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## **SEMIOTICS OF SUPERIMPOSITION, TRANSLATABILITY OF GOVERNABLE SPACES**

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### **Abstract**

*Tales of immigrants and accounts of diaspora experience appear frequently in Jhumpa Lahiri's Indian-American fiction. Her narratives are crowded with visual objects, all with cultural significance and spatial function. This study is a visit to the micro space of a Bengali couple in 'This Blessed House' of Lahiri to explore the geography of the house and the exhibitions therein; and, in the meantime, to explicate the struggles which seek to inscribe preferred meanings of the objects onto the outdoor and indoor geography of the house and to translate spatial codes into cultural language. The researcher has followed a progressive approach, as the method with the story development, to picture gradual and multilayer superimposition of foreign emblems on the homely decorations in the house and to study their function. It is unfolded at the end of the paper that the emerging relations between the mixed signs on show signify a challenge to the sole ownership of space, its governable uniformity and its axiomatic truth. The findings are thought to call into question and cast doubts about the soundness of ideological representations from diasporic experiences.*

### **Keywords**

Superimposition, Sign, Space, Diaspora, Lahiri

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## **1. Introduction**

Urban landscapes are primarily construction of human being and filled with cultural signs as their indicators. Lahiri translates these symbols, within and without conventional geographies, into her fictive language. Those signs portray mixed experiences of characters who cross geographical boundaries for diverse reasons. They also depict, in words or in gestures, Lahiri's engagement with dynamics of emerging spaces through cross-cultural and inter-cultural relations. In her works, we are exposed to unending visual constructions and multi-layer representations which delineate her preoccupation with multiple themes of displacement, relocation, identities, renegotiation of identities, and “sacred spaces” (Deesawadi, 2017). The purpose of this study is to examine the assumption directly related to the Indian immigrants and their living micro spaces in the macro space of New England. It is assumed that 'if the function of the landmarks of migrants on the soil of the host society is sought to close cultural frontiers, then the comfort of the closed spaces would inevitably be disturbed by interventions from within and without forces'.

In this paper, Lahiri's story of *This Blessed House* serves as the experimental ground to uphold our discussion on multi-layer superimposition of dissimilar cultural marks on the immigrants' landscape and unavoidability of subsequent translations and appropriations of “authentic” language of space. The study seeks to explain that homogeneity of space and uniformity of its material blocks in immigrant communities is in the risk of unpredictable challenges as the migrants enter new conditions or they are forced to interact with the milieu.

Notwithstanding the evidence, for the first generation of immigrants, who arrive as adults, the processes of linguistic, cultural, and social change are painful and usually incomplete. Immigrants tend to settle in ethnic enclaves, prefer to speak their mother tongue, and gravitate to places of worship and social events that provide cultural continuity with their origins” (Hirschman, 2014).

## **2. Resistant Spaces**

In his paper, Deesawadi explains about the importance of understanding the ways to examine the ‘sacred spaces’ and indicates that by creating “scared spaces” we are able to govern the narrative and story of ‘where we are’ (Deesawadi , 2017: 546). In so doing, he pores over the relation between the sacredness of space and the emblems that are set on show in that space. “I

summarized that 'sacred space,' for me, it can be linked to the theory of phenomenology", he states and then develops his method of creation of 'sacred space' and divides it into three categories: I. a symbol erected in the space, II. an image depicted, and III. the architecture closely related to the figures branded as sacred (Deesawadi , 2017: 546).

In Lahiri's tale of blessed house, a Bengali couple moves to a new place in an American city and finds a number of Christian statutes and icons left by the former house owner. Twinkle, the wife, represents an interest in those objects; however, her husband, Sanjeev, urges her to throw them away. In the story, protecting visual uniformity of newly-bought house of the Bengali couple is the primary concern of Sanjeev. He means to decorate the house with homely Hindu emblems from India, and struggles not to allow 'foreign things' to be on show on the mantelpiece or anywhere in the garden, which, he thinks, may disturb comfort and domesticity of the house filled with familiar visages including a beautiful Indian girl. He intends to privatize the space and to introduce his preferred codes as the dominant concept of it. He does it deliberately in an attempt to sketch foreground and background and to visualize dimensions of space specific to cultural and ideological priorities.

Besides, Most of the women among the first generation of Bengali immigrant society, as Lahiri portrays in her narratives, seek to crowd their living space with tokens from 'home', bearing apriori symbolic meanings. They aim to superimpose axiomatic and value-laden objects on the foreground, with their underlying regulatory significances, to adjust the standings of their subjects. In this strictly controlled space, the subjects are expected to adhere to an indexical language of signs through which the order and grammar of their existence is defined and fragmentations are set in tune (Rouhvand, 2014: 133). Via these axioms, familiar indications are legitimized and non-familiar signs are considered as unreal and irregular. In other words, they start from the signified to decide on signifiers. By convention, immigrants who arrive in a new geography are supposed to get engaged in a never-ending dynamic experience of appropriating and translating signs between double spaces of host and guest cultures; however, Lahiri's first group of women settlers decline to experience new way of life and limit communication and negotiation with sign systems of host culture (Rouhvand, 2014: 133).

However, Denis Cosgrove, on human geography, once declared that landscape is not an empty, innocent, neutral and mute space (Cosgrove, 1989: 179). Besides other things related to

cultural space in Lahiri's works, her fiction is simultaneously a depiction of inscription of exclusive meaning on the material landscape and resistance to it.

### **3. Superimposition of Emergent Spaces**

Ironically, the emergence of a set of different cultural items in Sanjeev's 'home' begins to challenge his way of decoration and his thought of exhibitionism. The "blessed" objects start their appearance from within the enclosed boundaries of his 'home' and from within the well-protected space which was thought would seal the impact of non-familiar elements and would cloud or keep out all the discordant signs. In his article, Tyler Nickl writes: "Lahiri often uses her characters' material culture as emblems of the tensions and contradictions in their lives. Her short story 'This Blessed House' is no exception" (Nickl 2011: 37). Charmed by the Christian symbols and figures, Twinkle persists to place them on show in different corners of the house saying that it is "blessed". The conflict erupts over exhibiting opposing cultural elements in the, exclusively, micro landscape of the Indian family. Twinkle's developing interest in foreign objects, including Christian effigies, snow globes, posters and postcards of Christian saints and her decision to display those objects around the house unfolds discord of taste and ideals between man and wife. Sanjeev, who is caring about his roots and heritage, protests against his wife's disrupting move.

In this story, the reader experiences Lahiri's portrayal of a young Bengali woman figure who emerges on the sidelines of the traditional Indian immigrant women and seeks to contradict the definitions of a typical Indian housewife in America. Elena Stoican argues that Twinkle is an atypical Bengali woman who does not "cook Indian food, she smokes, she is rather unorganized, and she wears high heel shoes which makes him [her husband] appear shorter.... (Stoican, 2007). Although her name is Tinima, she prefers to be called Twinkle, an English word borrowed from a nursery rhyme". Despite the images from stereotype Indian women whose voices are heard collectively and whose common concerns, by definition, are to do their best to be skillful in cooking, to wear traditional colorful saris in public and at home, and to do ritualistic make ups to follow a "typical" Indian woman example, Twinkle's voice is heard distinctly and discordantly. She contradicts most of the stereotypical Bengali women figures represented in Lahiri's narratives.

Twinkle, nonetheless, starts from the signifiers to decide on signified. She is an example of deconstruction of the image that has, for long span of time, embroidered the Indian immigrant women landscape. Her disruptive emergence is closely associated with the 'objects', the signifiers, from the host culture. When Sanjeev starts to protest at the initial gestures by his wife who wants to display the "white porcelain effigy of Christ" around the house and asks Twinkle to "Throw it away" to "get rid of that idiotic statute", she dismisses his command and plants "a kiss on the top of Christ's head ... [and] place[s] the statute on the top of the fireplace mantle" on show. Emergence of mismatching cultural objects tends to confuse the sense of being at 'home' which makes Sanjeev threatened.

Lahiri readily illustrates, through Twinkle's tale, that even the neatly-sealed boundaries have some pores in them. Nigel Thrift discusses dimensions of spatial formations and argues that "... there is no such thing as boundary. All spaces are porous to a greater or lesser degree" (Thrift, 2006: 140). Hall is also vigilant about disruptive forces of emergent spaces as far as cultural issues are concerned. He states in an interview by Kuan-Hsing Chen that he has always been wary of defining accurately what cultural space is and what it is not (Chen, 1992: 396). In line with Thrift and Hall's comments, Twinkle and her discordant interests are persistent in posing challenges to the regulations of disciplinary space. In the story, intrusions take serious dimensions as she imposes more of parasitic objects, of her preference, against the background setting of the Indian family. Lahiri notes that for Twinkle, the mantle

serve[s] as the display shelf for a sizeable collection of Christian paraphernalia. There was 3-D post-card of Saint Francis done in four colors, ... and a wooden cross key chain, which Sanjeev had stepped on with bare feet.... There was a framed paint-by-number of the three wise men, against a black velvet background, tucked in the linen closet. There was also a tile trivet depicting a blond unbearded Jesus, delivering a sermon on a mountaintop, left in one of the drawers of the built-in china cabinet in the dining room.

Looking for everywhere devotedly and dutifully, Twinkle keeps on her haunt for new Christian items to post on the expressive corners of the house, in a struggle to win aura of command and shades of meaning for her cherished objects. Matthew Amster asserts in his article

that social landscapes are the “locations where overlapping layers of meaning exist and move through time” (Amster, 2008: 177).

Concealed once from the view, Christian objects start at the margins of the house to eventually become major components of its landscape. Twinkle uses the objects to express her presence persistently. She addresses Sanjeev, who finds the view of objects incongruous, meaningless and irritable, saying that there must be other Christian objects and then she keeps her haunt. Several things including a “larger-than-life-sized water-color poster of Christ, weeping translucent tears”, “The switch plates in the bedroom ... decorated with scenes from bible”, “the dishtowel that had ... the Ten Commandments printed on it” and the “plaster Virgin Mary” all are located one after the other and are displayed by Twinkle to do serious changes in the geography of the house. Her struggle to alter the view of decoration rearranges apriori propositions of the space in a way to map out a loose echelon for value formation. In Hall’s eyes, cultural space is “... layered. Reflecting different interests within the dominant class ... containing different traces from the past (e.g. religious ideas within a largely secular culture), as well as emergent elements in the present” (Hall, 1976: 6).

The case of Indian couple could be an example of “... an interaction between attitudes and characteristics of immigrants and the responses of the receiving society, moderated by the particular circumstances of the immigrant group within the new society” which helps us better understand the meanings of translations of cultures and their appropriation (Phinney et al, 2001: 494).

#### **4. Translatability of Governable Spaces**

In *This Blessed House*, piling-up of the visuals by Twinkle is followed by an inevitable process of appropriation of cultural context. Those immigrant subjects who are stuck in the liminal spaces, and those subjects who are moving between two spaces of motherland and host society are unceasingly and unavoidably translating the significations of cultural signs into new meanings. This is a dynamism which allows for changes in the appearance of landscape in Sanjeev’s house. Twinkle seems to be aware of this potential embedded in the contingency of immigrant spaces. She makes her husband learn about the urgency of rising meanings that should be added onto the landscape or should replace the old concepts and their long-standing values. In

so doing, she goes far to such an extent that her husband suspects that Christian objects mean something to her and she has changed her religion.

Lahiri's story shows that gradual but non-stop distortion of the axiomatic meaning of landscape signifies impotence of exclusive claims on it. The more struggle for the ownership of a space as a property, the more interference from the periphery and emergent culture to dispossess the claimants from absolute claims on it. In Lahiri's story, the threats about the total loss of hegemonic moment of "Indoscape" (Rouhvand, 2014: 134) leave no way for Sanjeev but to compromise over the inclusion of Twinkle and her desires. The fight over the visibility of the cultural elements and the subsequent trade over displaying them remind us of Hall's clever analytic discussion in "Gramsci's Relevance for the Study of Race and Ethnicity" where he asserts that cultural space is a site of ongoing struggle for winning positions, a site where center cannot be settled thanks to ever-increasing interference of periphery, and a locus where the outcome of struggles cannot be guaranteed (Hall, 1986: 424).

The terms the couple came to over sharing and trading the components of space undergo open conflicts. In the quarrel between the couple that erupts following the discovery of plaster Virgin Mary, Twinkle threatened that she would leave the house if the statute was not positioned somewhere to attract the view. She urged her husband to accept that the statute was a part of their property. Although Sanjeev feels ill at the sight of those foreign objects within his 'home', he surrenders and they settle "on a compromise: the statute would be placed in a recess at the side of the house, so that it wasn't obvious to the passerby, but was still clearly visible to all who came" to the house. Practically, they agree to spare some space in the house so that Twinkle could exhibit Christian icons which have already posed so many challenges to the uniformity of its appearance and have reduced its concentric gradients to multiple center points.

In the case of *This Blessed House*, the incoherence of material space can be traced to the differences and heterogeneity of social forces inherent to their cultural built-up. These conflicts are basic to the dynamism of space of immigration, which leads to the inevitable exchange of traits. At the end of the story, Nickl writes, Sanjeev "feels a 'pang of anticipation' during the dinner party as he contemplates Twinkle and feels a longing for some connection with her (Nickl, 2011: 41). As the story develops, the challenges against Sanjeev force him obliquely to accept the engagement with Twinkle. Nickl maintains that "Sanjeev displays his college books and the effects of Indian Yuppie gentility; Twinkle has her menagerie on the bookshelf" (Nickl,

2011: 45). With the drama heightened at the final scene, while Twinkle persuades the dinner guests to follow her to the attic for another treasure hunt, “Sanjeev’s discomfort dissolves into bland resignation” and “Carrying the bust of Christ found by the dinner guests, he bears the weight of an image foreign to him” (Nickl, 2011: 41). His ‘hesitant free’ involvement in the enterprise is, in a sense, a surrender to the demands emerged, multiplied, accumulated, imposed and superimposed, in want of realization.

## **5. Conclusion**

As it was discussed the isolated space and the immigrants’ enclave opened itself to the urges of ‘other’ emerging forces from within. In the story, resistance to peacefully recompose the every-day geography and to rearrange the components of landscape was followed by piling up of indexical signs emerging from the fringes of space to virtually switch the assumed order of foreground and background or to be a part of the center. The effect on our experience is "deautomatization" of meaning. This could also be the second experience of Sanjeev as he failed to push for authenticating privileged statements in the context of new geography. Besides, we experience that cultural space is a medium through which signs are contested and constituted, and governance over the discourse of space is a temporary matter. In the same way, Sanjeev is unable to maintain his control over the structure of meaning and secure its unity. His earlier mastery on the signification of signs results ultimately in accommodating substantial degree of consent over their repositioning. The findings of the study illustrated that diverse cultural landmarks and imprints that different strata of migrants leave on the soil of America, through symbols and symbolic representations, picture their living landscape with metaphoric dimensions, which are the set against the traditional ideological representations from diasporic experiences.



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