

Miriam Bait / Claudia Gualtieri (eds.)

Conversations on Utopia

Cultural and Communication Practices



PETER LANG

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This book offers an interdisciplinary conversation on utopia clustered around cultural and communication practises in terms of political and ethical projects. It sheds light on cultural and discursive aspects characterising the polysemous concept of utopia conceived as an ongoing process that is put into practice in the present. Against this backdrop, the book raises questions for intellectual work, seeks out an enlightening breach in academic field boundaries, invites a revision of the forms of knowledge production, and encourages pedagogical actions for the development of critical thinking.

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Cecile Sandten

Heterotopian Spaces of Feminist Self-Enunciation in Anita Desai's Writings

Abstract: The garden as a literary trope, but also down to earth project, has always, and in many ways, been associated with notions of paradise, as in the Garden of Eden or the Land of Cockaigne, but also with orderliness, stability, or security, and eventually with refuge. In contrast, the image of the garden has also been related to wilderness, chaos, disorder, or instability, and with the gothic. Both aspects have been prominent themes in the fiction of Indian English novelist Anita Desai. In nearly all of her novels, Desai addresses the garden and also the barsati, the rooftop dwelling in the city, in a dialectical mode as a refuge and shelter, but also as wilderness and chaos. Concentrating on the garden and the barsati as a heterotopian idea and refuge, especially this aspect of the two spaces will be discussed in this paper in the framework of Indian feminist literary criticism, in particular with reference to the notion of Malashri Lal's "threshold" – a real, as well as symbolic, bar placed on women by patriarchy. My paper will argue that both places help Desai's protagonists to express their views on political and private issues serving them in their self-enunciation and self-articulation, and, eventually, in crossing the "threshold". At the same time, Desai dismantles, by way of subtle commentary, the highly questionable image of the Indian woman as subdued girl, mother and wife but anticipates what will later be known as the "new" Indian woman. In my paper I will explore these ideas by focusing on Desai's children's book *The Peacock Garden* (1974), the short story "The Rooftop Dwellers" (2000), and her novel *Cry, the Peacock* (1963). I will endeavour to read these texts through a perspective that combines Indian feminist, and heterotopian concerns, attuned to the interconnection of discourses and structures of Indian womanhood and the garden/barsati as a heterotopian setting for women in India.

Keywords: Garden, barsati, Indian feminism, threshold

Introduction

Literature has an important function in making the future and alternatives to the existing order thinkable. Utopian ideas and their dystopian counterparts, however, seldom deal with the future, but mostly with the present, as Thomas More's founding text for this genre, *Utopia* (1516), has demonstrated. More precisely, in his narrative, More views Utopia and, accordingly, man and society, metaphorically as a terrain and species that has to be cultivated (More 2001, *passim*). Thus,

Utopia represents an enormous, paradisiacal garden.¹ In this framework, the garden as a literary trope, but also as a down-to-earth project, has always and in many ways been associated with notions of paradise, as in the Garden of Eden or the Land of Cockaigne, and, in that sense, also with orderliness, stability, sustenance and security, and, ultimately, with refuge. In contrast, however, the image of the garden has also been related to wilderness, chaos, disorder, and instability, as well as with the gothic, and has been thus connected to anxiety, nightmare, or horror. Both aspects have been perceptible themes in the fictional writings of Indian English novelist Anita Desai. In her writings, Desai, in a dialectical mode, addresses both the garden and the barsati, an urban rooftop dwelling, as places not only of refuge and shelter, but also of wilderness and chaos. In this chapter, focusing on the garden and barsati as utopian ideas and thus refuges, this particular aspect of the two spaces will be discussed within the framework of (Indian) feminist literary criticism. Specifically, I will refer to the notion of the "threshold"² – a real, as well as a symbolic, barrier imposed upon women by patriarchy – and the idea of aestheticized environments which mutually cross-fertilize each other in Desai's garden/barsati conceptualisations. Accordingly, the garden/barsati as a place of security and – in contrast to the city – a terrestrial and exotic paradise serves Desai as a utopian notion that allows her protagonists to express their views on political *and* private issues, serving them in their self-enunciation and self-articulation, and, eventually, in crossing the "threshold" that has been erected before them by patriarchy. At the same time, Desai dismantles, by way of subtle commentary, the highly questionable image of the Indian woman as a subdued girl, mother, and wife, and anticipates what is known as the "New Indian Woman". In her articles, Lisa Lau defines the "New Indian Woman" as an urban, educated, middle-class woman, whose development has paralleled the equally rapid growth of the middle-classes in India at the beginning of the early 2000s.³ The concept explores the ambiguous positionality of women negotiating their societal roles and places, within and outside the family and home. In my paper, I will explore these ideas by focusing on Desai's children's book *The Peacock Garden* (1974), her short story "The Rooftop Dwellers" (2000), and her novel *Cry, the Peacock* (1963). More specifically, I will claim that Desai's texts represent ideas of the evolution and development of her female characters. Within this framework, my paper will endeavour to read the above-mentioned texts through

1 See Rebhorn 1976.

2 Lal 1995.

3 Lau 2006, pp. 159–171; 2010, pp. 271–292.

a perspective that combines Indian feminist and heterotopian concerns, attuned to the interconnection of discourses and structures of Indian womanhood and to the garden/barsati as a heterotopian, perhaps also exotic – as related to the South Asian location –, setting for women's refuge and self-enunciation in India.

The Garden: A Paradise and Heterotopia

As literary settings of the garden are often associated with notions of paradise, I would first like to briefly consider a few definitions of paradise. In the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*⁴, the term "paradise" is described as originating in the Old French and modern French *paradis*, which relates back to ecclesiastical Latin *paradisus* and Greek *paradeisos*, meaning royal park or garden enclosure, and from *pairi*, which implies around, or to mould or form. As a noun, it also means the "Garden of Eden as described in *Genesis* 2, 3". In this context, it might also denote an "earthly paradise". In the second definition, the term is explained as "Heaven, in Christian and Muslim theology", and, in a third definition, it implies "A region of surpassing beauty or delight; a place or state of supreme bliss". In a fourth definition, in a horticultural context, the term means a) "A garden, an orchard; *spec.* the garden of a convent" and b) "An ancient Eastern park or pleasure ground, *esp.* one enclosing wild animals for hunting". Within this framework, Sharae Deckard maintains that

[f]rom the original walled garden, the *hortus conclusus*, paradise has undergone continuous religious and secular mutations: from a terrestrial Eden located in Asia, the Americas, or Africa, to a cloister, a garden of love, a nobleman's park, or a labyrinth of temptation, to Arcadia, the Land of Cockaigne, El Dorado, or Utopia, to a botanical garden, a colony, a tourist destination, an ad-man's dream, a pharmacological hallucination, or a future world.⁵

Thus, in literature, the garden takes on an entire variety of meanings and explanations.⁶ Michel Foucault, in his lecture "Of Other Spaces: Utopias and

4 Shorter Oxford English Dictionary 2007, pp. 2094–95.

5 Deckard 2010, p. 4.

6 Accordingly, Jenny Uglow gives the following etymological explanation: "The garden is merely a boundary between us and the wild, a tamed sphere that always wants to revert to wilderness. It is sexy and fecund, prone to chaos and pests, but controlled (we hope) into beauty and order. The word 'garden' itself comes from *ghordos*, an ancient Indo-European word for 'enclosure', and the same root is in 'yard' and 'orchard'. Garden historians remind us, too, that the ancient Persian word for 'enclosure' was *pairidaēza* – which applied both to the hunting parks of kings and to walled gardens for produce

Heterotopias", defines utopias as "sites with no real place. They are sites that have a general relation of direct or inverted analogy with the real space of Society. They present society itself in a perfected form, or else society turned upside down, but in any case these utopias are fundamentally unreal spaces".⁷ However, Foucault also refers to the real places that exist in every civilization and society, as those spaces

which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. [...] Because these places are absolutely different from all the sites that they reflect and speak about, I shall call them, by way of contrast to utopias, heterotopias.⁸

In this context, Foucault states that "perhaps the oldest example of these heterotopias that take the form of contradictory sites is the garden".⁹ He further argues that "[w]e must not forget that in the Orient the garden, an astonishing creation that is now a thousand years old, had very deep and seemingly superimposed meanings", "and all the vegetation of the garden was supposed to come together in this space, in this sort of microcosm". Thus, for Foucault "[t]he garden is the smallest parcel of the world and then it is the totality of the world. The garden has been a sort of happy, universalizing heterotopia since the beginnings of antiquity".¹⁰ In contrast to the real site of the garden as defined as heterotopia, paradise is "an ideal rather than a real place, something onto which to project hopes and aspirations", as it shows not being "fit to live in".¹¹ Therefore, the following three sections will outline how these ideas, in conjunction with Indian feminism,¹² can be read in a selection of Anita Desai's writings in order to

and ornamental plant. This became *pardes* in the Old Testament, *paradisos* in Greek and our 'park' in English". (Uglow 2004, p. 3; emphasis i.o.).

7 Foucault 1984, p. 3.

8 Foucault 1984, pp. 3–4.

9 Foucault 1984, p. 6.

10 Foucault 1984, p. 6.

11 Alexander 2011, p. 2.

12 For conceptualisations of Indian Feminism see, in particular, Lal whose idea of the "threshold" has been used in this article. Further conceptualisations of Indian Feminism diachronically and mostly in contrast to western feminism, can be found, for instance, in Padma Anagol (2005, p. 3) and her "Western impact – Indian response" paradigm by focussing on Victorian women writers and Indian women writers' responses; Radha Kumar (1993) and K.A. Kunjakkan (2002), who both argue from a social-political perspective; Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2003, p. 4), who criticises "the race blindness of imperial feminism" and argues for a "deeply collective nature of feminist thought" and

demonstrate how heterotopian ideas materialise in her texts. In this framework I would like to take Shelley Saguaro's argument on board who writes, that "analogies with aspects of gardening, with terms such as 'cultivation', 'nurture', 'growth', 'lowering', and 'fruiting', are commonplace and are even familiarly extended to aspects of development of selfhood".¹³ Accordingly, I argue that through living in and with the garden/barsati, Desai's characters experience some form of self-awareness, growing, "flowering", and finally self-enunciation.

***The Peacock Garden* (1974): The Garden as a Heterotopian Space of Refuge**

The theme of Desai's children's book *The Peacock Garden* most movingly takes on the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947, a time of persecution, ethnic cleansing, and genocide. The protagonist, the young Muslim girl Zuni, together with her family, finds refuge in the village mosque's enwalled garden, where she experiences a time of confinement but also of utmost happiness, "supreme bliss" (*OED*) and safety. From a heterodiegetic perspective, focalising on the young girl, during the course of the novel, Zuni encounters the mosque's garden as an exotic paradise. Even on the night in which the village's Muslim population begins to move onto the trucks that will take them to Pakistan, their new home, Zuni, in the courtyard of the mosque, is thrilled upon seeing the "white dome of the mosque rise above the treetops and walls, like a ghost".¹⁴ She thus also addresses the gothic aspect of the place, which is intensified by the sad crying of a peacock, the novel's eponymous bird.¹⁵ As the only Muslims left in the courtyard after the other refugees have left for Pakistan, she and her family now "could only hear the rustle of the banyan leaves, and, sometimes, the sad cry of a peacock" (p. 28). The

is thus in favour of a transnational feminist movement, a feminism without borders (p. 2); whereas Anita Myles (2006, p. v) criticises the West for its "biased intolerance towards the male species"; and Chandra Nisha Singh (2007, p. 194) argues in favour of gynocriticism; whereas Neeru Tandon (2008, p. 5) criticises the predominantly elitist feminist movement by Indian women in India.

13 Saguaro 2006, p. x.

14 Desai 1995 [1974], p. 28. Hereafter page numbers will be included in the text.

15 In two out of three selected titles for this paper, the peacock plays a central role. The peacock is both the national bird of India as well as a sacred and mythical bird in Hindu mythology. It is the vehicle of a number of Indian deities and gods. In one instance, it kills a snake, the act of which epitomises the circle of time.

rustling banyan leaves hint again at the gothic idea of the garden and the overall gloomy and unhappy situation that is epitomised in the peacock's sad cry.

The next morning, however, Zuni finds even the courtyard well enticing, on account of what she discovers in it: "[. . .] if you were bold enough to hang over the edge and look, a silent green pool of cool water in which frogs floated and plopped" (p. 29). This already indicates Zuni's enthusiasm for nature, especially also in small things. Aware of the sounds of the courtyard and the peacocks, the family is taken into the garden and to their hut, where the garden epitomises abundance, wilderness, and sustenance: "It was a huge garden, cut up into many small gardens, all a tangle of lemon trees flowering creepers, mango and orange trees and patches of vegetables" (p. 30). In the next quotation the garden is also depicted as a place of some kind of fairy-tale-like secrecy, when "[t]he caretaker stopped, parted some jasmine bushes over which a pumpkin vine had spread itself, and they saw the small, mud-walled, thatch-roofed hut in which he meant them to live" (p. 30). As it is only a small and simple little earthen hut with one room, the family's new accommodation stands in stark contrast to the "white-washed brick house the family had lived in" before (p. 30). Moreover, the garden is full of animals, "things to eat [. . .] and full of things to see" (p. 32), thus, again, showing the garden a paradisiacal place. Mostly, Zuni is afraid of the peacocks' "loud, sad shrieks" (p. 33). Yet, she is also excited by their feathers, which are "green and blue, with a jewel for an eye in the centre" (p. 33), emphasising their outstanding quality. In search of more feathers, Zuni goes to explore the garden, and finds that "one walled garden opened into another walled garden, that one was full of lemon trees, another of loquat trees, that some had oleander bushes in bloom and others white jasmine. It no longer seemed closed and dull to her" (p. 36). In this respect, and in this kind of enumeration of its natural, wild qualities, the garden functions as an unknown space that Zuni slowly discovers. When her father goes to the mosque to pray, Zuni accompanies him, slips out,

and once she was in the cool, open veranda with its high arches, she felt happy and free again. The arches were like picture frames and through them she could see all the gardens and courtyards of the mosque and even over the low walls into the fields outside.
(p. 39)

Thereby, Zuni is also able to get a full picture, however like an artwork, of the place. With her realisation that something is wrong in the outside world, Zuni finds in the gardens of the mosque shelter a feeling of freedom, but also, however, a threshold that she will eventually have to cross as she will grow, whatsoever. Her collection of peacock feathers, with which she decorates the hut, steadily grows, so that the feathers' "brilliant colours [. . .] really looked as though a rich

cloth with a pattern of stars hung there" (p. 43), thus transforming the little hut into a kind of heaven space. By then, Zuni has also become used to the cries of the peacocks, so that they no longer disturb her. The garden therefore generally epitomises a place of abundance and plenty, peace and refuge and represents, as Foucault argues, "a sort of microcosm" in which "all the vegetation of the garden was supposed to come together in this space".¹⁶ This is shown in the family's lunch gathering:

At noon Amma came out to the orchard with a flat basket balanced on her head and a jar of cool water in one hand. She spread out their food under the flowering creeper that was like a great tent of bright orange flowers all winter and then called Abba and the girls. They sat down under the bright flowers in the winter sunshine, eating bread stuffed with radish and a potato curry Amma had made. (p. 48).

Thus, the family waits for the situation to revert to normal, even though Zuni's father, after an outing, learns that their house has been burnt, their cattle stolen, and the friend who was looking after their house, killed: But

"[. . .] we are not homeless," Abba reminded her [Amma]. "We have a house here now – a good place to live. We are safe and blessed by the saint here. We lead a good life in this garden, don't we, Zuni?" Zuni had seen a peacock flutter down from the wall into the garden and she ran on, shouting, "I like it here, Abba, I like it better than in the village". (p. 60)

This passage, again, shows that Zuni experiences the garden as a place or state of paradisiacal bliss. After several months have passed and the political and religious conflict has been somehow resolved, Zuni is again able to attend her former school in the village and is also able to have her friends Bina and Teta visit her in her garden and new home. The three girls want to see the peacocks, the peahen, and her brood, but their search is in vain. Eventually, before the two friends have to leave through "the blue door" (p. 68) in the garden's wall in order to go back home, they suddenly encounter the magnificent birds. During this same time, Zuni's mother is entertaining visitors from Pakistan, and it becomes settled that Zuni's sister Razia will soon be married.

For Zuni, in Foucault's terms, the garden is both the smallest parcel of the world and its totality, providing the grounds for a happy and peaceful life set apart from the terror and prosecution of the Partition. Due to the political-religious conflict, Zuni is confined to the mosque's garden outside the village, yet she also experiences this departure from her former life as a time of freedom

16 Foucault 1984, p. 6.

and happiness. Her father helps to maintain the garden and mosque's economy, while her sister and mother also learn to be content in a small place. And, due to the garden's abundance, nobody has to suffer. Only when the times improve and Zuni and her father venture out into the village is she able to cross what Malashri Lal calls the "threshold". Lal conceptualises the threshold "in its three essential components of interior space, doorway poise and exterior adjuncts",¹⁷ analogous to the physical spaces created around the arrangements of and relations between the threshold as inside, on, and outside the bar established by patriarchy. Applied to the novel, for some time, Zuni and her sister Razia are confined to a position "inside". Then Zuni, as she gazes through the mosque's arches that provide her with the greater view, finds herself "on the threshold". Yet, at the end of the novel, being able to leave the garden and attend school again, and the prospect of Razia getting married, grants the two sisters a new position outside of the threshold, in the "exterior adjuncts".¹⁸ The opposing pulls of "inside" or "interior space" and "out there" or "exterior adjunct"¹⁹ are part of what the colonial and partition orders have enforced on the two girls. This symbolic barrier, characterised by the threshold, is effective in times of conflict, trouble and up-rootedness. The garden, in the framework of a heterotopian, that is, enclosed, space, serves as a confinement, but also a space of freedom and self-enunciation where Zuni, especially, is able to live a sheltered way of life "on the threshold", which she eventually crosses in order to resume her education and to meet her friends. Finally, the garden in *The Peacock Garden* epitomises a heterotopian space as well as a successful crossing of the threshold. However, the novel sheds in a way a problematic light on the current political situation, that is, on the partition of India and Pakistan which seems to be resolved in the end. In reality, however, the conflict is still going on.

"The Rooftop Dwellers": The Barsati as Heterotopian Space of Self-Enunciation

"The Rooftop Dwellers", published in the short story collection *Diamond and Dust* (2000), is set in 1980s Delhi and describes the experiences of the young, freedom-seeking protagonist Moyna while she lives in a barsati, a rooftop dwelling. The story is told from a heterodiegetic voice, focalising on the young

17 Lal 1995, p. 22.

18 Lal 1995, p. 22.

19 Lal 1995, pp. 12, 22.

woman who is, right from the beginning, depicted as being different, as "the whole of Delhi", in contrast to her, is watching the *Mahabharata* on TV,²⁰ a 94-episode Hindi series based on the eponymous Hindu epic that screened from 1988 to 1990. Furthermore, Moyna is described as determined "to make her new life as a working woman in the metropolis succeed" (p. 161), in spite of the minimalistic life style that she has to endure while trying to settle "into this new, challenging way of life" (p. 162). This includes the small cell of a room in a women's hostel that Moyna first rents, the commute on the "'Ladies' Special instead of the regular DTS" (p. 162) and her experience of tap water as a luxury (p. 161; p. 162). Moyna's love for nature is revealed by the fact that she allows a little yellow kitten, whom she names Mao, into her life. However, when discovered by the matron of the hostel, this leads to her eviction, as no pets are allowed (p. 163). As a single woman working in the office of a literary review journal (bluntly named *Books*), it is difficult for her to find new accommodations, as prejudices against single women stereotypically associate them with "sin and wantonness" (p. 163), with being unclean, or immoral. She is, thus, frequently dismissed as an applicant for renting a barsati. The narrator generally describes a barsati, the reason for its construction, as follows:

These rooms had once been built on Delhi's flat rooftops so that families who slept out on their roofs on summer nights could draw in their beds in case of a sudden dust storm or thunder shower. But now that Delhi was far too unsafe for sleeping alfresco, the barsatis were being rented out to working spinsters or bachelors at a delightful profit. (pp. 163–164)

At the final barsati that Moyna visits, she feels an aversion to the landlords, the Bhallas, as well as a sudden conviction that she will not rent it. However, when she is finally led to see the room on the rooftop, she is overwhelmed:

And there, on the flat rooftop of the plain yellow stucco villa in a colony Moyna had never heard of before on the outskirts of New Delhi, there to her astonishment was a palace, a veritable palace amongst barsatis. The rooftop, which covered the entire area of the villa, seemed to her immense, larger than any space she had occupied since her arrival in Delhi, and it was clear, empty space under an empty sky, with a view of all the other rooftops stretching out on every side, giving Moyna, as she stood there, a sense of being the empress of all she surveyed. Of course it would bake under her feet in the heat of summer but – and this was the crowning glory – a pipal tree that grew in the small walled courtyard at the back of the house rose up over the barsati itself, sheltering it from the sun with a canopy of slivery, rustling leaves, spreading out its branches and murmuring, Moyna felt certain, a gracious welcome. (pp. 164–165)

20 Desai 2001 [2000], p. 159. Hereafter page numbers will be included in the text.

This passage is indicative of the main tendency of "The Rooftop Dwellers": The protagonist's positive feelings towards the barsati synecdochally mirror her euphoria, which is described almost exclusively in terms of freedom, greatness, self-enunciation, and nature. The first of these aspects are represented in her feeling of imperialness when imagining herself living in this barsati, the last is embodied in the pipal tree with its soothing and inviting leaves and branches. Taking a more realistic view of the accommodation, in stark contrast with Moyna's idealised conceptualisation of the barsati, the narrator provides an entirely different and rather bleak picture:

[w]hat could it matter if the barsati itself was merely a square walled cube, that it had not been cleaned in so long that the single window had turned opaque with dust, and spider-webs hung in swags from every corner, that the bed was nothing but a string cot, the cheapest kind of charpai? What did it matter that the single cupboard against the wall had doors that did not seem to meet but sagged on the hinges and could never be locked, that the "kitchen" was only a blackened kerosene stove atop a wooden table that also served as desk and dining table, that the "bathroom" was a closed-sized attached enclosure, open to the sky, with a very stained and yellowed squatter-type toilet and a single stand-pipe? (p. 165)

However, "Moyna's mind was racing with visions of what she could transform the place into. Why, its very bareness gave her the freedom to indulge her wildest dreams and fancies" (p. 165). Signing a year's lease and paying three months in advance, Moyna takes the place and moves in. On moving day, her friend Tara, together with her husband Ritwick, help her, but point out that she does not have her own water storage tank and that once the windowpanes are cleaned, all the neighbours "can look right in" (p. 167), since she has no curtain. Furthermore, they also suggest that the neighbours, who have begun to assemble and watch from their barsatis, might be thieves or murderers and that she needs a lock. In addition to having to depend on the municipality for water, which is delivered at five in the morning and five in the evening, Moyna now also has to adjust to the way of life of the Bhallas, the market where she has to get milk for her cat Mao, and her commute on an ordinary DTS bus, where she is exposed to importunate men. In keeping with the light-hearted tone of the entire story, Moyna finds an autorickshaw driver, the Sikh Gurmail Singh, who offers her his services and becomes "her private chauffeur" (p. 172).

When Moyna's colleague Tara, together with Adrian, an Englishman working for the British Council, come, unannounced, to visit Moyna in her barsati, since she has no phone, Moyna is at first very insecure and even frightened. However, after Adrian's bottle of wine has been opened, mugs, instead of proper wine glasses, filled, and chairs have been brought out onto "her terrace" (p. 182), with

the "pipal tree" "beginning to rustle like a shower of rain in the first breath of air that evening", Moyna suddenly feels "her spirits break free and lift" (p. 182). She is excited to be able to entertain friends "on a starry evening, just as she had imagined an adult working woman in the metropolis might do, just as she had imagined *she* would do – and now it was happening" (p. 182; emphasis i.o.). But it is not only Moyna who feels this way: Tara, too, "seemed liberated by coming away from her mother-in-law's house where she had to live because of Ritwick's stalled promotion at the university" and "Adrian seemed enchanted by everything his eye encountered on the rooftop – the parrots streaking in to settle in the branches of the pipal tree for the night, the neighbourliness of the other roof dwellers, several of whom had lined up along their ledges to watch (discreetly or not so discreetly)" (p. 182). In this setting, the evening on her barsati terrace, the setting sun, the evening sky, stars, and the pipal tree, all serve to create an atmosphere of elevation and sense of freedom that Moyna experiences. The barsati thus takes on the function of a heterotopic, that is, an exotic 'garden' space that presents a "threshold" for the protagonist to cross, by which she gains freedom and self-expression.²¹

The small wine-drinking party does not, however, meet with the approval of the Bhallas, and from that time on, Moyna is constantly reminded of having transgressed the barrier imposed upon young women. Not only does her "foreign male" guest cause problems, so, too, does her cat Mao, who has grown into a tomcat, and who uses the pipal tree to go on his roaming sprees. Conversely, female cats also use the tree to get to Mao's terrace. When the Bhallas, who constantly observe their tenant, discover that Moyna has a cat, she is once again close to being evicted. Worse yet, Moyna experiences a burglary at her barsati that, as the story suggests, has been carried out by the Bhallas' servant. Constantly reprimanded by her landlady Mrs. Bhalla, Moyna retreats to her barsati: "Then she sat down on a chair under the tree, feeling as if all her strength were gone" (p. 189). When Mao comes to be stroked, she has the feeling that he is saying something comforting, "consoling things" (p. 189); she listens to him and to the pipal tree "that shivered and rustled" (p. 189). A young foreign woman, Simona, another barsati dweller whom Moyna meets in the mornings in the queue at Mother Dairy, remarks to her: "You have such a beautiful tree" (p. 193). This leads Moyna to consider that the tree "could be the reason why she stayed on with the Bhallas" (p. 193).

21 See Lal 1995, p. 17.

The threshold that confines women behind the bar and behind which Moyna lives, is constantly and explicitly addressed by Mrs Bhalla: "These girls, these days, think they can go to work, live alone – huh! Can't even take care of their own belongings!" (p. 194). And one of her colleagues tells Moyna to "Please lock door safely. Not safe to live alone like this" (p. 200). Yet, in spite of all these obstacles, when her mother comes to visit because Moyna has contracted the flu, Moyna experiences the barsati as "bathed in mild sunlight and at its most livable in Delhi's pleasant winter" (p. 202). Her mother's visit helps Moyna to regain her strength, and, due to her mother's and Mrs Bhalla's mutual understanding and her mother's "indigestible sweetness" (p. 203), her visit also evinces another positive outcome. The pipal tree's leaves are, furthermore, depicted as quaking with the hazy winter light that filters through (see p. 203). Interestingly, when Moyna eventually learns that the Bhalla's servant was the burglar and has stolen her tape recorder and tapes, she remains "silent": "she knew it would be unwise to tell her mother that she lived amongst thieves. How then could she declare to her that she intended to remain here with them [the Bhallas], not return to family and home, comfort and care" (p. 204). Eventually, when she learns that her boss, Bose Sahib, wants to close the journal and venture into rural development projects and she then receives a letter from her mother telling her about a suitable husband, Moyna suddenly comes to the realisation that "She was free, she was determined, she had made her decision, and she sat up, laughing" (p. 207).

The short story "The Rooftop Dwellers" is a snapshot of the moment a young, educated working woman in 1980s India who crosses the threshold from confined family life and her filial duties to freedom and thus becomes what Rajeswari Sunder Rajan as well as Lisa Lau have termed the "New Indian Woman"²² as one concept within the broader framework of Indian feminism. Moyna, as I read the short story, transgresses the threshold that leads into the "exterior adjunct", that describes the male outer space as "[...] an unknown arena full of male activities concerning business, trade, politics and administration".²³ Lal emphasises that, women can only enter irrefutably in the space beyond the threshold: "[r]emembering that she is alone and isolated in a situation which functions by male consensus and collectivity, she has to devise strategies for survival of the self and acceptance by the 'other', almost simultaneously".²⁴ This liberation of the educated, young, modern woman can only be achieved through

22 See Rajan 1993, p. 130; Lau 2006, pp. 159–171; Lau 2010, pp. 271–292.

23 Lal 1995, p. 13.

24 Lal 1995, p. 19.

Moyna's life in the barsati – an exotic heterotopian space of aloofness in the city. The barsati, thus, epitomises nature, minimalism, freedom and autonomy. By using this barsati – the embodiment of self-enunciation for the young middle-class working woman – as a threshold and thus "strategy of survival of the self",²⁵ Moyna finds herself in a position which allows her to free herself from the trap of traditional ideological Indian womanhood.

Cry, The Peacock: The Garden as Gothic Heterotopian Space

In *Cry, The Peacock*, Desai's discursive strategy can be interpreted as a paranoid discourse of the self in the form of a primarily autodiegetic narrative through the protagonist's interior monologue. The first and third short chapters of the novel are written from a heterodiegetic voice, whereas the long second chapter is written from the autodiegetic voice of Maya, the main character. Interestingly, in Hindi the word "maya" means "illusion" which reveals to be an important character trait: Maya is a fragile introvert whose childhood trauma leads to violent death.²⁶ During the course of the novel, the only way for Maya, who actually lives in a fantasy world, is to transcend and escape the controls placed upon her life, her desires, her love, her sexuality, and her self-determination, by throwing her husband Gautama off the rooftop of their house and kill him. Crossing this threshold leads to the loss of her sanity and her life itself.

Maya is obsessed with a childhood prophecy that was made by an albino priest who was summoned by her father, Rai Sahib, and she therefore strongly believes that in the fourth year of her marriage, as prophesied, she or her husband will be killed: "It had to be one of us, you see, and it was so clear that it was I who was meant to live. You see, to Gautama it didn't really matter. He didn't care, and I did".²⁷ The loss of her mother as a young child leads her benevolent father, who adores and protects her, thus continuously keeping her barred in behind the threshold, to raise her in an exceedingly protected and well-off upper-caste household. This upbringing results in the naïve Maya marrying one of her father's friends, Gautama, who is fifteen years her senior and dreads passion "as wise men dread their flesh" (p. 217), thereby perpetuating her captivity behind the bar of the threshold. In contrast to Maya, Gautama, a lawyer, represents rationality and public life, and, perhaps unconsciously, does everything to keep Maya behind the threshold, a patriarchal confinement that, in this

25 Lal 1995, p. 19.

26 Narayan/Mee 2003, p. 227.

27 Desai 1980 [1963], pp. 215–216. Hereafter page numbers will be included in the text.

case, epitomises a vital component in determining the binary construction of domestic and public life, sentiment and rationality, respectively.

According to Lal, for women, crossing this bar is always an "act of transgression".²⁸ Yet, being constrained to the position of the sentimental woman is therefore also characteristic of an illusion, since, through her father, Maya is relegated to the stereotype of myth and legend to which women seem to more easily than men conform.²⁹ In her essay, Gayatri Spivak has coined the term "regulatory psychobiography", which "constitute[s] the subject effect of [...] women, give[s] these women a sense of their 'I'". Accordingly, they are "model narratives that give 'meaning' to our readings of ourselves and others".³⁰ Within this framework, Maya is not allowed to develop an identity, a space or voice of her own that would be distinctive from her position as dutiful daughter and devoted wife who believes in and behaves in accordance with myths. In addition, through her interior monologue, Desai creates a language of silence for Maya, as her voice would – in actual fact – not be heard, as her words are all in her head (and on paper). But she is also not able to be a dutiful mother, as she is childless and loves her pet dog: "Childless women do develop fanatic attachments to their pets, they say" (p. 10), another negative female stereotype. The topics addressed in the novel, are accordingly, marital disharmony, loss of identity, escapism and a growing sense of the meaninglessness of life in the young, educated, upper-caste woman.

In Maya's case, the garden constantly represents a place of horror and the gothic, which is already revealed in the first sentence of the novel, in a foreshadowing of Gautama's and, eventually, Maya's deaths: "All day the body lay rotting in the sun" (p. 5). Her beloved little dog Toto has died, and Maya is incapable of doing what is required, which would be to tell the "Public Works Department" to "send their scavenging truck to take the corpse away" (p. 6). Instead, Maya is only able to move "the little string bed on which it lay under the lime trees, where there was a cool, aqueous shade, saw its eyes open and staring still, screamed and rushed to the garden tap to wash the vision from her eyes" (p. 5). The gothic atmosphere of the house and the garden are continuously depicted through descriptions of light and darkness, flowers, and wild life, thus rendering the space unhomey:

The light in the verandah was on, illuminating the white pillars with an inward glow, as of marble at sunset, though not quite so soft, or quite so translucent. Rangoon creepers entwined these pillars and climbed the walls, spread trembling tendrils toward the

28 Lal 1995, p. 12.

29 See Spivak 1989, p. 227.

30 Spivak 1989, p. 227.

roof and wrapped themselves around the gargoyle heads of the drainpipes, choking their grinning mouths with dry leaves, and crowning them with clusters of small, star-like flowers that had been pink and red in daylight, and now were white and strongly scented. (p. 12)

In this atmosphere of terror, the protagonist's thoughts are continuously pervaded with associative chains of animals, the seasons, day and night, that, like the creepers

[...] hung in long bunches, like those of white grapes, now rising upon the uneven breeze, now descending, with a slow, mysterious movement as of nocturnal snakes. They say it attracts snakes – this sweet, intoxicating fragrance. No, I am wrong. It is Queen of the Night that attracts snakes. Beauty and evil. evil, beauty. Snakes, summer, scent, flower, white, white, white. . . . In the dark, in the dry, scented April dark, the sky was dimly lit by April stars. Winter was over, summer had not yet arrived. I lay back in my chair and breathed deeply, lay there waiting – for summer? for snakes? for the moon? I did not know. (p. 12)

This stream of consciousness and, in particular, the last sentence, also address the protagonist's overall situation: She is afraid, and has no task to pursue, no profession or occupation in life. Thus, she feels a type of void:

Yes. I did. It was that something else, that indefinable unease at the back of my mind, the grain of sand that irked, itched, and remained meaningless. Meaningless, and yet its presence was very real, and a truly physical shadow, like the giant shadow cast by trees, spilt across the leaves and grasses towards me, with horrifying swiftness, till, like the crowding blades of grass, it reached my toes, lapped my feet, tickling and worrying, and I leapt from my chair in terror, overcome by a sensation of snakes coiling and uncoiling their moist lengths about me, of evil descending from an overhanging branch, of an insane death, unprepared for, heralded by deafening drum-beats . . . (pp. 12–13)

These two quotations demonstrate how in *Cry, The Peacock*, Desai combines the interior monologue with garden and animal descriptions in order to show the highly-disturbed mind of a young woman who subsequently becomes entangled in her unavoidable deathly fantasy, perhaps her own dystopian world, initially created by her mysticism-oriented father and inadequately dealt with by her unemotional, rational husband. The moon, for instance, is perceived as "a demoniac creature, the fierce dancer that had all day been trying to leap the threshold of my mind and home, accompanied by a deafening roar of silent drums" (p. 28). This oxymoronic perception of the garden epitomised in the 'roar of the silent drums', and, by extension, her own mind, is emblematic of the primary tendency of the text, as it reveals the negative effects of the prophecy, reflecting Maya's irrationality, disappointment, and unhappiness with her life as a whole, which

are described almost exclusively in terms of nature, seasons, the garden, and the house. Although the garden is also depicted using affirmative associations, the negative aspects nonetheless constantly prevail, often in miniature instances, as in the words "blades" and "crushed": "I stretch out my naked legs, and blades of grass are crushed under them, then spring up again with an even stronger odour of milk and cows and honey" (p. 36). In this quotation, the garden, apart from the "blades of grass" that "are crushed" under the "naked legs", is nonetheless given a paradisiacal connotation, "before the fall", and, by extension, before Gautama's fall from the roof.

Only when Maya has flashbacks to her childhood days does she relate to the garden in solely positive images: "Our table is laid beside a mandarin orange tree – there is one in each corner of the garden – a little faery tree, with its glossy leaves, and an overload of small, bright globules of fruit, like miniature lanterns on a carnival night" (p. 44). Yet, her father's garden is described like "a Moghul garden, gracious and exact, where breeding, culture, leisure and comfort have been brought to a nice art, where no single weed is allowed to flower, no single flower to die and remain on the stalk, no single stalk to grow out of is pruned shape" (p. 45). As the autodiegetic narrator's mind is often compared to gothic, animalistic, and botanical patterns, she also compares her father's mind to his rather rational Moghul garden: "As the streams in a Moghul garden flow musically through channels of carved marble and sandstone, so his thoughts, his life flow, broken into small exquisite patterns by the carving, played upon by altering nuances of light and shade" (p. 45).

However, in particular the garden, plays an important role in Maya's life as she seems to become one with it contrarily to the above-mentioned gothic aspect: "I have so much to look at, to touch, and feel, and – be happy about. I like to walk about here and touch things – leaves, sticks, earth, everything. I play with my cat" (p. 118). These utterances stand in contrast to the concept of the "New Indian Woman" as Maya, in contrast to Moyna, is free to enjoy her garden, while at the same time being dependent, or even having been made dependent, on her father and her husband, that is the male-dominated world. Therefore, it is strange that Gautama wonders how Maya is able to lose herself in her garden and her pets as he has played a decisive role in Maya's development (see p. 119). To be more precise, he does not support her by taking her fears seriously, since he does not believe in fate. In contrast, Maya does believe in fate and therefore represents also a kind of female stereotype that she cannot escape. Accordingly, more and more often, Maya is visited by hallucinations and spirals downward into anxiety, worry, and visions that find expression in numerous nature, animal, and night/day associations as well as flashbacks. This reveals her helplessness in her mental

confinement, as her husband is neither willing nor able to provide any serious support. The final transgressive step seems thus to be inevitable and can be read as a radical feminist act of self-enunciation, as it is a final elimination of male domination.

Conclusion

As the different conceptualisations of Desai's gardens have shown, the garden offers the Indian female child and young woman an opportunity to transcend the bar of the threshold, a seemingly utopian, yet also a down-to-earth act. If Zuni and Moyna do eventually successfully transcend the unstable, contested space of public and private spheres through the garden as a refuge and the barsati and the pipal tree as moments of freedom, Maya is only able to do this through a most destructive deed: the act of murder. Using violence as her only way out, she is nonetheless still not able to reach "the world beyond the home [. . .] in its real and metaphysical components",³¹ even though she has violated and rebelled against the moral and social order that the threshold dictates. The barrier, or threshold, installed by multiple patriarchal forces, that is, her father and Gautama, restricts and regulates Maya in her position as both dutiful daughter and devoted, yet childless, wife. However, perhaps as an act of adjustment, Maya is not able to truly play these three roles (that of daughter, wife, and mother), as her father adores and spoils her, whereas Gautama continuously ignores and scorns her. Thus, Maya flees into her inner world of desires and her belief in love as life's tenet, which makes her even more detestable to Gautama. His threshold, therefore, is non-negotiable, embodied in his lack of emotions and empathy. Similarly to Desai's novel *Baumgartner's Bombay*, through Maya, who is at the periphery with regard to her private and public life, as her husband does not take her desires and fears seriously, she is not able to venture into the public life. Even though through her narrative voice, she is simultaneously at the centre, Desai depicts Maya as more thoughtful than, for instance, Gautama. Yet, Maya is not successful to come to terms with her life.

Where Moyna's critical voice questions the patriarchal and traditional boundaries for women, and Zuni experiences refuge and, eventually, the crossing of the threshold in the enclosed space of the mosque's garden, as freedom, Maya, at the end of the novel, regresses into a state of "child-like" "girl, Maya" (Desai, 1980 [1963]: p. 212),

31 Lal 1995, p. 19.

who sat somewhere upstairs, delightedly opening cupboards, pulling out drawers, falling upon picture-books and photographs with high, shrill cries of pleasure hugging them to her, dancing around the room with them, on air-borne feet. Now in the silence they could hear her moving above them, like a poltergeist, light and quick on its feet, eager in its chuckles of merriment, and frantic in its ceaseless movements, like being hunted. (pp. 212–213)

Even though the emancipation struggle in India has stretched the bar, Maya, in contrast to Zuni and Moyna, is only able to transgress the barrier of the threshold erected by the male patriarchal order by falling off into madness. According to Lal, "[m]adness is a meta-language for [the woman's] rebellion and helplessness, for exploring the crevices of forbidden thought".³² With Zuni, it remains to be seen whether the refuge and crossing of the garden wall will help her pursue an emancipated life on or outside of the bar of the societal threshold.

For Moyna, the crossing of the threshold into the public space is enacted through her decision to remain living in a barsati, a truly emancipatory act through which self-enunciation is possible, whereas Maya's transgressing emancipatory act eventually leads to her husband's death as well as her own. In this regard, Maya's transcending move is an illusion, a form of self-fulfilling prophecy from which she has suffered from nearly all her life, which her name forcefully implies, and which the garden as a heterotopian space and as a reflection of her inner turmoil symbolises.

The garden and barsati (with its tree) are nonetheless used synecdochally by all three female characters to voice emancipation, freedom, refuge, and heterotopian ideas. In Maya's case, however, it is used as part of her inner narrative voice, with which she expresses her mental regression, brought about by her upbringing and her circumstances within a patriarchal society. For Moyna and Zuni, however, the garden/barsati functions as a site of utopian ideas that ensue concrete political possibilities. For that they have to cross the threshold as an actual moment of "hope for postcolonial female liberation".³³ Maya's transgression can be read as an act of personal autonomy that the garden as heterotopian, and often, gothic space invites. The idea of hope for (postcolonial) female liberation is a strong topic in Desai's writings as through the garden/barsati her protagonists experience some utopian dimension of agency. This shows that Desai's texts are characterised by an intricate conjunction of the garden space as gendered, emotional, and psychic, and ultimately heterotopic – a contradictory counter-site.

32 Lal 1995, p. 21.

33 Ashcroft 2017, p. 4.

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