

THE TENSION BETWEEN THE PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SPACES IN JOSEPH CONRAD'S *THE SECRET AGENT*¹

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Abstract

The present analysis is intended to shed light on Joseph Conrad's sense of space and the intrinsic relationship between the public and private spaces in *The Secret Agent*. The characters who are alienated to the public spaces and who develop a fear of those spaces are confined to the private and domestic spaces which are mainly thought to provide some comfort and peace. As opposed to this common idea, domestic spaces never provide any refuge for the characters. They are caught between these two spaces. The dilemma between the public spaces and private spaces are so effective that it is possible to see its effects upon the characters. *The Secret Agent* certainly seems to be in the grip of Conrad's ironic portrayal of the characters who are confined to the domestic spaces as a result of living a double life like secret agents. The public spaces intrude upon the domestic spaces with adverse effect. The characters develop double lives in their relationships with others. Conrad's extremely ironic tone emphasizes and reveals the chaos present in each character's relationships. The novel is based upon the tension between the public and the private, domestic spaces. Conrad's perspective is reflective of a society suffering from the tension between the two spaces. The domestic spaces mirror the public spaces.

Key Words: Space, Public Space, Private Space, *The Secret Agent*, Chaos.

JOSEPH CONRAD'IN *GİZLİ AJAN*'IN DA KAMUSAL VE ÖZEL MEKANLAR ARASINDAKİ GERGİNLİK

Öz

Bu çalışma Joseph Conrad'ın *Gizli Ajan* isimli romanında Joseph Conrad'ın mekan anlayışını, özel ve kamusal uzam arasındaki temel ilişkiyi aydınlatmayı amaçlamaktadır. Kamusal uzamlara yabacılaşan ve kamusal uzam korkusu geliştiren karakterler kendilerini esasen biraz sükûnet ve barış sağladığına inandıkları özel ve iç uzamlara kapatmaktadırlar. Genel kanının aksine, iç uzamlar asla karakterler için bir sığınak sağlamamaktadır. Karakterler bu iki uzam arasında sıkışıp kalmışlardır. Bu iki uzam arasındaki ikilem o kadar büyüktür ki karakterler üzerindeki etkilerini görmek her zaman olasıdır. Roman, gizli ajanlar gibi ikili bir yaşam sürmenin sonucu olarak iç uzamlara sıkışıp kalan karakterleri Conrad'ın ironik bakış açısıyla vermektedir. Kamusal uzamlar olumsuz bir etkiyle iç mekânları işgal etmektedir. Romandaki karakterler

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başkalarıyla olan ilişkilerinde ikili bir yaşam tarzı geliştirmektedirler. Conrad'ın oldukça ironik olan tonu karakterlerin ilişkilerinde var olan kaosu vurgulamakta ve göz öüne sermektedir. Roman kamusal uzamlarla, özel, iç uzamlar arasındaki gerilim üzerine kurgulanmıştır. Conrad'ın bakış açısı iki uzam arasında sıkışıp kalmaktan sıkıntı yaşayan bir toplumu yansıtmaktadır. İç uzamlar kamusal uzamları yansıtmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Mekan, Kamusal Mekan, Özel Mekan, *Gizli Ajan*, Kaos.

1- Introduction

This study will analyse the interdependence and the fundamental interrelationship between the public and private spaces in Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent*. The concepts of public and private spaces have been used to analyse the basic dichotomies in the macrocosmic and microcosmic levels in the analysis of the literary works. Spatiality has always been subordinated to temporality in modernity since many writers have preoccupied with questions of time and with experiments in the representation of time in modern texts, so space has not attracted as much attention as temporality. However, the issue of space-place and man's relationship to them turn out to be more elusive and complex. Human-place relation and spatiality in modern culture have a prominent role in the languages that constitute narrative discourse. As Fredrick Jameson points out, "it is at least empirically arguable that our daily life, our psychic experience, our cultural languages are today dominated by categories of space rather than by categories of time, as in the preceding period of high modernism proper."² Whatever is true for time is true for place as well. According to Foucault, "the present epoch will perhaps be above all the epoch of space...The anxiety of our era has to do fundamentally with space, no doubt a great deal more than with time."³ Modern man's perception and understanding of human space has been altered enormously by the striking developments which came into being in modern period. The shift in the sense of place and space, man has affected human's perception of private, social, cultural identity and unity. The language of space and place has proved to be a crucially important part of narrative discourse. It is as functional as the other languages that constitute the narrative discourse. The language of space and place keeps a dialogic relationship with the languages of the characters, the languages of actions and events, the language of the narrator. It manipulates and directs the characters to take their environments into consideration. When space becomes prominent, it begins to exert its power upon the characters, and interrupts their relationships and complicates their interactions.

² Jameson, Fredrick, *Postmodernism or, and the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Verso, London, 1999, p. 16.

³ Foucault, Michel, "Of Other Spaces" in *A Reader in Cultural Studies: A Selection of Classic Texts on Humanity and its Cultures*, Ed. Haase, Fee-Alexandra, www.gutenberg.org, 1967, pp. 130-131.

2- Public and Private Spaces

The Secret Agent is shaped by language of place and space. Public space takes the place of personal space, invades privacy and penetrates into the private space. It is threatening and dominating. Conrad resembled the power and control of time and space over one's life to a machine and found them as threatening:

There is, let us say, a machine. It evolved itself...out of a chaos of scraps of iron and behold! It knits. I am horrified at the horrible work and stand appalled. I feel it ought to embroider, but it goes on knitting. ...And the most withering thought is that the infamous thing has made itself: made itself without thought, without conscience, without foresight, without eyes, without heart. It is a tragic accident...and it is indestructible! It knits us in and it knits out. It has knitted time, space, pain, death, corruption, despair and all the illusions, and nothing matters.⁴

Accordingly, *The Secret Agent* is not only a simple story of a group of terrorists who live in the dark streets of London. It is the story of a prison or in prison whose inmates suffer from the chaos of the outside world. Anarchism dominates the world of *The Secret Agent*. The characters who escape from the public spheres are locked in private spheres. They imprison themselves in private spheres. They are confined in space and are terribly immersed into their loneliness in the sinister and alien environment. Thus, there is a close interdependence between the private and public spaces. As Carola M. Kaplan has remarked:

There is a fundamental connection between the public and private spheres in which the domestic world reflects in miniature the larger world outside it. The nature of this connection emerges in a common narrative pattern wherein the apparent safety of the domestic sphere proves to be illusory. Not only do the dangers of the larger world intrude upon the private world, but the narrative discloses that they already exist within it.⁵

The characters in *The Secret Agent* are trapped into the domestic spaces after escaping from the dark and airless atmosphere of the outside world. In order to find peace, solace, comfort and protection from the threatening, insidious and ominous dangers which threaten their individuality such as social oppressions, his detachment from not only from nature but also from himself, from the community in which he lives, they searched for the private and domestic spaces, but the machine goes on knitting them not only out but also in. Mr. Verloc who is a seller

⁴ Conrad, Joseph, qtd. in Jean-Aubry, G., *Joseph Conrad: Life and Letters*, Doubleday, New York, 1927, p. 216.

⁵ Kaplan, Carola, M., *Conrad in the Twenty-First Century: Contemporary Approaches and Perspectives*, Routledge, New York, 2005, p. 138.

of shady wares and considers himself as the protector of society, cultivates his domestic virtues. His domesticity is emphasized at the beginning of the novel: “He was thoroughly domesticated. Neither his spiritual, nor his mental, nor his physical needs were of the kind to take him much abroad. He found at home the ease of his body and the peace of his conscience, together with Mrs. Verloc’s wifely attentions and Mrs. Verloc’s mother’s deferential regard.”⁶ The darkness of the world and the chaos outside are reflected on the private spaces. London streets are full of impenetrable shadows. The city’s dim, drab streets and visible ugliness signify for the meaninglessness and futility of life. This pessimistic portrayal of darkness envelops and penetrates the private spaces of the characters. The domesticity in *The Secret Agent* functions both as a reflective and defective mirror of the social space. As pointed out by Louise Mooney, “as if through a distorting mirror of diminishing images, the great doomed world and the city of shadows are reflected in the very centre of domesticity.”⁷ The existence of macrocosmic confusion and meaninglessness finds its best expression in the microcosmic concentric circles which are drawn by Stevie, who is Mrs. Verloc’s brother:

Mr. Verloc, getting off the sofa with ponderous reluctance, opened the door leading into the kitchen to get more air, and thus disclosed the innocent Stevie, seated very good and quiet at a deal table, drawing circles, circles; innumerable circles, concentric, eccentric; a coruscating whirl of circles that by their tangled multitude of repeated curves, uniformity of form, and confusion of intersecting lines suggested a rendering of cosmic chaos, the symbolism of a mad art attempting the inconceivable.⁸

The macrocosmic confusion and meaninglessness show themselves in the microcosmic private spheres of the Verloc family in their lack of communication, silence and their loneliness. They begin to live a double life not only physically but also spiritually. The observable silence at home, and the hidden thoughts about each other are signs of outside evil’s penetration into the private spheres. The superficial intimacy between Mr. Verloc and Winnie shows itself best in their bedroom:

After slipping his braces off his shoulders, he pulled up violently the venetian blind, and leaned his forehead against the cold window pane – a fragile film of glass stretched between him and the enormity of cold, black, wet, muddy, inhospitable accumulation of bricks, slates, and stones, things in themselves unlovely and unfriendly to man. Mr. Verloc felt the latent unfriendliness of all out of doors with a force of approaching to positive bodily anguish. ...This luminous and

⁶ Conrad, Joseph, p. 15.

⁷ Money, Louise, “The Secret Agent: Joseph Conrad’s Doomsday Book”, http://thenovelclub.org/papers/secret_agent0303.doc, 2003, p. 3.

⁸ Conrad, Joseph, p. 46.

mutilated vision was so ghastly physically that Mr. Verloc ...discomposed and speechless with the apprehension of more such visions, he beheld his wife re-enter the room and get into bed in a calm, business-like manner which made him feel hopelessly lonely in the world...he felt horribly wakeful, and dreaded facing the darkness and silence that would follow the extinguishing of the lamp...Mr. Verloc's anxieties had prevented him from attaching any sense to what his wife was saying. It was as if her voice was talking on the other side of a very thick wall...The dreary conviction that there was no sleep for him held Mr. Verloc mute and hopelessly inert in his fear of darkness.⁹

Mr. Verloc's predicament and fear is not comprehensible to Mrs. Verloc. The life at home is so dull that there is nothing to be said about it. As pointed out by Bloom, "Winnie's greatest character flaw is her passivity. Her passive philosophy of life causes her to conform to Victorian social expectations of self-sacrifice, silence, and a marriage made in the courtroom."¹⁰ Inside the cocoon of their daily lives and social obligation, Mrs. Verloc is inattentive for the most part. The intimacy and friendship are disappointingly chaotic and meaningless: "Conrad succeeds in infusing a simple act of everyday life, that of going bed and talking one's wife before falling asleep, with a weight of profound menace. ...They seek some kind of refuge from calamity in the elementary certainties of life only to be denied them at last."¹¹ Mr. and Mrs Verloc seem to be parts of a more or less harmonious whole. As a consequence of the oppression by the public sphere, they are alienated to each other. The ties that formerly bound them to each other have snapped. Alienation from each other is one of the most important consequences of the evil in the outside world. The public sphere oppresses them unfairly and cruelly, and turns their private sphere into an antagonistic and uncongenial sphere. They are oppressed so much by public space that private intercourse at home is not possible. They are reduced to being inarticulate and indifferent. At times, Mr. and Mrs. Verloc are wrapped by an illusory sense of companionship with each other. This spurious unity indicates blindness to the realities of human condition. They are not aware of the emptiness, horror and panic lurking not only in the public sphere but also in their private spheres.

The antagonistic, alien and hostile public space appears to be part of man's private sphere. It is menacing and sinister and exceeds its normal boundaries, and it moves inwards in all directions so that it covers all private spheres. It has a prominent role in creating the plight of the characters at home. The lives of all the characters in the novel are undermined by the threat of the public space. Their compartmental lives are in line with the dangers of the outside world. Everybody

⁹ Conrad, Joseph pp. 54-57.

¹⁰ Bloom, Harold, *Modern Critical Views: Joseph Conrad*, Chelsea House, New York 1986, p. 57.

¹¹ Hagan, John , "The Design of Conrad's *The Secret Agent*" *ELH*, Vol. 22 No. 2 (Jun., 1955), p. 153.

has to live lonely in his own sphere, which proves man's existential condition, his alienation, loneliness, the emptiness and hollowness of the universe. At the centre of this microcosm is nothing inside but the imprisoned spirits. Man is in imprisonment of himself. The characters stand for truth concerning the universe which creates a great horror. The emptiness and hollowness of the universe is the frightening truth of each character in the novel. The characters are immersed into their agonising silences, and they withdraw from the outer world. They become indifferent to their environment.

The Secret Agent is an enigmatic novels that explores the medium of doubleness. The duplicity, a certain doubleness, characterizes *The Secret Agent*. As Holland claims: "each major character throughout the book has doubleness and tripleness in relationship with others."¹² The novel is composed of a succession of interdependent duplicities which develop new perceptual skills and processes that enable the reader to have a new perspective. The characters Homo Duplex; paradoxical and contradictory about the identity. The doubleness reflects decentredness of human being: 'I am, but I do not have myself.' The title of the novel in connection with the double lives of the characters becomes more meaningful. They are secret agents with their silence, sin, crime, guilt and fear.

The double life of the main characters and dichotomies between private and public spheres penetrate the deeper parts of their minds. Winnie who is utterly devoid of curiosity, and her mysterious husband Mr. Verloc have always hidden their real faces until the bomb which has been intended to destroy the planet's time-keeper has ended up their apparent and fake happiness which is governed by hypocrisy, vanity and affectation: "It was his marital affection that had received the greatest shock from the premature explosion."¹³ They fail to realise the real motives of their life. This reality is darkened by their passion and self-interest. Mr. Verloc cannot understand Winnie's fondness of her brother Stevie, and goes on believing that Winnie has loved him. Winnie who is a typical Victorian woman sacrifices her real love for a butcher due to her economic concerns and her search for a safe place for her brother, her mother and for herself. Her conformity to social conventions forces her to have a double life for seven years in marriage:

That was the man I loved then,' went on the widow of Mr. Verloc. 'I suppose he could see it in my eyes, too. Five and twenty shillings a week, and his father threatened to kick him out of his business if he made such a fool of himself as to marry a girl with a crippled mother and a crazy idiot of a boy on her hands. But he would hang about me, till one evening I found the courage to slam

¹² Holland, Norman, "*Style as Character: The Secret Agent*", Ed. Bloom, Harold, Chelsea House, New York 1986, p. 54.

¹³ Conrad, Josep, p. 188.

the door in his face. I had to do it. I loved him dearly. Five and twenty shillings a week! There was that other man- a good lodger. What is a girl to do? Could I have gone on the streets? He seemed kind. He wanted me, anyhow. What was I to do with mother and that poor boy? Eh? I said yes. He seemed good natured, he was freehanded, he had money, he never said anything. Seven year-seven years a good wife to him, the good the generous...Do you know what he was?...He was a devil!¹⁴

In the same way, Mr. Verloc is a double agent and “hides himself in the shades of a sordid street seldom touched by the sun behind a dim shop with its wares of disreputable rubbish.”¹⁵ He is a mysterious and reticent one who runs a pornography shop in order to cover his real business:

What his business was he did not say; but after his engagement to Winnie he took the trouble to get up before noon...He never offered to take Winnie to theatres, as such a nice gentleman ought to have done. His evenings were occupied. His work was in a way political, he told Winnie once. ...how much more he told her as to his occupation it was impossible...to discover.¹⁶

Neither Mr. Verloc nor Winnie is honest to each other in their marriage. Although “their accord was perfect, it was not precise. It was a tacit accord, congenial to Mrs. Verloc’s incuriosity and to Mr. Verloc’s habits of mind, which were indolent and secret. They refrained from going to the bottom of facts and motives.”¹⁷ The result is poor communication between Winnie and Mr. Verloc. Both of them prefer to keep their hidden past motives to themselves which leads to an utter lack of communication and lack of love. Their past and secrets shape their present, and the past becomes the present. The silence which dominates their relationship is a parody of the outside fake silence which finds its best expression in the silence of the Verloc family. As Andrew Roberts states, “the Verloc’s marriage and family life is clearly a parody of the secrecy and restraint of the corrupt and suffocating bourgeois society of which Verloc is a servant.”¹⁸ This domestic and private entrapment is a microcosmic metaphor which stands for a macrocosmic entrapment from which there is no escape. Both Winnie and Mr. Verloc seek an asylum which will save them from the dangers of the outside world. Rather than providing a shelter for them, the domestic sphere proves to be much more perilous than the public sphere. They feel themselves much more alienated, lonely than as before. Their marriage and home do not bring the expected peace, comfort and solace: “She looked round thoughtfully, with an air

¹⁴ Conrad, Joseph, pp. 222-223.

¹⁵ Conrad, Joseph, p. 40.

¹⁶ Conrad, Joseph, p. 16.

¹⁷ Conrad, Joseph, p. 199.

¹⁸ Roberts, Andrew, p. 139.

of mistrust in the silence and solitude of the house. This abode of her married life appeared to her as lonely and unsafe as though it had been situated in the midst of a forest.”¹⁹

Conrad tries to reflect human predicament in the universe. The dullness in the outside life intrudes upon the private sphere. The London streets reflect the same boredom, dullness, and fear. After Winnie has killed Mr. Verloc, she goes out in order to get rid of the suffocating air at home. In an ironical way,

The street frightened her... This entrance into the open air had a foretaste of drowning; a slimy dampness enveloped her, entered her nostrils, clung to her hair. It was not actually raining, but each gas lamp had a rusty little halo of mist. ... The vast world created for the glory of man was only a vast blank to Mrs. Verloc. She did not know which way to turn. ... She was the most lonely of murderers that ever struck a mortal blow. She was alone in London: and the whole town of marvels and mud, with its maze of streets and its mass of lights, was sunk in a hopeless night, rested at the bottom of a black abyss from which no aided woman could hope to scramble out.²⁰

The prostrate London is described as a hostile wasteland. Winnie’s wandering in the antagonistic London streets on her own without coming across anyone is a clear indication of man’s spiritual loneliness and sterility, and her longing to communicate. As Sir Ethelred points out in the novel, “a genuine wife and a genuinely, respectably, marital relation. ... from a certain point of view we are here in the presence of a domestic drama.”²¹ It represents a frightful picture of the domestic life. The characters’ efforts to escape from the gloomy, cruel and violent public spaces into the private spaces lead to their destruction. This domestic drama is a reflection of a greater drama.

3-Conclusion

The world of *The Secret Agent* from the public to the private spheres is an illusion. No one is safe. It is the reflection of a distorting and defective mirror of a chaotic world. Fear, horror, and terror must be considered as central to the understanding of the chaos in the novel. Fear is the central motive for Enlightenment. As Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* pointed out, “enlightenment, understood in the widest sense as the advance of thought, has always aimed at liberating human beings from fear and installing them as masters. Yet the wholly enlightened earth radiant with

¹⁹ Conrad, Joseph, pp. 222-223.

²⁰ Conrad, Joseph, pp. 217-218.

²¹ Conrad, Joseph, pp. 180-181.

triumphant calamity.”²² Growth has co-existed with human misery. Perhaps never before in history has man confronted with such mighty opposites, yearning for security and existence on the one hand and mass annihilation on the other hand. Knowledge and tools which were intended for the happiness of man help only to create fear, horror and terror. Man has lost his control over his own life and fate. Enlightenment which is thought to liberate man from superstition turned into an enslaving mechanism. This enslaving mechanism creates a great tension between the public and private spaces, and the difference between these two is lost. The public places go on intruding the private spaces and transforming them into the public places in which modern man suffers. Throughout *The Secret Agent*, there is an indispensable relationship between the public and private spheres. The private sphere is a reflection of the public sphere. The domestic sphere does never provide refuge from the public sphere. The private sphere turns out to be as threatening as the public sphere. Humans are trapped between these two spheres over which they have no power and effect. There is no other sphere to go and there is no exit. It is impossible to escape from them. Conrad’s novel with its wasteland public and private spaces and with its grim ending is a modern representation of a cosmic view of man and the universe.

²² Horkheimer, Max and Adorno, Theodor, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2002, p. 1.

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