the silence that gave answers to all the questions I was afraid to ask myself (63).

The silence that is being experienced here is not only the inter-personal but also the institutional, a silencing of the voices of diasporic in a location that openly declares multicultural inclusivity but imposes cultural evasiveness. Coldness is also exhibited in the loss of affect in the novel. Not that the main character is cold, but rather anaesthetised. His indifference permeates his relationships, memories and even dreams which are not full of intimacy and meaning. Clarke compares the physical chill of Toronto with a recollection of warmth in the Caribbean, but these recollections do not warm her up, quite on the contrary, they remind her better about the loss she has suffered. By so doing, in this regard, winter is a cultural exile and not a disadvantage of climatic nature.

Symbolic Geography: Homes, Streets, and Liminality

The Question is superimposed with metaphor and meaning, forming ambiguous spaces of the metropolis which turn uncanny, transitional ones making people feel fear, unstable, and without roots. Clarke rearranges the psychic fragmentation of the character by rearranging the geography of Toronto. Even apartments are a place of paranoia, of disintegration, of temporary shelters in which the protagonist does not feel safe, but alienated and scared. The fact that dark corridors, doors which cannot be opened, and falling floors are mentioned several times only lets stress the instability of the domestic space.

The open spaces are even redefined in menacing terms. Intersections suggest the lack of development or links, but rather the stalemate of decision. In the Clarke tale, parks, in the majority of literary traditions, represent places of release and contemplation, whereas in this case they are linked to colonial monitoring and revelation. There is, nevertheless, never a lack of the sense of mistrust and discomfort concerning the dealings of the main character with these spaces, as though these are spaces he is invading, which can ever be his. This is particularly reverberated by the concept of the third space advanced by Bhabha. The protagonist is torn between cultures, languages and the past. He fails to fuse into the reality of the Canada of the present and the Caribbean past. Such ambiguous cultural status is spatialized:

His world is neither home nor exile, but a turbulent transitional place. At one point of extreme hopelessness. Even my dreams were no longer mine, they were floating, the streetcars, with no meaning, without point, lonely (79).

Place and belonging are not associated with dreams and his identity. Thus, the symbolic geography of the novel is linked not just to a loss of direction in the world but also a lack of commitment in oneself. These spaces which Clarke writes of are the ones that lead and contains the sense of self of the protagonist; it disintegrates it. His walk through Toronto turns out to be a long-term stroll of the lostness of the diaspora and the impossibility to find a permanent place in a hostile modern urbanity.

Conclusion

Clarke does not only make Toronto a setting but also an agent of alienation of the main character. It becomes what one may refer to as a cold continent, a cold, a remote space in which history,

memory and identity have been frozen under the strata of institutional non-consideration and racial apathy. It is the very institutions that form the urban modernity: housing, transportation, city space, city talk, etc., which are discriminatory mechanisms and which render the Black Immigrant socially invisible and emotionally detached. *The Question* dismantles the Canadian myth on multiculturalism by revealing the psychological and spatial processes in which the city environment is recreating the colonial violence in other, much more insidious ways. Clarke brings out the fact that even though a postcolonial future promises, the outcomes of the racial othering still exist in the shape of geographic alienation, affective numbness and symbolic exile. Instead of the acculturation or development, the protagonist is brought into the realm of loss since each step of the journey is described as the crossing of a street or a door into a new world which further alienates the protagonist.

The topography of pain, with his metaphoric and elaborate description of Toronto, Clarke portrays Toronto as the place where the diasporic self alone is not displaced but where the hope of community and recognition in the new land have also been lost. The Toronto city through the image depicted in *The Question* is a city that gives more than it takes. It is a place that the immigrant

will never be, but standing outside and observing through the glass full of frost and anticipating the warmth that will never come.

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