



Islamic Azad University
Tehran Central Branch
Faculty of Foreign Languages

A Cultural Reading of Space in Jhumpa Lahiri's Narratives

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English Literature**

By:

Hassan Rouhvand

Advisor

Prof. Jalal Sokhanvar

Readers

Dr. Amir Ali Nojournian
Dr. Sarah Catherine Ilkhani

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Abstract

This research seeks to address and examine the position and significance of space in Jhumpa Lahiri's narratives from a cultural perspective. The objective of the present study is to indicate the role of cultural space as the site of ambivalence and multi-dimensional representations. This is conducted by examining the fictive works, as the experimental ground, through the theoretical lenses of Stuart Hall and other theoreticians in the field of space and cultural studies. Three areas of *cultural space*, in theory, *ethnoscapes* and *landscapes*, in practice, are explored by drawing upon two major variables of this research, *space* and *culture*. The present research demonstrates that, firstly, Hall's articulation approach to cultural studies signifies a range of simultaneous double movements in the space. Secondly, the researcher argues that *ethnoscapes*, in Lahiri's works, encompass the spaces of resistance and articulation. Namely, the space of ethnic Indian community in America is the site of absolute differences as far as cultural interactions between earlier generation of immigrants and the host society are concerned. At the same time, it is the site of articulation of differences when it comes to the responses of younger generation of immigrants to heritage and to the culture of New England. And finally, the researcher comes to the conclusion that cultural geography of Indian immigrants, either in the fictional landscape of Lahiri's narratives or in the landscape of America, is subject to the diversity of representations and constructions. The study illustrates that diverse cultural landmarks and imprints that Indian migrants leave on the soil of America, through symbols and symbolic representations, picture a landscape with metaphoric dimensions. Accordingly, cultural geography is represented in the forms of regulatory, emergent, hyphenated and kaleidoscopic spaces.

Keywords: articulation, ethnoscape, landscape, regulatory, hyphenated, emergent, kaleidoscope.

Chapter One

Introduction

1.1. General Background

When I was growing up in Rhode Island in 1970, I felt neither Indian nor American. Like many immigrant offspring I felt intense pressure to be two things, loyal to the old world and fluent in the new, approved of on either side of hyphen. Looking back, I see that this was generally the case. But my perception as a young girl was that I felt short at both ends, shuttling between dimensions that had nothing to do with one another, Jhumpa Lahiri said elaborating on her double identities. ("My Two Lives" 103-4)

However, Lahiri has emphasized that "I'm lucky that I'm between two worlds ... I don't really know what a distinct South Asian identity means. I don't think about that when I write, I just try to bring a person to life" (Tsering B1).

The researcher begins with these quotes in that they address the motivation behind this dissertation which deals with the cultural studies of immigration and the resultant spaces in the imaginative world of literature.

Lahiri was born in London, England, in 1967. She is the daughter of immigrant parents, a librarian father and a teacher mother from India. She was raised in Rhode Island, receiving her B.A. in English literature at Barnard College, and later an M.A in English, an M.A in Creative Writing and an M.A in Comparative Studies in Literature and Arts, as well as a Ph.D. in Renaissance Studies from Boston University. Her debut work, *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), a collection of short stories, has won several awards, including the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 2000, O. Henry Award in 1999 and PEN/Hemingway Award in 1999. Her second publication, *The Namesake*, a novel, was released in 2003 and then was turned into a movie by Mira Nair in 2006. *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008), another short story collection, shortly after the publication won the Frank O'Connor International Short Story Award, Asian American Literary Award in 2009 and also was among the five best-seller literary list of 2008 in the United States.

The stories of immigration appear frequently in Lahiri's Indian-American fiction. The nine short stories collected in *Interpreter of Maladies* give a picture of the myriad aspects of Indian culture and life, both in and out of the United States. Lahiri writes about the lives within and without conventional geographies. Those lives portray mixed experiences of characters that are animated in her fiction. Moving characters in her migration stories cross geographical boundaries for diverse reasons and experience the negotiation of multiple themes of grief, loss, gain, alienation, displacement and identity. Those characters are unavoidably involved in the issues urgent to broken and displaced communities. Lahiri displays importance of such issues as tradition, heritage, home, origin, isolation, exile, resistance and assimilation for Indian diaspora. Relations, communications and negotiations are also illustrated in this colorful landscape via creative imagination of the writer and her stylistic mastery. Out of nine short stories, in *Interpreter of Maladies*, six which are set within America are the hotbed of cultural clashes and

contracts, differences and relations, not only between the Americans and Indians but also between the different generations of immigrants themselves. The researcher has excluded three of the short stories of "A Real Durwan", "Sexy" and "The Treatment of Bibi Halder" in *Interpreter of Maladies* from the present analysis which, he contends, are not closely related to the space of immigration.

The Namesake, Lahiri's first novel, is evolved around the topics that link Indian families arriving in America with their tradition and heritage. In a major instance in the novel, the Ganguli family waits for the arrival of news from their parents in India to formally name their newborn in America. This is regarded as a sign of respect and courtesy to origin. At the same time, there are topics in the novel which portray connections to the past as uncomfortable moments. For example, after the birth of a Bengali child, in *The Namesake*, the names that the newborn receives signify multiplicity of positions that he is going to be given in the new world: those of exclusion, inclusion, hybridity, normalcy, etc. Homely experiences of love, sex, relationships, passion, guilt and adultery are diverse aspects of the immigrants' lives in different geography in the novel. Also, skilful display of experiences of transformation, assimilation, resistance, divergence and convergence of cultures synthesizes the space of Lahiri's novel as a collective and inclusive whole.

Further, *Unaccustomed Earth*, the most recent of Lahiri's publications and supplementary to her earlier works, in terms of immigrants' struggles to produce spaces of their own in the macro space of America, enjoys rich portraits of newcomers' experiences. *Unaccustomed Earth* comprises eight short stories and one of them titled "Nobody's Business" is excluded from our discussion due to its void of relevancy to the subject of this research. The *Christian Science Monitor* wrote on *Unaccustomed Earth* that "Jhumpa Lahiri details with quiet precision the

divide between American-born children and their Bengali parents in her new short-story collection” (Zipp unpaginated). Besides, the book explores the relations between different generations of immigrants and the moves that they make within Bengali community abroad and the moves that they make toward the host culture. It is also about the myriad of responses that those moving generations receive, in return, in the new space. Lahiri, in this collection, seems to deal with more personal dynamics of Bengal lives within America or, however shortly, outside of America. The researcher’s reading of Lahiri’s products from new perspective aims at probing into the diversity of cultural spaces of Indian immigrant community in New England and the significance of the rising issues.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Interpreter of Maladies, *The Namesake* and *Unaccustomed Earth*, as the typical fictive products of the early twenty-first century about immigrants and immigration in the context of America, delineates Lahiri’s preoccupation with major cross-cultural and inter-cultural relations in the lives of Indians abroad. They also depict, in words or in gestures, her engagement with the dynamics of emerging spaces. In contemporary studies, traditional static views on space have dramatically made dynamic and metaphoric turns. One of the major contemporary thinkers of social space, Henri Lefebvre (1901–1991), has stated in *The Production of Space* that, recently, studies on space have been conducted under hyphenated interdisciplinary titles, e.g., “literary space, ideological spaces ... social space” (3). In the same way, this research is seeking to argue that space has also dynamics to be read from cultural perspective. This is the space where human being faces never-ending challenges and opportunities in his/her daily life. This is the space,

where diverse cultural phenomena, including class, race, ethnicities, religion, sexuality and gender are constantly essentialized and de-essentialized.

In popular cultural studies, launched mainly by Birmingham Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) and associated with Stuart Hall (1932 -), cultural space is read as the site of transgressions and overlapping, and struggles for positions as well as articulation of those positions. These recent developments and novel discussions on space through cultural perspective have posed certain challenges to the traditional and even some contemporary disciplinary positions. The challenges mean to disclose certain problems when theoretical studies are put in practice in social and material life. Due to the specificity of cultural relations in the immigrant society of America and due to the ever-changing cultural texture of such communities, this dissertation aims at further explorations of the spatial configurations of ethnicity and visual representations of human geography in Lahiri's narratives which are rich with such moments.

1.3. Objectives of the Study

1.3.1. Hypothesis

In studying the cultural space in Lahiri's narratives, the terms of *space* and *culture* serve as the dependant and independent variables respectively for the assumptions of the research. The outcomes of the study are noted in the variable of *space*, as the independent variable of *culture* changes or takes different forms. To study the correlation between space and culture and for testing the main hypotheses of this dissertation which are outlined in the following paragraph, the theoretical studies of Hall and the fiction of Lahiri serve as the experimental grounds.

In theory and in practice, it is assumed in this research that:

- I. If the living spaces are not related to the everyday cultural practices, then the space will take abstract dimensions with its postulates signifying absolute and unchangeable truth.
- II. If the living spaces are related to the everyday cultural practices, then the formation of relevant spaces will require articulation and inclusion of diverse regimes of truths.
- III. If the spaces of ethnicity in immigrant stories are related to diverse cultural build-ups, then Indoscapes, or the spaces of Indian immigrants in America, will be the locus of ambivalence in terms of cultural productions.
- IV. If the human geography is related to the culture-specific representations, then the landscape of Indian community in America will take the heterotopic configurations in terms of cultural representations.

1.3.2. Significance of the Study

By the global movements, in “the era of globalization and mass migration” (Appaduari 25) of peoples bearing their cultural baggage, and by the contemporary trends toward models of diasporic landscapes that

map varied trajectories of migration scholarship ... the old static place-bound notions of cultural geography has been replaced by newer dynamics. These studies rethink immigrant agency in process of formation and subject to the representation from within and without, while also emphasizing multiple, interlocking, irregular configuration at various scales. (Braziel and Mannur 11)

With these in mind, it is curious to know that Indian diaspora community sometimes claims that it is India’s pride that every member of millions of Indian diaspora spread across the globe is maintaining their commitment to Indianness. This follows the axiom that what gives a common

identity to all the members of Indian diaspora is their Indian origin, the consciousness of their cultural heritage and their deep attachment to India. It, therefore, would be significant to hear what the immigrant agencies themselves, in Lahiri's fictions, say when they are set against a big set of cultural negotiations in the host society.

Lahiri, as an immigrant writer, has worked her way up to become one of the major figures in contemporary American literature. Since 1999, when her *Interpreter of Maladies* hit the best short story collection in America, she has received several awards from the reputable literary foundations. The researcher has the opinion that her distinguished style and initiative themes in literary practices, related to the questions of immigrants, deserve much scholarly explorations. In Lahiri's narratives, Bengali immigrants arrive in New England bearing their cultural baggage, including language, rituals, habits, tradition and heritage. As for ethnicity and ethnic issues in America, immigrant generations take different strategies, including contest, resistance and concession, to produce the correspondent spaces. In an instance in "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine", Lilia draws upon a culture-specific moment which distances the host culture from that of the guest:

Mr. Pirzada and my parents spoke the same language, laughed at the same jokes.... They ate pickled mangoes with their meals, ate rice every night for supper with their hands. Like my parents, Mr. Pirzada took off his shoes before entering a room, chewed fennel seeds after meals as a digestive, drank no alcohol (*Interpreter of Maladies* 25)

Cultural space of immigrants is significant not merely because it capitalizes on racial and cultural similarities and dissimilarities. It is also significant since it poses challenges to the isotopic traditional representations of diaspora with closed boundaries. This holds true for the spaces of ethnicity in Lahiri's narratives. In other words, resistance is not the only dimension of cultural encounter as far as immigrants' stories are concerned in her fiction. Space of immigration,

viewed through cultural perspective, signifies struggles against assimilation and also surrenders to it. As for her part, Lilia, in “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine”, shows gestures of adaptation in New England. She expresses, in her American geography and American history classes, she learns her lessons and does them with her eyes closed (*Interpreter of Maladies* 27). In that story, host and guest cultures divide when it comes to the values of tradition and heritage and they partially come to terms through education, for instance, as a means to naturalization. As for the ethnic issues in this dissertation, juxtaposition of theory and practice will reveal whether the traditional views on diasporic space and inscribing absolute meanings in the new context are workable.

Another area of significance in immigrant narratives, and especially in Lahiri’s works, is representation of landscapes of culture, or visualization of human geography. Studying landscape in her works significantly demonstrates that cultural geography of immigrants is everywhere in the soil of America and in Lahiri’s narratives, and it is filled with the symbols of diverse cultures. In her works, we are exposed to unending visual constructions of multi-layered and irregularly-shaped material spaces. For example in Lahiri’s fiction, earlier Bengali immigrants load the symbols with values and exhibit them in the landscape to the effect of building a space in accordance with ideological preferences. In her stories, immigrant women, with their saris for instance, are pictured out-stuck as the regulatory symbols in the landscape and are represented as guardians of Indian values in the alien culture.

According to Hall, space and its material appearance, culturally constructed, is the site of differences and articulation of those differences. This ambivalent space gains more significance if the subjects of the study are chosen from the immigrant communities, since they are facing a number of challenges, in terms of commitments to heritage and cultural practices, within the host

geography. The idea that there is merely a homogeneous and a “singular, true reading of any specific landscape ... (is) self-evidently bizarre” (397), Bjorn Sletto writes discussing Denis Cosgrove (1948-2008) in his paper “Producing Space(s), Representing Landscapes: Maps and Resource Conflicts in Trinidad” (2002). With these potentials embedded in the narratives of Lahiri, it would be significant to study, in this dissertation, the perspectival dimension of the cultural building blocs of Bengali diaspora and their relationships.

1.3.3. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this correlational study is to critically examine a number of assumptions in theory and in the selected fictional works which are directly related to the Indian immigrants and their living micro spaces in the macro space of America. Assuming the relations between the two main variables of the study, that is, *space* and *culture*, the researcher, firstly, investigates various dimensions of abstract and articulated spaces in the theoretical domain, particularly in Hall’s works. In this part of the work, the research aims at studying the concept of space as it is in for a number of challenges, either to be isolated from the impacts of actual everyday aspects of life or to be reproduced in active engagement with diverse cultural moments. The researcher examines two assumptions of the research in close study of the ideas put forward by some theorists, in general, and Hall, in particular. In so doing, Hall’s articulation approach in dealing with cultural studies will be further explored.

Secondly, Lahiri’s works, as the major testing ground of the research, are read to further scrutinize the correlation between space and culture in distinct layers of the immigrants’ lives. The researcher, initially, focuses on the ethnic issues specific to Indian community abroad to test for its ambivalent texture. As for the spaces of ethnicity, the research aims at studying two major

responses of diverse generations of Indian immigrants to the new cultural space of America and to the cultural texture of Indian diaspora. In studying the spaces of ethnicity, the researcher draws on cultural differences and the mechanisms that are taken by the immigrants to deal with those differences that Lahiri's works spotlight. Also, the represented landscape of Indian immigrants in America is studied for its heterotopic configurations. As for the assumption of this study, cultural geography of immigrants is a locus for multi-layer representations via symbols. The researcher studies the function of the symbols and landmarks of Indian migrants on the soil of the host culture to find out about their significances. To make the purpose statement and the assumptions of the study more explicit, the research questions are outlined in the following section.

1.3.4. Research Questions

Studying the space of culture both in theory and in practice, the researcher will focus on five major questions of the study which will provide a path to advance with the research. Given the above information,

- 1- The main question of this dissertation is what configurations space takes when it is read through specific cultural lenses. Hall has argued that culture, with all its incongruent components, produces spaces with unstable, multi-dimensional and articulated features. The research intends to read the assertion both in theory and in practice.
- 2- The research aims at addressing Indian immigrants' cultural spaces or, as the researcher has chosen to call, Indoscapes in America. The study shall attempt the question that what it means to be a diasporic subject or to be poisoned between two or more worlds in

Lahiri's narratives. What roles do resistance through rituals as well as cultural negotiations and interactions play in developing or deconstructing such spaces?

- 3- The selected areas of study in practice, that is, ethnoscaples and landscapes, are argued to be in a constant process of definition and redefinition in the contemporary developments. The study is to answer the question of whether Lahiri's colorful depiction of spaces of ethnicity and cultural geography is the site of collective moments of homogeneity, heterogeneity and hybridity.
- 4- Cultural space is a locus where all its components are readily involved in the acts of producing and consuming, representing and being represented. What purposes do the politics of representation, construction and control serve in the space of Lahiri's narratives?
- 5- What literary techniques does Lahiri employ to build up her imagined spaces and to translate spatial codes into her language?

By providing answers to these questions and to the potential problems that the researcher may encounter in the course of this study, it is expected that consistencies and inconsistencies between theory and criticism are uncovered and potential dynamisms are unearthed.

1.4. Review of Literature

As a non-disciplinary theoretical domain, cultural studies grow out of diverse theoretical moments and academic traditions. In discussing the tradition of cultural studies, Hall's strategy is to articulate a number of intellectual roots, including classical and modern outlooks. Pursuant to this background, cultural studies are often referred to as a counter-disciplinary sphere with the

implications that it lacks a controlling disciplinary core. For the theoretical work in this dissertation, the researcher will focus on Hall as the main figure in the domain of cultural space.

There are some moments in culture that seem to be central for Hall in his scholarly work. Hall's position within cultural studies is to de-police its theoretical boundaries in favor of spatial method of articulation. This has helped him to question and criticize the taken-for-granted aspects of cultural studies. Interviewed by Kuan-Hsing Chen in "The Formation of a Diasporic Intellectual" (1996), Hall asserts that his interfering position has served some of his political aspirations (Chen 502). As Hall observes, this has also helped him to easily recognize the perils of defining boundaries for cultural studies. In another interview conducted by Chen and titled "Cultural Studies and the Politics of Internationalization" (1996), Hall argues that "As you know, I have always been slightly wary of defining too precisely what is and what isn't cultural studies, because of danger of 'policing' its boundaries" (Chen 396). He insists that cultural studies is the site of overlapping and transgressions. This outlook has served as an instrumental strategy for Hall to constantly interpose his own ideas as well as those workable views of others into the mainstream cultural studies and prevent it from being settled into an institutionalized intellectual position.

For Hall, issues around culture as well as the spaces resultant from cultural practices "are absolutely deadly political questions" (Procter 1). The point is elaborated by James Procter in *Stuart Hall* (2004) when he discusses traditional Marxist and new left standpoints and Hall's academic position towards both trends. Hall rejects Marxist revolutionary politics in favor of Gramscian views on hegemony, where the concept is interpreted as a political site of ongoing process of struggles between competing voices. Cultural studies, in this sense, would offer enough space to emergent forces, "which is sensitive to discursive issues" (Morley and Chen 5).

Hall's readings of popular culture undermine classical constructions of space as the reductive moments of either/or, high/low and inclusion/exclusion. Therefore, cultural hegemony, from Hall's viewpoint, is the site of contradictory spaces at which the oppositions co-exist, struggle for dominance, negotiate and push for containment and counter-containment projects at the same time.

One of Hall's principal interests, in dealing with cultural studies, is to investigate into the space of representation. He discusses the issue in his "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" (1990) where his major concern is portrayals from black identity. For Hall, representation is not an act of reflection but a practice of reconstruction, which is controlled by dominant culture. Such a critical approach to cultural studies deliberates space of representation as an act of political and ideological recreation that serves the specific interests of those who intend to control the means and meanings of the agency. For Hall, as he states in "The West and the Rest: Discourse and Power" (1996), discourse "is a group of statements which provides a language, a way of representing," (Hall 201) constructed with the aim of molding social and cultural institutions and identities therewith.

Due to the same ground, Hall theorizes identity depiction as a problematic process. Drawing upon the politics of identity, he elaborates, in "Cultural Identity and Diaspora", that the concept is not an essence but a positioning (Hall 238). He contends that "the boundaries of difference [between identities] are continually repositioned in relation to different points of reference" (ibid). For inscription of difference, he does use the word "play" (ibid) which goes beyond the simple function of "binary oppositions" (ibid). In his paper, Hall, beautifully, refers to continuous transformation of identity of diasporic agency implying that, in any instance of traveling across borders, the traits of a traveler and the nature of journey demonstrate significant

changes (Hall 237). Hall, however, does not essentialize “play” which may function as a means to indeterminacy. While he asserts that meaning and representation of identity is never finished or completed, he argues that punctuations and temporary positions also matter to hinder the ever-flow of signification process.

In the same way, Arjun Appadurai (1949-) accentuates inevitability of changes in the classical definitions of *dispora* by drawing upon the surge of global moves and worldwide migrations in the past decades. In his “Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy” (1990), Appadurai indicates “how various global flows have fundamentally altered the nature of global cultural economy” (25). He portrays different types of “imagined world landscapes” (ibid) in an attempt to describe the discourse of globalization and to picture the flow of diasporic agencies, which have problematized the security of conventional cultural borders. Appadurai’s voice is echoed, more or less, by Braziel and Mannur in *Theorizing Diaspora* (2003). They contend of diaspora flows as “new currencies in globalist discourses” (Braziel and Mannur 1). Through a detailed definition of the concept, they suggest that displacement, dislocation and relocation of immigrant diaspora signify “the fertility of dispersion, dissemination and the scattering of [cultural] seeds” (Braziel and Mannur 4). According to Braziel and Mannur, the trend, however, opens homogeneity latent in the discourse of global culture to new challenges, which postcolonial thinkers, including Homi K. Bhabha (1949-), also favor to further illuminate.

As a distinguished postcolonial critic, Bhabha is perhaps most well-known for his theory of cultural hybridity. He argues, in *The Location of Culture* (1994), that

The representation of difference must not be hastily read as the reflection of pre-given ethnic or cultural traits set in the fixed tablet of tradition. The social articulation of difference, from the

minority perspective, is a complex, on-going negotiation that seeks to authorize cultural hybridities that emerge in moments of historical transformation. (Bhabha 3)

Mixed space of identity, that Bhabha propounds, is itself a process of transformation, a passage for the possibility of cultural interaction and cultural hybridity that, simultaneously, acknowledges differences and rules out assumed or imposed hierarchy.

For Bhabha, the alleged homogeneous space of national cultures, as the transmitted traditions through history or organic racial communities, is nothing more than a static strategy taken in the face of global contracts and negotiations. For him, absolute claims to identity are in a constant and profound process of redefinition, redefinition in favor of impurity and mixed traits. In *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha denounces essentializing claims to national identities which push for racial drives and ethnic cleansing. He explicates the idea by arguing that "The hideous extremity of Serbian nationalism proves that the very idea of a pure, 'ethnically cleansed' national identity can only be achieved through the death, literal and figurative, of the complex interweavings of history, and the culturally contingent borderlines of modern nationhood" (Bhabha 7). Bhabha's argument for the urgency of new identities is a contributing point for those theoretical positions which claim for the space of culture as a process of new formations. Henri Lefebvre (1901-1991), the contemporary social thinker, is also a critic of Cartesian polarized distinctions in the structure of cultural space.

Discussing the contemporary views on the concept of space, Lefebvre points out: nowadays, there are claims here and there about the emerging spaces in today's social studies. In *The Production of Space* (1991), he writes: