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Discerning the Chronotope of Diaspora Narratives: A Study of Jhumpa Lahiri's Unaccustomed Earth

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Abstract

Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin's term 'Chronotope' is an aesthetic way of presenting human beings in relation to their temporal and spatial world. It is known as the space- time frame in which a literary argument develops. Immigrants, living in diaspora, are actually living in the third space where they attempt to create a new identity and a new culture for themselves, separate and different from both the culture of the homeland and that of the host country. Being a writer from the third space, who is aware of the politics of space and displacement, Lahiri's fictional corpus looks into the modern world that is racing rapidly to transform itself into a global city. Yet, her works are not blind to the world of heterogeneous societies that do not wish to leave aside their historical particulars which give them uniqueness. This paper is an attempt to discern the chronotope in the diasporic narrative of Jhumpa Lahiri's Unaccustomed Earth by artistically assimilating the structure of the temporal and spatial relationships which form an integral part of any diaspora narrative.

Chronotope is an aesthetic way of presenting human beings in relation to their temporal and spatial world. It is "a way of comprehending human life as materially and simultaneously present within a physical-geographical space and a specific point of historical time" (Morris 180). Chronotope is the combination of two Greek words kronos which mean time and topos means space or place. It is known as the space- time frame in which a literary argument develops, or, more technically, in the field of literature theory.

Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin coined the term "Chronotope" while rejecting the Kantian idea that the a priori space and time are inherent in the consciousness of the subject . He agrees with Kant that they are categories (and that without them the world cannot be known), but he considers that they constitute entities whose existence is independent of consciousness. For Bakhtin, the notions of space and time are generated by the materiality of the world, and can even be objectifiable for analysis. The notion of "chronotope" that Bakhtin extrapolates from physics, expresses the indissoluble nature of space-time, which, conceived in connection with movement and matter, are configured as its properties, and, thus, time can be a coordinate spatial: the fourth dimension of space.

Discerning the chronotope of diaspora narrative is of crucial importance since "every entry into the sphere of meanings is accomplished only through the gates of the chronotope" (Bakhtin 258). Accordingly, "all the novel's abstract elements—philosophical and social generalizations, ideas, analyses of cause and effect, gravitate toward the chronotope and through it take on flesh and blood"

(250). The chronotope of a fictional narrative situates it in its historical time and mirrors the chronotope of the real world (253).

Immigrants, living in diaspora, are actually living in the third space where they attempt to create a new identity and a new culture for themselves, separate and different from the culture of the homeland and that of the host country. Being a writer from the third space, who is aware of the politics of space and displacement, Lahiri's fictional corpus looks into the modern world that is racing rapidly to transform itself into a global city. Yet, her works are not blind to the world of heterogeneous societies that do not wish to leave aside their historical particulars which give them uniqueness. Such peculiarities like– food, clothes, language, religion, music, dance, myths, legends, customs, individual community, rites of passage and others constitute markers of their ethnic identity. These are retained, discarded or adopted differently at different times and places; but a feeling of oneness and a tug of the roots persist even after several years of border crossing.

Torn between two nations and two cultures, Jhumpa Lahiri, a significant U S based Indian writer feels a forceful need to articulate her profound understanding of the broken psyche of the Indian immigrants in the US, emphasizing the social-cultural and economic realities around them. Lahiri's investigations take her to the cultural, emotional and geographical location, dislocation, and relocation of the immigrant. The multi-level identity of the immigrants prompts her to explore the historical conditions leading to migration as well as the individual responses to these diverse circumstances. As a second-generation immigrant herself, she uses her creative talent to make the existence of the Indian immigrant in the US heard and recognized. As Rushdie says in The Imaginary Homelands, it is her cross-cultural experience of place and displacement that gives rejuvenating diversity to her writings.

Many of Lahiri's stories describe the intellectual immigration of Indians after the year 1965. Her characters mostly come from the wealthy families and are triggered by educational and economic opportunities of America. They usually strive to obtain either a doctoral degree or a job in white-collar professions. Fulfilling their American Dream to a large extent, they realize their goals of successful careers and economic stability. Interestingly, Lahiri also points out how their America-born confused children shuffle while following their parents' footsteps.

As Bill Ashcroft asserts in *The Empire Writes Back*, one of the key themes in post-colonial literature is the concern with place and displacement (8). The Identity crisis, an important concern of the postcolonial literature, comes into being with the development or recovery of an effective identifying relationship between the self and the place. Displacement often introduces such a dynamism in the relation between past and present that self-fashioning becomes an ongoing process in the lives of many of the immigrants. However, the title story Unaccustomed Earth portrays two types of immigrants. There are people who get engaged in a never-ending dynamic experience of translating themselves between host and native cultures. On the other hand, there are groups of Indian newcomers who struggle to impose spaces of mother land, with their relevant significations, on those of the host society and as a result of it, they decline to experience new way of life.

Born in America to Bengali parents, Ruma in "Unaccustomed Earth" lives in the third space all her life. The story records her permanent conflict between the culture she inherits from her parents and the way of life, her birthplace teaches her. Ruma's life is a continuous reconciliation between Indian and American ways of lives. To Ruma, the selling of the family house by her father is an act of cruelty and betrayal. Though she says no to American clothing, American cuisine, and American English, she starts replicating her departed mother who resists assimilation all through her migrant life. Ruma's attachment

to her mother increases after her departure and she is badly haunted by the memories of her mother. Ruma's mother keeps wearing sari's and jewels all the times, speaks only Bengali with her children, creates a circle of friends and arranges regular visits to Calcutta whereas for Ruma's father, the transnational character in the story, process of acculturation is somewhat spontaneous and natural.

The domestic, the local, the public, the urban, the national and the transnational form an interconnected spatial matrix, where possibilities for belonging, for choosing not to belong and for combining belonging in multiple communities emerge. Occupation plays a major role in one's will to belong. Occupation contributes to the moulding of self and identity through several mechanisms by supporting self-image, self-esteem, self-confidence, sense of competence and self-efficacy beliefs. In "Unaccustomed Earth" Ruma's mother, an expatriate, a preserver of her past shows a backward longing syndrome, clinging to her ex- status. She eagerly waits for the regular trip to India. She opposes Ruma's marriage with an American as it is unbearable for her to see her ethnic values getting degenerated. Ruma, like her mother, remains as an expatriate, unable to celebrate her status as an immigrant or transnational. Contrary to Ruma, Mrs. Bagchi, moves to America, just to escape from her parents' trap of remarriage after becoming a widow at twenty-six. She breaks all traditional bounds and subverts the restrictions of patriarchy. "She wore Western clothing, cardigans, and black pull-on slacks and styled her thick dark hair in a bun" (9). Her decision to remain single and teach at Stony Brook University, and her assimilation, easy acculturation and negation of insider-outsider conflict mark a sharp contrast with the acculturation, culture shock and east west encounter of Ruma and her mother.

The Indian diasporic communities, especially those that are made up of first-generation immigrants, are often hegemonic in their attitudes. "Only Goodness" reminds that it is not very easy for the first-generation migrants to transcend the barriers of space and time, even after crossing the geographical and metaphoric borders of their native land. There are many shreds of evidence in the narrative to suggest that Sudha feels alienated and hurt by the disparity when her younger brother Rahul is given preference. Though alcohol is prohibited in their Indian value system, it is somehow tolerated in the new surroundings, a woman doing so is certainly unthinkable to them. Realizing this contrast between the genders, Sudha lives as her parents' good little Indian girl, keeping "her persona scholarly, her social life limited to other demure girls in her class" (131). However, she resents that the same expectations do not apply to Rahul and that he is "allowed to wear shorts in summer, to play sports in school, things her mother considered inappropriate for a girl" (137). Here the social conservatives of her parents time get entangled with the current scenario of Sudha, making it difficult for both the first generation and the second generation immigrants to transcend spatial and temporal barriers.

No matter, how much good and ambitious a student Sudha is, her parents think that she should be always under the control of her parents. Rahul is shocked to see his sister's over-commitment to her parents. He exclaimed "Jesus, Didi. You're almost twenty-four, Do you still care what they think?" (133). On the one side, she is like any of her American peers, a free student who finds nothing unusual in dating and in using alcohol, on the other hand, she is her parents' Indian American daughter who is forced to obey the rules and regulations of the strictly patriarchal Indian value system. It is only when she is twenty-four and after completing her degrees at Pennsylvania that she is finally allowed to go abroad to study and break away from her family's grip. Sudha studies diligently throughout her young age, whereas Rahul never lifts his finger, never takes pains to please his parents. Sudha is a helpful daughter and a dutiful sincere sister.

Sudha seems to please her parents whereas Rahul never bothered to spend his time at his mother's table even during the Christmas celebration or in decorating their Christmas tree. Her life in "in-between" condition is very painful and marginalizing unless the diaspora is prepared to know both the cultures and its perceptional differences. The first-generation migrants and their definitions of what it means to be Indian, shape the socialization of the second-generation immigrants. They have come from India with culture and are experienced both the host culture and the native culture first hand. They take it as a privilege to decide what should be preserved, whatnot, and what should be passed on to their children.

Migrations have both erased and re-inscribed patterns of being and belonging, producing a self with multiple and partial identification which is simultaneously both individualized and community oriented. Thus, the diaspora subject occupies a space of exile and cultural solitude which can be called a hybrid location of antagonism, perpetual tension and pregnant chaos. Lahiri's characters cast light on the cultural sub-text of the global experience. Therefore, the diasporic narratives map the contours of the transited identity of the subject that are in constant negotiation and transformation because of the interaction between the past and the present.

The difference and the clash between the family-centered Indian culture and the individual-centred American culture turn many immigrant characters' displacement a complicated affair and the alienation an intense experience. Indian culture specifically defines the binaries, the home, and the outside world, as the two extreme poles. The former is largely spiritual and female space, whereas the latter is inherently a male space dominated by materialistic endeavours. Alfonso-Forero writes:

The distinction between the material and the spiritual in the domain of culture is essential to how nationalism attempts to resolve the women's question… The division between ghar-the home, an inherently spiritual and female space- and bahir- the outside world which is inherently male and dominated by material pursuits - determines not only the division of labor concerning how the Indian home is run, but more importantly it positions women as the guardians, and propagators of Indian culture. In this manner, Indian nationalism elevates the condition of the middle-class woman to a goddess-like status…. (853-4)

According to Robin Cohen, Diasporic identities are shaped in different spaces, which are interconnected and sometimes distinct and competing. Each different space is attached to a shared sense of belonging and to a sense of longing and shared memory of uprooting. In the story "A choice of Accommodation" Lahiri enters into the contemporary issues of Diaspora with a new perspective of cultural decentralization. The story shows how family plays a key role in the formation of the cultural identity construction of a second-generation migrant. Born in a well-reputed wealthy family of Bengal, Amith represents the unsuccessful Indian American youth facing the challenge of inhabiting the conflicting roles of a son, husband and a father. As a second-generation Indian Diaspora, he had been suffering from the issues of rejection and estrangement ever since his parents' untimely decision to return to India when he was a student. Having more concern for his son's career, Amit's father compels him to become a successful medical practitioner like him. To a teenager, his ambitious father's decision of sending his only child to an American boarding school was nothing but abandoning and disowning the child. Amit associates his Langford school with the rejection, he experienced at the hands of his parents. He expects beforehand that going back will be a haunting experience when he hesitates to socialize with ghosts from his adolescence.

Nevertheless, though Amit does not embrace Indian tradition, values, and culture, he seems to be annoyed by certain aspects of his family life that deviate from and never corresponds to the values and

traditions of his parents' birthplace. The story offers a spectrum of many such conflicting circumstances. Though Amit hardly gets exposed to the Indian way of life, he is worried about his lack of connection with his parents. The story creates the impression that Amit might have got attracted to Megan only because she reminds him of nothing of his parents and relatives and India. Yet he is frustrated thinking that Megan has never been fully accepted by his parents. Never, he can relate himself to his parent's birthplace, but he notices that his wife is not wearing the jewels his parents presented to her, and he unknowingly attributes so much value to the ancestral jewels. Megan, who is a breadwinner of his family, is a smart, hard-working busy doctor like his father. Even though Amit is not bound by the Indian patriarchal family structure, he seems to be worried about his taking up of the feminine role of looking after children and cooking for the family members. Amith seems to be more Indian than his parents when he loves and cares for his daughters very much and foregrounding him as a father than anything else in his life. His anguish is revealed in the lines; "He could not imagine sending his daughters to Langford – couldn't imagine letting go of them as his parents had let go of them" (86).

Amit is not at all free from the reminiscences of emotional trauma and he asserts never to send his children to a residential school because of what he had experienced. His feeling of defectiveness in a deeper relationship with his white wife Megan is portrayed very delicately by Jhumpa Lahiri. The story presents a powerful portrayal of interracial marriage, calling for the reconciliation of discrepancies, negotiation, and adjustments between the protagonists Amit and Megan.

People, who are the products of a collectivist culture, find themselves as strangers in an individual-centered society such as the one prevalent in the US. Living between the values of the collectivist and individualist cultures, these characters seem to prepare to deal with the diverse modes of living and to negotiate their associations with various spatial and temporal dimensions of their diasporic existence. However, they find the homogenizing forces of globalization and the machine-oriented lifestyle of the western world as a severe threat to their conception of self. From this perspective, diaspora seems to play a decisive role in defining an alternative way of perceiving themselves as well as people around them. No matter whether the story takes place in India or Boston, Lahiri's characters struggle with the traumas of exile and quite a few of them emerge as transnational citizens transcending beyond the borders of space and time.

In the trilogy "Hema and Kaushik", both Hema and Kaushik suffer from identity crisis caused by their displacement. Kaushik cannot work through his loss in the past, so he becomes a person who always lives in the downhearted condition and dies at last. On the other hand, she can have a negotiation with her past. Kaushik is torn between cultures: he desires for a home, but as soon as he finds one he has to depart and follow his parents. These dislocations make him baffled and unable to relocate. Hema, born in the United States and not enforced to relocate, raises like an American, visiting McDonald's now and then, dutifully working on school assignments, and trying to restrict the Indian influence her mother frequently makes on her. Contrasted with their parents, the second-generation Indian Americans suffers more from their exile and displacement because they have no preference for their life.

Esther Peeren, using Louis Althusser's model of ideology, explains the chronotope's function as "an ideology of time-space that interpellates individuals as subjects into collective space and into collective time through specific spatial and temporal norms" (71). In Lahiri's fiction in general, and *Unaccustomed Earth* in particular, this interpellation is tripled: diasporic subjects are interpellated by more than one chronotope simultaneously. They are subjected by home chronotope, host chronotope and the third space

chronotope. These chronotopes are considered as the "organizing centers," places where "the knots of narrative are tied and untied" (Bakhtin 250).

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