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# Can past cultural hybridity be revived? Old Delhi in Anita Desai's fiction

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## Título / Titre / Titolo

¿Se puede revivir la hibridación cultural del pasado? La antigua Delhi en la ficción de Anita Desai

L'hybridité culturelle passée peut-elle être ravivée? L'ancienne Delhi dans la fiction d'Anita Desai

L'ibridità culturale del passato può essere rianimata? La vecchia Delhi nella finzione di Anita Desai

## Abstract / Resumen / Résumé / Riassunto

The paper explores the dynamic relationship between spatiality and social processes in the city, the “lived spaces” negotiated by writers/characters/readers. It focuses on Shahjahanabad/Old Delhi and its grandiose past of rich history, linguistic and poetic traditions with reference to Anita Desai's novels *Clear Light of Day* and *In Custody*, and unravels connections at the intersection of the real and the fictional city. The Mughal city was famed not just for its architectural magnificence but its composite culture and its art connoisseurs. Historical forces destroyed the city physically, dismantled its cultural life and in the process strangled its soul. The two novels repeatedly invoke nostalgia for past grandeur and harmony, and the paper suggests the need to move beyond mourning for lost traditions in the text and outside by reader-citizens, and raises possibilities of cultural hybridity in the transformed spatialities.

Este artículo explora la relación dinámica entre espacialidad y procesos sociales en la ciudad, los “espacios vividos” negociados por escritores / personajes / lectores. Se centra en Shahjahanabad / Old Delhi y su grandioso pasado de rica historia, tradiciones lingüísticas y poéticas con referencia a las novelas de Anita Desai *Clear Light of Day* e *In Custody*, y desentraña las conexiones en la intersección de la ciudad real y la ficticia. La ciudad de Mughal era famosa no sólo por su magnificencia arquitectónica sino también por su cultura compuesta y sus conocedores del arte. Las fuerzas históricas destruyeron la ciudad físicamente, desmantelaron su vida cultural y en el proceso estrangularon su alma. Las dos novelas invocan reiteradamente la nostalgia por la grandiosidad y la armonía pasadas, y el documento sugiere la necesidad de ir más allá del luto por las tradiciones perdidas en el texto y fuera de los lectores-ciudadanos, y plantea posibilidades de hibridación cultural en las espacialidades transformadas.

L'article explore la relation dynamique entre la spatialité et les processus sociaux dans la ville, les «espaces vécus» négociés par les écrivains / per-

sonnages / lecteurs. Il se concentre sur Shahjahanabad / Old Delhi et son passé grandiose d'histoire riche, traditions linguistiques et poétiques en référence aux romans d'Anita Desai *Clear Light of Day* et *In Custody*, et dévoile les connexions à l'intersection de la ville réelle et la ville fictive. La ville de Mughal était célèbre non seulement par sa magnificence architecturale mais aussi par sa culture composite et ses connoisseurs d'art. Les forces historiques ont détruit physiquement la ville, démantelé sa vie culturelle et étranglé son âme. Les deux romans invoquent à plusieurs reprises la nostalgie de la grandeur et de l'harmonie passées, et l'article suggère qu'il est nécessaire de dépasser le deuil des traditions perdues dans le texte et à l'extérieur par les lecteurs-citoyens, soulignant les possibilités d'hybridité culturelle dans les spatialités transformées.

Questo articolo esplora la relazione dinamica tra spazialità e processi sociali nella città, gli “spazi vissuti” negoziati da scrittori/personaggi/lettori. Si concentra su Shahjahanabad/Old Delhi e il suo passato grandioso di ricche tradizioni storiche, linguistiche e poetiche con riferimento ai romanzi di Anita Desai, *Clear Light of Day* e *In Custody*, e svela i collegamenti tra la città reale e quella fittizia. La città di Mughal era famosa non solo per la sua magnificenza architettonica, ma anche per la sua cultura composta e per i suoi intenditori d'arte. Le forze storiche hanno distrutto fisicamente la città, smantellato la sua vita culturale e, nel processo, ne hanno strangolato l'anima. I due romanzi invocano ripetutamente la nostalgia per la grandezza e l'armonia del passato, e l'articolo suggerisce la necessità di andare oltre il lutto per le tradizioni perdute nel testo e fuori da esso, per i cittadini-lettori; fa riferimento, inoltre, alla possibilità dell'ibridismo culturale nelle spazialità trasformate.

## Keywords / Palabras clave / Mots-clé / Parole chiave

Anita Desai, *Clear Light of Day*, *In Custody*, spatiality, social processes, cultural hybridity.

Anita Desai, *Clear Light of Day*, *In Custody*, espacialidad, procesos sociales, hibridación cultural.

Anita Desai, *Clear Light of Day*, *In Custody*, spatialité, processus sociaux, hybridité culturelle

Anita Desai, *Clear Light of Day*, *In Custody*, spazialità, processi sociali, ibridismo culturale.

There are indelible and inextricable links between spatial forms (in the city) and social processes; spatiality and social relations are played out in a dynamic and dialectical manner in the city, where neither the city nor the social actors/characters/readers moving through them are static objects of study and their intrinsic changes, and those with relation to each other make the study interesting and complex. Spatial theorists from Foucault to Lefebvre to Soja have placed experiences in “lived space” as central to their studies, and their works help unravel connections at the intersection of the real and fictional city. Most writers on Delhi, including Nayantara Sahgal, Khushwant Singh, Anita Desai and Manju Kapur, make no attempt to fictionalize the familiar streets and landmarks of the city; the reader is instead invited to identify the known markers, to negotiate the city spaces along with the characters at the crossing of actual and imagined spaces. This paper attempts to explore spatialities of (Old) Delhi vis à vis its grandiose past of rich history, linguistic and poetic traditions with special reference to Desai’s novels *Clear Light of Day* and *In Custody*.

The area of Delhi that is now referred to as Old Delhi, is a walled city, founded as Shahjahanabad by the Mughal ruler Shah Jahan in the seventeenth century. The imposing Red Fort on the banks of the River Yamuna, the grand mosques, well laid-out gardens, elegant mansions and the beauty of Chandni Chowk spoke volumes about the architectural magnificence under the Mughal rule. In fact it is arguably considered the golden period in Delhi history when literature and culture flourished under royal patronage, but more importantly where art connoisseurs were not limited to the elite spaces of the court, and Persian and Urdu poetry was appreciated by the common man on the streets. Both the king and the beggar could recite couplets of the poets of the age like Zauq and Ghalib:

The culture of Delhi had acquired a certain authenticity. Over a period of time, varying elements had synthesized to produce a composite life-style for its inhabitants-not laboured, not grafted-but effortlessly woven into the city’s own personality. Its socio-cultural ethos, distinctive enough to give even the witticisms of the city an unmistakable Delhi flavour, was what

prompted Zauq to say: ‘*Kaun jaye par ab Dilli ki galiyan chod kar*’ (‘Who then can leave the streets of Delhi’) (Varma: 41).

Delhi, preceding the revolt of 1857, is associated with a quintessential composite culture and the city spaces pulsated with arts but they became deserted in the face of brutal British retaliation to the revolt.

The city was forced to relinquish its privileged and prestigious position both as a political capital (with the shifting of capital to Calcutta) and as a literary-cultural centre. The announcement of shifting back of capital at the Coronation Durbar of 1911 and the building of a new city for it did not turn out to be a reason to cheer as the British capital, New Delhi was aimed as an administrative capital to spatially showcase the grandeur of the British empire, and to physically and symbolically overshadow the earlier city and its people. Built in the Grand Manner, it was meant to display power, “as an expansive pattern of sweeping vistas, its relation to topography and prior urban arrangements is arbitrary, its effects often grandiloquent” (Kostof: 240). The initial plan to provide a linkage between Shahjahanabad and British Delhi was abandoned due to escalating costs, and the resplendent city where on the walls of Diwan-i-Khas (Hall of Private Audience) of Red Fort is inscribed the famous verse of Amir Khusrau, “*Gar firdaus bar ruhe zameen ast/ hameen asto, hameen asto, hameen asto*” (“If there be a paradise on the face of the earth, it is this, it is this, it is this”) was reduced to being called Old Delhi. The vertical imposition and horizontal expanses of the new city were awe-inspiring and impressive, but not inviting to forge relations between the city and its inhabitants; the white imperialists who occupied the city’s power centres sought ownership of spaces. The severing of relationship of the city with people continued with independence and partition in 1947 that led to major demographical shifts with large scale migration across the border. Old Delhi has faced apathy not just at the hands of the imperial rule but also from urban planners and policy makers after independence. The *havelis* (mansions) and streets that echoed the finest verses

and were the seat of Delhi *tehzeeb* (refinement) lie in dilapidated state with dangling mass of electric wires threatening to set afire the last spaces that recall the city's composite culture.

The erstwhile splendid Shahjahanbad has witnessed ruthless dispossession of people, dismantling of cultural life and thus strangling of its very soul. In its present avatar it is a thriving wholesale market of goods but a dismal residential place. Once a muse to poets, and inspiration behind Ghalib's couplet, "I asked my soul: What is Delhi?/ She replied: The world is the body and Delhi its life", the city can only harp on its past grandeur, reminding one of the elegiac note in Ahmed Ali's *Twilight in Delhi*. People's struggles to establish connection with the city as they grapple with transformed spatialities and demographics is the focus of the two Desai novels under discussion here, and the intersecting matrix of identity-language-space is explored through Old Delhi spaces that evoke a grand past as they languish in present neglect.

### **Partition(ed) land and fragmented family(ies) in *Clear Light of Day***

The narrative of Desai's *Clear Light of Day* (1980) juxtaposes the contemporary events of the 1960s against the 1940s of partition that shook the order of the city with reference to three families of Old Delhi: Ali, Das and Misra. Of the co-joined events of independence and partition in Indian history, the latter is the greater lived and experiential reality among the people of Delhi; in the novel, it transforms spaces and relationships in the house, the neighbourhood and the city at large. The effects are most acutely felt in the Das household where the fractured familial relationships mirror those of the nation. The visit of younger sister Tara, along with her diplomat husband Bakul, is the prism through which notions of time and spatial memory are raised, and allows for reflections on relationship with siblings Bim, Baba and Raja, and also on Old Delhi spaces.

The novel offers a glimpse of the heterogeneity and plurality of the Old Delhi society and class structure that is often ignored in discussing its squalor and decadence. The Dases, the elite Bengali family, are the "mimic men", aping the white colonizers in their dress, behaviour and conventions of gentility; the daily club visits create a superficially active and mobile life ignoring the illness and turbulence that pervades the house and city alike. In contrast the bourgeois Misras make no attempt to "keep up appearances" and their household space is one of unscheduled visits, unorganized meals and haphazard plans. The Alis are the genteel, propertied Muslim class, and among the few who could plan their migration in the wake of the impending Partition, and shift to Hyderabad. The Old Delhi families of the novel had been neighbours "for as long as they could remember (theirs was not a neighbourhood from which people moved – they were born and married and even died in the same houses, no one ever gave one up)" (Desai 1980: 136); the close knit, almost incestuous relationships of Old Delhi are akin to rural community life.

The areas of Old/New Delhi though located within the same city are juxtaposed almost as cities of South/North or rural/urban landscape. Or they could be seen as Tonnies' distinction between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*, where *Gemeinschaft* (usually translated as "community") and *Gesellschaft* ("society" or "association") correlate largely with the difference between "traditional" and "modern"; and these differences are both temporal and spatial, with the latter corresponding to urban forms of sociality marked by weakening bonds of family, disappearance of the neighbourhood and cultural forms of clan. The traditional Old Delhi is associated with stagnation, decay and death, Bim says, "Old Delhi does not change. It only decays. My students tell me it is a great cemetery, every house a tomb. Nothing but sleeping graves. Now *New Delhi*, they say is different. That is where things happen." (Desai 1980: 5) The shift in administrative power centres makes Old Delhi life move at snail pace in a slow paced loop, largely unconcerned with fast paced action of New Delhi. Change and movement belong to either the past of Old Delhi

spaces or the present of New Delhi spaces, while the present of Old Delhi is represented as unmoving and static, where Godot-like “nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes”.

The sense of lost grandeur hangs heavy, and can only be recalled through tales of a glorious past, “And here, here nothing happens at all. Whatever happened, happened long ago—in the time of the Tughlaqs, the Khiljis, the Sultanate, the Moghuls— that lot” (ibid: 5). Even if one were to recall the more immediate past, Hyder Ali’s abandoned house narrates a tale of neglect; the walls that once resounded with poetry and political discussions stare emptily, and the mirror reflects desolation and nothingness, it stares back blankly at the place which housed a rich library and held *mushairas* (poetic symposiums) but was abandoned at partition. The turbulent memories of 1947 subtly refer to various partitions: home/family, neighbourhood, city’s culture and language, and the nation. Kamila Shamsie opinions that the novel handles the theme of partition in a restrained manner “in its sidelong view; glancing allusions and attention to tiny details which echo and reverberate, rather than directness” (Qtd.in Bruschi: 158).

Bim witnesses the fractured and burning city on her bus ride back from Davico’s restaurant in Connaught Place:

the massed jungle of rag-and-tin huts that had grown beneath them, housing the millions of refugees who were struggling in across the new border. Here there was no light except for the dull glow of small cooking fires, blotted out by smoke and dust and twilight. They swarmed and crawled with a kind of subterranean life that made Bim feel that the city would never recover from this horror, that it would be changed irremediably, that it was already changed, no longer the city she had been born in. (Desai 1980: 86)

The decrepit spaces occupied by the refugees contrast sharply with the opulence of the arched doorways, red velvet curtains and waiters serving meringues and ice cream at Davicos. “From a centre of Indo-Islamic culture, Delhi became a city of refugees” (Tan and Kuldaisy: 199), and the violently uprooted millions battled

material and emotional losses while carrying mindscapes of the city left behind. Can the horrors of partition as represented in the tangible form of refugee camps be seen as Foucauldian heterotopias? Heterotopia is a site that undoes the usual order of space and the refugee camps are possibly cracks in the edifice of official power, disrupting and under-cutting the rhetoric of political celebration from British imperialism by emphasizing violence and homelessness in the independent nation state. The repeated references to the summer of 1947 in the novel underline the importance of revisiting the roots of fissure through memory and imagination and to attempt a resolution at least at the level of the landscape, of the house and neighbourhood.

The attempted reconciliation of past and present throws up repeatedly the clichéd binary and hierarchical notions of New Delhi/Old Delhi, movement/stasis, speech/silence, West/East, rationality/irrationality and coherence/chaos where the former set of values are posited as superior. The trope of movement, both horizontally in space and time, and vertically up a social ladder is suggestive of progress, though the novel simultaneously questions these simplistic and linear ideas. Bakul and Baba are placed at opposite ends of the mobility spectrum; Bakul, a diplomat, is a man on the move, he is either travelling or discussing his travels or planning to travel. On the other hand autistic Baba has been playing the same records on his HMV gramophone for decades, caught in a time warp in terms of choice of music and the machine used to play it. As opposed to the globetrotters Bakul and Tara, stasis is underlined strongly in the lives of Baba and Bim, who seem to be caught in a time bubble while the world outside spins into transformations.

In the discussion about non/transforming spaces, the space of the garden in the house is an interesting one and evokes myriad associations: as an edenic place, a place of innocence and simplicity, a metaphor of undivided nation, a space of shared idyllic past and a desire to recreate the harmony of the paradisiac world of siblings before they grew apart emotionally. Ranu Uniyal discusses its multiple dimensions:

The garden is not fully inside, unlike the terraced rooms, nor is it open for public viewing. It has thorns and briars, it has long hedges and is wild in its outgrowth. It opens and conceals, it explores and withdraws. If it had invoked a landscape of desire in Maya, in Bim, the garden performs a fully mediatory function between the outside world and the house with its closed doors and overgrown shrubs. It has its own *modus operandi*... The garden becomes a principle of mediation. It does not entrap her [Bim] nor does it leave her vulnerable at the hands of the city. (Uniyal: 215)

The garden's location inside the house and yet exposed to the gaze from outside, conflates the public and private, and allows for other mediations questioning the ideas of history and memory. It recalls not just the familial history but the various eons of Delhi spaces: Krishna playing with gopis on Yamuna, the first woman queen of Delhi, Razia Sultan, Mughal emperor Aurangzeb and the partition of the country, and questions linear notions of history in space. Meanings are not simply contained in physical forms of space, but as Benjamin reiterates they are bound up in individual and cultural memory and filtered through experience. The sedimentary history of places represent layers of memory, "the invisible identities of the visible" (De Certeau: 108) that are unfolded through the landscape of the garden, house and city.

The (grandiose) past is not severed from the (decadent) present, and the creative process of memory, what Benjamin calls the "mysterious work of remembrance-which is really the capacity for endless interpolations into what has been" (Benjamin: 16), is a way of forming linkages and continuation between people and space. A reconciliatory attempt is made through the leitmotif of poetry and music that strings together spaces and people, a musical evening at the Misras, reminiscent of Old Delhi *mushairas* (poetic symposiums), "bound them all together in a pattern, a picture as perfectly composed as a Moghul miniature of a garden scene by night" (Desai 1980: 180). The star lit sky extends its magic over the chaotic preparations, the pasts of Mughal and English are evoked through the poetry of Iqbal and Eliot, the commotion is part of the ethos, the chaos

slowly giving way to harmony. The binaries in this case are not seen in conflict but are part of the tapestry of the place, interlinking individuals, landscape and music.

Images of brokenness and fragmentation give way to a search for wholeness and harmony; the shared history of siblings draws sustenance from the same soil of past and the prism of memory is used to reflect and refract on past fragmentations, hinting at possible unfoldings and new experiences beyond the partition(s). *In Custody*, based again in Old Delhi explores some of these concerns further vis à vis the partition of language and the dichotomy of reality/imagination.

### **Lost language and poetic traditions in Desai's *In Custody***

*In Custody* (2008) is the story of Deven, Hindi lecturer in Mirpore, and his experience of meeting the great Urdu poet Nur and being his literary custodian. It is a narrative about the loss of Urdu language due to separations and partitions of land, "Urdu – the language of the court in the days of royalty – now languishes in the back lanes and gutters of the city. No place for it to live in the style to which it is accustomed, no emperors and *nawabs* to act as its patrons" (Desai 2008: 15). The novel depicts the dichotomous relationship between reality and imagination through the decline of Urdu language and literature in post-independent Delhi/India. Language is potentially a potent binding connect between people, and people and place; and here that link is severed as Urdu, language of the Mughal court suffers in the face of lack of readers and government support, lying in exile in the very spaces where it flourished, making its speakers alienated in that landscape. The relation between people and spaces is further explored through binaries of reality/imagination, life/art, purity/hybridity played out in the cities of Mirpore/Delhi.

Mirpore, unlike the big cousin Delhi proud of its antiquity, is unselfconscious about its history. Its nondescript and unremarkable architecture and landscape

neither evoke glorious history nor do they symbolise romance or patriotism. Its historical and cultural aridity is repeatedly underlined, its drab functional restaurant near the bus stand contrasts sharply with the gourmet foodscapes of Delhi, almost akin to differences between prosaic Hindi and poetic Urdu. Deven regards the mundane Mirpore as a trap where he is forced to teach Hindi to sustain his family while Delhi symbolises the world of imagination and poetry. Finding himself economically disempowered by Urdu, he can only pursue it as a “hobby”, and feels that meeting and interviewing Nur in Delhi would be his opportunity of moving from the fringes of Urdu world to its pulsating centre. The politics and power of languages is pointed by his colleague, Jayadev, “We are in the wrong department. We took the wrong subject. We should have taken physics, chemistry, micro-biology, computer technology-something scientific, something American. Then we would have had a future” (Desai 2008: 204). The disciplines that he lists are associated with greater relevance and job opportunities in the modern world, and equally importantly with English as their medium of instruction/research they score over Hindi and Urdu in providing mobility.

The leap from Mirpore to its alter ego Delhi overpowers Deven’s senses, the chaotic scale of the big city appears to him as a Kafkaesque labyrinth: “If it had not been for the colour and the noise, Chandni Chowk might have been a bazaar encountered in a nightmare; it was so like a maze from which he could find no exit” (Desai 2008: 31). The spectacle of the city that Park describes as “stimulus of city life” (40) can either appear peculiarly attractive to the young or create a blasé effect to the sensory overkill. Deven is overwhelmed by the explosion of the sensory, and instead of joy in what Barthes calls the “untamed erotic potential of the city” (Barthes: 170) as unfolded in the balcony event that follows, he struggles to reconcile the worlds of art and commerce, of Nur being lodged in the ordinariness of the material world.

Nur’s decline is symbolic of the slide in prestige of Urdu at various levels that are interrelated: as language of the common man on the streets, as choice for literary engagement, lack of encouragement from the literary

boards, the decrepit plight of literary figures and the dismal publications in the language. While the decline of Urdu from its zenith during Mughal rule to its present state can be traced back to the imperial rule of the British, the novel focuses on the privileging of Hindi over Urdu after independence. The Indian history of colonial rule and subsequent independence/partition of land and languages hint at a triumvirate language play between Hindu, Urdu and English. Aijaz Ahmad describes three aspects in the breakup and redistribution of the Urdu writing community after partition. First was the migration and resettlement of Muslims across the newly-drawn borders; second was the increased communalization of Urdu as a Muslim language, its implementation as a national language in Pakistan, and finally the Indian government’s abandonment of Hindustani in favour of Hindi as the official language. Ahmad views the loss of Hindustani as a recognized lingua franca as a major event since it had served as a “living link between Urdu and Hindi which now became more and more distant from each other, especially in their written forms” (Ahmad: 201-2) and strengthened the perception of Urdu as a Muslim language. Desai attempts to make an intervention in the Hindi-Urdu debate interestingly by writing the novel in English and imitating Persian imagery and metaphor in composing couplets. Interestingly the adaptation of the novel for a film by Ismail Merchant complicated the situation further, the couplets written in English were translated into Urdu and Desai says, “So, in my other life, I became an Urdu poet, a language which I do not write at all” (Interview with Guignery and Alexis). The triumvirate language play and the change in genre from literary fiction to popular medium of film (which incorporated verses and ghazals of Faiz) resists easy and simplistic notions of power hierarchy of languages and genres.

Deven’s romantic perception of Urdu poetry and artists is eroded when the ailing Nur pessimistically asks:

How can there be Urdu poetry when there is no Urdu language left? It is dead, finished. The defeat of the Moghuls by the British threw a noose over its head, and the defeat of the British

by the Hindi-wallahs tightened it. So now you see its corpse lying here, waiting to be buried (Desai 2008: 24)

The scene recalls Bim's description of Old Delhi as a cemetery in *Clear Light of Day* above, and underlines the demise of language in decadent landscapes. Deven, even as he teaches Hindi for corporal survival, desperately clings onto the language hierarchies in his mind that are a reversal of the dominant linguistic power play. His subterranean Urdu self seeks recognition or encouragement from Murad, editor of the Urdu magazine *Awaaz*, the commercial equivalent of the royal patronage that poets enjoyed during Mughal rule. Yaqin opines that Deven, Murad and Nur are caught in a nostalgic remembering of Urdu, and their "nostalgia is rooted in the cultural memory of a premodern past that rejects the values of an evolving modern present" (Yaqin: 139). They find it difficult to accept the paradigmatic shift that has taken place in language usage and places of performance, of the spaces of *mushairas* (poetic symposiums) making way for film songs played in the bazaar.

There are brief interludes of poetic brilliance in this twilight world of Urdu literary scene, of Nur's poetic career and of Chandni Chowk as a place, all of them past their prime. These oasis-like scenes are played out on the terrace, a liminal space in the structure of the house. The peripheral space of the balcony links the private space of the house with the public one of the streets. The soundscapes and lightscapes of the bazaar encroach on the world of art through traffic noise, music from cinema halls, greasy food and excessive drinking. Deven's notion of placing art imaginatively and spatially in ivory towers of beauty and grace is shaken as the material world constantly impinges on the artistic one, permeating through thoughts, speech, sights, sounds and people, questioning the dichotomies of worlds of reality and imagination. "The rooftop did not really raise one above the din of the streets; it was as if they were inside a balloon, floating above but remaining enclosed" (Desai 2008: 46-47). This world tries to sustain itself by drawing from the world below,

a floundering effort of hanging on to art is made by Nur by feeding and cultivating the company of "lafangas [loafers] of the bazaar world –shopkeepers, clerks, bookies and unemployed parasites" (ibid: 50) whose concern is with freebies rather than his verses. The vomiting Nur is the symbol of nadir, giving a physical form to depreciation, breaking the mirage of grandeur that had guided Deven only to dissolve into a nightmare.

Like Nur, Siddiqui is given to recollection of an age, time and space when Urdu enjoyed glory, and these two representatives of the Urdu culture also symbolise its decadence and decline. Siddiqui in his old dilapidated villa with no electricity, collapsed roof and non-functional kitchen, attempts to maintain an impression of splendour and regal hospitality as he sits in white muslin kurta with a pipe, offering rum and kebabs to Deven in the midst of ruins, "as if all were still in order, still functioning in another opulent age" (ibid: 146). Yaqin argues that the description "reinforces the idea that Siddiqui's class can no longer be the custodians of Urdu as they have little power to make themselves heard at the national level. The official situation and status of their language literally makes them outsiders in their own home" (Yaqin: 135). Like Deven, Siddiqui holds onto a nostalgic image of Delhi that houses the poetic Urdu, but finds it difficult to accept the present reality where the city struggles to uphold its linguistic and literary traditions.

It is significant that Urdu is perceived as endangered in the spaces of Delhi by men, and even in the midst of crisis there is a resistance to shift away from traditional and singular notions of language. This comes across strongly in two cases: the resistance to admit women's voices in the male sphere of Urdu poetry and the reluctance to using tools of modernity (the tape recorder). Nur blames Imtiaz Begum for having overtaken the spaces of his house, cleverly manipulating across the spaces of disrepute of kotha (brothel) in bazaar to a respectable *mehfil* (gathering), snatching his jewels, verses and audience in the process. Deven is critical of her coquetry and recitation of imitated verses, and

even ignores her manuscript, not acknowledging an alternative vision and space for female poetry. Desai consciously conceived the novel as a masculine world of Urdu poetry, but “I found all these women whom I had locked out were screaming and thumping on the door and demanding to come in” (Gee: 9). Arasteh and Pirnajmuddin argue that Imtiaz uses the master’s tool, the male dominated language of Urdu poetry to make sure that her voice is heard. In simultaneously resisting oppression and exploring her unique subjectivity, Imtiaz “‘writes back’ to the oppressive forces of her community; she becomes a ‘mimic woman’, an altered female subject and a figure capable of uttering resistance” (Arasteh and Pirnajmuddin: 62). The hegemonic patriarchal-linguistic notion is reluctant to make space for variants of Urdu, be it through linguistic varieties or feminine voices.

A similar resistance is witnessed in the suggestion to record Nur’s verses for future generations, Siddiqui ridicules the idea and Nur feels it would reduce him to the level of singing poets of cinema, “Record -like in the cinema? For songs? I am not one of those singing poets, you know, some performer at weddings and festivals-” (Desai 2008: 121). The run-down brothel, the place for recording, soon becomes the replica of Nur’s terrace, the outside world of commerce makes frequent and disturbing entries into that of poetry, with mere flashes of poetic beauty heard in the midst of ugly bawdiness. Three weeks of recordings and extraneous material are reduced to merely one tape of “a bizarre pastiche” (ibid: 198), shattering Deven’s notion of playing a key role in preserving for posterity the voice of a great Urdu poet. He is forced to relinquish myths, and to accept sordid realities as part of art, rather than its ugly other. He needs to confront anew the binaries between art/life, reality/imagination, purity/hybridity, public/private spaces and masculine/feminine spaces and to acknowledge that they are fuzzy and allow for porous migrations, and these are best witnessed in liminal spaces like the terrace alluding to uneasy connections between spaces, languages and identities, and making the case for diversity and hybridity.

## Conclusion

It is important to remind and reiterate that the spaces of Old Delhi that have been discussed above with reference to Desai’s novels are lived or social spaces. The spatiality is located at the intersection of the fictional and real city, or in Wirth-Nescher’s words “novelists, readers, and characters are all engaged in verbal cartography, plotting cities through language”(4). The city of architects and urban planners is also the city of imagination of the writers, and at the same time that of the readers; in the triad of perceived, conceived and lived spatiality, Lefebvre’s “representational space” is the linking argument.

How does one as reader-citizen of Delhi react to the nostalgic tone in Desai’s novels that evoke a glorious past that characters struggle hard to reconcile with the present? Historical forces dealt a deadly blow to the city’s core, physically and psychologically, unfortunately the inner city area has not witnessed creative-cultural resurgence through gentrification. Shahjahanabad Redevelopment Corporation (SRDC) has repeatedly announced various plans to decongest the area, to promote built heritage, and to restore and renovate the notified *havelis*(mansions). Most of these plans for reviving the cultural glory of the area are in limbo (Nath), except for perhaps converting part of Ghalib’s *haveli* into a museum in 2010. It makes one question the extent to which relationships between people and city spaces be dictated by governmental policies from the top and argues for changes and negotiations through people’s initiatives from below, or ideally an involvement of both.

In the last decade or more, two factors have been instrumental in establishing anew people’s connection with Old Delhi: the Delhi Metro and heritage/food walks. The swanky efficient metro runs underground the congested lanes of Chandni Chowk, facilitating two-way traffic between Old Delhi and New(er) Delhi(s), it has achieved what Lutyens initially conceptualised as connection between New and Old Delhi. Walking tours of the area organised by Sohail Hashmi,

Asif Khan of *Delhi Karavan* and Ramit Mitra of *Delhi by Foot* among others seek to build bonds between built environment and people, antiquity and contemporariness, the Mughal city and the globalised city. Within the format of the guided walk, the contemporary *flâneurs* as “poets of their own affairs” (De Certeau: xviii) chart new spatial stories, and take tentative steps in moving beyond mourning for a lost city and its cultural grandeur. The midnight’s grandchildren seek to form new connections with Shahjahanabad/Old Delhi, to forge bonds that are to move beyond nostalgia and instead acknowledge the spatial and cultural transformations, and to celebrate the heterogeneity and plurality as its character-citizens.

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