

Spatial Reading of Jhumpa Lahiri's *Whereabouts*
Susmita Talukdar

Abstract: Jhumpa Lahiri's *Whereabouts* (2021) projects place that evokes both the senses of connection and loss for its unnamed narrator who, in her search of finding out her space in the world, fluctuates between what is immediate and distant. Her engagements with the surroundings and people at, in, and on various spaces/locations, and in different seasons seem to have become her own strategy of existence as she tries to negotiate with her loneliness in an unnamed city. My study problematizes the narrative space of the novel. Should the narrative locations projected in the novel be considered as just physical settings in which the author is unfolding the plot, or do these, with the protagonist's movement through them, expose the most crucial fundamental question of existence? The place becomes the most complex entity at which the author situates her character, as at various contexts those places take different significant meanings adding to the shifting meanings of contemporary life and purpose in the present age of global movement. The space in the contemporary global world of movement is slippery and both enticing and restrictive for human beings, causing dilemmas that result in man's disappointment and loneliness. The paper explores how Lahiri's text through its narrative space, produces socio-cultural and political place, and that further focuses on the psychic space delineating life enriched with varieties. My study attempts to overcome the rigid disciplinary boundary of English Literature without the theoretical constraints of several other academic disciplines, which would both make us critical of contemporary life yet sustain us with its varied resources.

Keywords: Jhumpa Lahiri, space, place, movement, predicament, loneliness, disciplinarity

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The paper studies Jhumpa Lahiri's *Whereabouts* (2021), the self-translated novel of the author's original *Dove Mi Trovo* (2018) originally published in Italian language, which, in literary translation of English is *Where I Find Myself*. I aim to find out how the spatial engagement of the text evokes emotions and generates feelings of connection and loss in the present global world of movement from one place to another because the spatial narrative of Lahiri gets significant dimension with reference to the contextual world of movement. The unnamed narrator's observations on several objects and people at various locations of the unnamed city and through her own solitary movement reveal that materiality of space in its geographical setting evokes human emotions, which further uncovers the fact that physical space and emotional space compliment each other in exposing a vulnerable condition. Indeed, today's world has connected us from one end of the world to another; still, we are living all "alone together" (Turkle 14).

The present study deals with Lahiri's narrative treatment of space in relation to contemporary world's motto of connection that exposes identity intersected by language, nationality, gender, sexuality and similar others crisscrossing various border discourses. This study also investigates how identity discourse intersects with physical and emotional spatiality. It also asks the question how through her textual spatiality Lahiri has unfolded man's intricate and complex psychic maps? It also makes an inquiry for what authorial politics and poetics Lahiri has projected into the most inevitable condition of human life at which man is susceptible to his/her choices and cannot decide anything solid, rather gets confused. Lahiri is known as a successful South Asian immigrant writer, whose fictions interpret the lives of Bengali American communities. Why has she first written *Whereabouts* in Italian language and then self-translated it in English? What is the purpose of Lahiri in constructing a plot, which appears almost like a diary? The author says in one of her interviews that taking away name of a place, makes it 'more open' and 'more liberating.' She says further in the same interview, "I think we can become too fixated on who we are and where we're from. And I think this can actually and does lead to a lot of very grave problems in the world" (Lahiri 2021). Is it Lahiri's cosmopolitan perspective to imagine a better world?

The text below explores these questions and hypothesizes that Lahiri, through her short snips of narratives, centred on various spaces and locations, has projected that physical and emotional instability are spurred by continuously changing scenarios which just don't reflect on temporariness and slipperiness of contemporary space but also draw our attention to the temporariness and slipperiness of every human's psychic emotions. One strategy that the author offers her readers is 'movement' to and fro to get rid of loneliness and the feelings of loss. In the narrator's constant movement from one place to another, Lahiri has registered places, which are both permanent and temporary and that further exposes how humans are helpless at present in keeping relationships permanent as social beings. This is a condition of being nowhere, though humans are always somewhere. In this context thus, the non-linear narrative plot of *Whereabouts* presents a crucial aspect of life and its challenges at which space, either imaginative or real, intersect with identity discourse, particularly when the diplomacy, politics and management of geography interferes with human emotions. The materialistic places become critical in raising emotional associations of an individual in its attempts to revisit memory, reconsider the present and reconceptualize the future.

Border issues in the global age of movement are quite controversial as they entail both attraction and repulsion. This is one of the reasons that a lot of people suffer from isolation in

the age of global movement, a movement that promises connection but fails to maintain it. In my study, the geographical border and the lines of control (LoC) are more than just physical borders, as they initiate emotional and other psychic responses of readers which further reflect back life in its varieties. The socio-cultural place, produced by Lahiri's text, problematizes the issue of geographical border by shaping the border with rhetorics of longing and desire, strangeness and familiarity, home and belonging at the various crossroads of global movement, which problematize the psychic space of love, sadness and conflicts in various forms of sentiments and complaints. Thus, the spatial reading of Lahiri's *Whereabouts* not only blurs the disciplinary boundary between English literature and some aspects of geographical space but also presents a certain human predicament in the age of movement.

In today's world of connection, this space of transition seems to be 'less real' and slippery and it is 'more urgent' (Tally 30) and provocative to go beyond what the 'border' is. The border discourse, besides being political is also rhetorical in expanding mental cartography; the elasticity of physical locations in the twenty-first century's World-Wide Web cultural world adds to the different dimension of relationships between man and his or her surroundings, on which Lahiri has focused her novel *Whereabouts*. She has projected human predicament of a new type of existential crisis as people are meshed between the cultural and lingual fixedness of identity and the fluidity of space in the global age of mass movement. Lahiri's narrative treatment of fictional space and place in form of landscape and or various forms of locations, not only evokes a sense of wonder and awe but also relates spatiality as more than an independent and passive entity, which prompts our emotional response. Therefore, characters can comprehend life enriched with complexities and serenities in its varied manifestations of love, memory, solitude, hope and quite often, uncertainty.

Many critics have written recently about this new novel but most of them targeted the language it was written as a new type of space for Lahiri. For example, Vani Kannan in "Language as a Moving Anchor: Jhumpa Lahiri's *Whereabouts*, Asian/ American Rhetorics and the Politics of 'Linguistic Migration'" (2022) analysed Lahiri's novel from cultural rhetoric approach and focused on the system of power that initiated Lahiri's 'linguistic migration' to move from her conventional delineation of characters and themes to those of unmarked, nameless, place-less characters. Another critic, Tanjil Rashid (2021) reviews the novel as a departure from an author's place and language bound identity and writes that by writing in Italian, Lahiri might have seen "the possibility of writing the everywoman English denied her" and to get a relief from the anxiety of the ties between the biography and geography many writers from the margin suffer from and, as such, with *Whereabouts* offering "a stylish and therapeutic release." Grazia Micheli's "The Pursuit of Lightness: Jhumpa Lahiri's Italophone Writing" saw the novel within an American and Asian American critical framework focusing also on the "Italian-language work," which contributes to the transnational and translanguaging understanding of American and Asian American life that contributes to the world literature in present times. Micheli explored the reasons of Lahiri's choice of writing in Italian language as being originated from both her sense of imperfection to the anglophone world as well as her own desire of getting relief from her ethnic identity. In this context Micheli says that

[i]n a world where people are increasingly crossing borders, and where it would be myopic to continue to keep literatures and language within closed national compartments, Lahiri endorses a sort of postnationalism that releases languages from any essential link to a particular culture or country and vice versa. (2021)

Furthermore, in their article on "Alienation and Assimilation: A Panoptic Foucauldian Study of Jhumpa Lahiri's *Whereabouts*" A. Sarwar and his co-authors read Lahiri's novel from a Foucauldian theory of resistance to find out that immigrants, particularly Eastern immigrants fall prey to alienation due to their resistance power, stronger than the external cultural forces which prevent them assimilate western culture. Furthermore, Claire Dederer in her review of

Rachel Cusk's *Second Place* and Lahiri's *Whereabouts* wrote that both women narrators attempt to liberate themselves by refusing "familiar forms of wanting" (2022) in their refusals they adopt as an attempt for understanding another life that can be lived by their alternative versions.

The above-mentioned reviews on Lahiri's *Whereabouts* are mostly focused on the author's departure from her conventional diaspora subjects and themes to her deliberate linguistic transference from English to Italian language as related to identity discourses with Lahiri's attempt to being included in the categories of transnational world literature. However, there is hardly any recent writing on *Whereabouts* that has discussed on the text's spatiality in disclosing various complicated psychic maps which not just contributes to the issue of border, sanctioned by political discourse of geography but also adds to the significance of English literature beyond the boundary of discipline. Therefore, I am interested to see how Lahiri's projection of her unnamed narrator in an unnamed city destabilizes the meaning of connection in the global world of movement, which promises strength of connection but fails to do so.

Whereabouts, as the title suggests is a novel about place, both geographical and emotional, which constantly shifts between these realms. What is especially interesting about the novel is its unusualness in terms of its narrative constituents: an unnamed female protagonist in an unnamed city, who watches people and events at various places like a passive onlooker and tries to connect those in relation to the spatial surroundings. Readers are informed of some of her identifying features (for example, she is middle aged, a professor, and about the fact that she is very lonely). The novel does not have a usual development of plot, rather the narrator's musings, ponderings, regrets and angst, her depression and rage at various locations ranging from 'In the Office,' 'At the Trattoria,' 'In the Piazza,' 'At the Ticket Counter' and many others to emotional set ups like the one 'In my Head.' Some chapters are titled with the narrator's everyday rituals like 'At Dinner,' and often visiting place labelled as 'At My Mother's.' Several chapters specify seasons and parts of a day like 'In the Spring,' 'In the Winter,' 'At Dawn,' and 'Upon Waking,' respectively revealing the way in which Lahiri's fictional space at various sites produces snippets of memory, pictures imagination, projects fantasy images, sentiments of fear and desire, and that, along with reconstructing the notion of place, reveals life's multiple resources of living.

In the novel, the city creates relationships for the narrator by connecting her with her childhood, her father, who is no more, and her love full of betrayal. The narrator's observations on the urban surroundings have created her own perception of living there, as she speculates the movement of people, while standing on the bridge. The chapter "On the Street" describes "the shadows of pedestrians cast on the surface," of the wall as a silent movement "toward a dreadful end" (Lahiri 2021a, 6,7). For the narrator, the movement of people, which might be their daily chores, is meaningless; in her utter disappointment of living a solitary life, she finds living her life as purposeless. It is through her perceived movement in the street the narrator discovers that her favourite stationary no longer exists the way it used to due to a new arrangement of things as it was overtaken by another businessperson. She imagines that the previous family might have failed their business, or they may have been evicted. Her assumption of what might be the possible reasons of her favourite stationery's changed status makes her paradoxically engaged also with the contemporary digital age at which her students hardly write by hand as they just "press buttons to learn about life and explore the world" (120) and so, they rarely if ever need a pen or pencil to buy from the stationery. Thus, the city at given locations becomes significant for her in making connection whether she is in movement or at not.

The first chapter of the novel, "On the Sidewalk," bares a reflection on a site of "a small marble plaque" with a name, surname, and date of birth of a son, accompanied by his mother's hand-written notes of greeting those who would "stop for a moment to ponder the death of her son" (Lahiri 2021, 4). The plaque on the sidewalk is a milestone of space and time, evoking the senses of loss and absence caused by death of a child and the hope of a mother in keeping her

dead son alive through the passers-by's sparing of a few moments of reading her dead son's data. But the narrator has neither seen the mother, nor the son, or any other person there in front of the plaque; for her, the site of the plaque evokes a sense of fear as she says, "I keep walking, feeling slightly less alive" (4). The unseen mother's performative act of memory adds to the significance of the plaque, raising people's awareness of a seemingly insignificant object lying at the side of the road many walk on by every day. Such engagement with the materiality of space evokes a special emotional response when the narrator bursts out her sentiments, her grief, her resentment, and complaints during the occasional visits to her father's grave. In a self-reflective and self-explanatory notes, she muses, about yet another space of the dead when she utters the following:

Here you are, in the heart of the city, surrounded by the dead... in your own realm, closed off. How can I link myself to another person when I'm still struggling, even after your death, to eliminate the distance between you and my mother [...] And may be the gaps between those tree stumps I always hoped would diminish, and perhaps even close up completely, represented that space between the two of you. (Lahiri 2021a, 145)

Thus, the memory of her father "At the Crypt" unveils the emotional gap that could have been filled up while he was living and would have helped her grow up stronger to be able to easily cross the physical and emotional borders. Standing before the "cold compartment" and the "dark space" (Lahiri 2021a, 146), the narrator unveils her longing for crossing the limit. In her frequent references to her unsuccessful childhood attempt of jumping from log to log, the emotional gap between the narrator and her parents gets wider, which deserves attention for further exploration of why she has never been able to take risks in her life for things that were out of her comfort zone. In this manner, the various locations such as the bridge "On the Street," the marble plaque "On the Sidewalk," the stationery store, or the crypt, are special spatial landmarks, which facilitate the ignition of emotional responses.

Whereabouts is Lahiri's textual imagination of a world where her female protagonist has never had to consider the words like 'passport,' 'borders,' 'checkpoints'—as she has told in her interview with Lisa Allardice (2021b). Place doesn't make any difference for her narrator and yet she still feels restless when it comes to telling about it. In the chapter "Upon Waking," the unnamed narrator tries to calculate her condition of being between the threshold and outside of it, in a state of being neither here nor there, when she is about to leave the city. The narrator is caught in a dilemma whether to cross the border or not as she has never been "on the other side of the border" (Lahiri 2021a, 138). She fluctuates between what is immediate and what is the distant and cannot decide what to do but after some time, in a weird philosophical mood, she reflects on spatial entirety that lacks "precise pathways" that would provoke both departure and adherence. The space of the city seems to bound her to a place when she says that

The city doesn't beckon or lend me a shoulder today. Maybe it knows I'm about to leave. ... the dense sky is the same one that will carry me away. That vast and vaporous territory, lacking precise pathways, is *all that binds us together now (italics added)*. But it never preserves our tracks. (Lahiri 2021a, 132)

In her hesitation, she recognizes that she is scared and "afraid to leave this house, this neighborhood, this urban cocoon" (Lahiri 2021a, 132). Also, in her attempt to self-motivate herself, Lahiri's narrator claims that a "new sky awaits me, even though it's the same as this one," being aware that "something is telling me to push past the barrier of my life" to which she heeds her "call, having come to know the guts and soul of this place a little too well" (Lahiri 2021a, 132-33). In this manner, Lahiri's text problematizes the salient features of border discourse when human life is at the crisscross of space becoming difficult to decide any destination.

One feature of movement across the physical border is instability, as Bertrand Westphal notes in his geocritical approach to literary studies (2011, 45). Generally, constant movement cause instability, which clashes with the sense of belonging, and is a critique of physical settlement. Continuous movements of people in twenty-first century's global world in this regards also involve a certain tension that arises between processes of assimilation and non-assimilation and the alienation resulting from the dilemma of making the choice between here or there. Also, this tensions involve anxieties for not being able to form a stronger sense of belonging to a certain space. Lahiri's navigation between two worlds and two languages can be taken as the tension mapped by her poetics resulting in a motif of writing, which has created a refuge for her newly carved literary world. Writing in Italian language and then translating it into English seems to be her new literary survival. Lahiri declared that she has always felt she has always existed in a kind of linguistic exile and she has managed to represent this in her new novel. However, this new book complicates the issue of identity and belonging in relation to "navigation" in life and space. As Eleanora Rao writes, the idea of "navigation" works "within a framework that simultaneously posits norms of identity and opens national identity up to discontinuity and displacement" making an "uneasy articulation of multiple figurations of displaced identities" indeed a key element "to the question of crossing linguistic and cultural borders" (Rao 2017, 225). And this is precisely what Lahiri's last novel does.

In the chapter "In the Piazza" Lahiri talks of a daughter of her two friends and envisions a positive future of the world in which people's identities would not be categorized under any language nor cultural constraints. This young woman is "fluent in the language her parents struggle to speak" and she "doesn't look like a tourist or foreigner, she's the type that fits in anywhere" (Lahiri 2021a, 17). She blends in, challenging obstacles appearing in various forms of norms, and actually crosses metaphorical borders and boundaries, exploring all sides the world can offer. Lahiri, through her fictional creation of these daughters, has imagined a better world where people would just be people, and their identity would not be constructed, maintained by places and spaces, and they would not be constrained by their birthplace or mother tongues. Nevertheless, the fictional parents of *Whereabouts* are worried of their daughter, but still hope that she will take her admission in a university closer to 'home,' which she will never do since she is "full of dreams and plans, she believes it's still possible to change the world. She's already brave enough to stand up to authority and she's determined to make a life for herself here" (17). 'Home' thus in *Whereabouts* is a problematic spot.

In the age of current movements, the connotation of 'home' involves subtler and complex understanding of belonging, as it is not a specific place. In Dorotee Birke and Stella Butter's observation 'home' takes different dimension in the age of large-scale developments as defined by globalization, technological advancement, climate changes and so on. For them 'home' in the age of mobility defines the way we live and the way we "do home" (Birke and Butter 2019, 118). In Lahiri's text, the narrator, though hesitant, is ready to leave the town, and before leaving, she describes how she has arranged her home, saying "I've given the key to my subletter... emptied out one closet and locked another, inside of which I've amassed everything I consider important" (Lahiri 2021a, 132). Perhaps in her new place there will be another 'home' for her, subtlet by someone else. Thus the concept of 'home' becomes both a permanent and a temporary site in the global age of movement.

Tim Creswell defines places as "not fixed'... but constructed out of multiple flows within and beyond a particular place" (Creswell 2011, 576), and, as such, 'home' is no exception of several currents and cross-currents of flow, caused by mobility. In Lahiri's narrative, thus 'home' as place at various locations, becomes both fixed and fluid, provoking both senses of belonging and departure. A spatial reading of Lahiri's *Whereabouts* makes readers engaged with several socio-cultural and political constructions that raise critical question about people's existence as they are continuously being scanned, making identity a fluid state since everyone is in a continuously the process of becoming and moving.

Andrew Thacker writes of modernist text's engagement of multiple forms of space and geography as producing a keen sense of disorientation and observes that "the switch from room to geopolitics, and back again demonstrates another characteristic of the modernist engagement with space," noting also that the "multiple forms of space and geography" produce a kind of "keenly felt sense of disorientation" (Thaker 2003, 7). In Lahiri's project of spatial narrative, such 'disorientation' is exposed through feelings of solitude, even though characters are among peers, crowds, masses, in the company of friends and relatives. The novel stirs readers to think deeply about the challenging question of contemporary solitude, especially in its depiction of what Lahiri called in her 2021 interview, as the "oscillation and unsettledness and shadows" (Lahiri 2021b).

Apart from the disorientation, *Whereabouts* projects a special socio-cultural-political space which produces further tensions but also aspirations when the author's focus shifts from the local to the global realm. In the chapter "On the Train," while going to another country on a fellowship, the narrator meets a group of five people in her compartment. She describes her co-passengers as cheerful, but displaying a certain anxiety in their physical gestures once the train halts a station. The narrator reflects on why do they behave as they do and she wonders

where they're going. All the way to the last stop, in order to reach the border and then cross it, like me? They appear to be waiting for something, they're excited, also a bit nervous. Every time the train makes a stop they look outside, alert, as if they don't know whether or not they should be getting off. Who are they going to see? What's the occasion? What's about to happen in these people's lives? (Lahiri 2021a, 156)

Similar to the passengers, the narrator cannot get rid of her anxiety when she ponders on how her new life will be across the border. She hesitates yet feels thrilled at the prospect of her new life after she crosses the border.

Until she come to this point, in her utter disappointment to fill up her quiet life, the narrator negotiates with her routines and rituals like occasional baptisms, weddings, or small dinner parties, but still she cannot escape the pressing feelings of solitude. She recognizes that solitude has become her "trade" since "it requires a certain discipline, it's a condition I try to perfect" (Lahiri 2021a, 27). And she finds that solitude inhabits most spaces she encounters. And movements as well. Thus space, in Lahiri's fictional representation emerges as a problematic site where identity discourses intersect with those of the border, projecting the individual's loneliness in our age of movement.

In her writing, Lahiri has envisioned a world where people's identity would not be categorised into compartments marked by a person's place of origin or by the mark of language. The unnamed narrator is a special metaphor in this regard, as it is the unnamed place along with the title of the novel. What ties the three together is the sense of loneliness. To fight this solitude, the narrator comes out of the cocoon of her urban comfort zone, begins to move around, and by moving from place to place, from 'home' to 'home,' she re-constructs her world of idiosyncratic 'disorientation:'

I've never stayed still, I've always been moving, that's all I've ever been doing. Always waiting either to get somewhere or to come back. Or to escape. [...] Is there any place we're not moving through? Disoriented, lost, at sea, at odds, astray, adrift, bewildered, confused, uprooted, turned around, I'm related to these related terms. These words are my abode, my only foothold. (Lahiri 2021a, 153)

In conclusion, Lahiri intends to focus on constant moving to and fro as a therapy for solitude and depression. This is a process of making connection with the individual microcosm and the collective macrocosm across physical borders, defined by geographical maps and bureaucratic policies, on the one hand, and metaphorical ones manifested by socio-cultural and linguistic norms on the other hand. Through her fictional narrative, Lahiri appeals for what Micheli

coined as “a world where people are increasingly crossing borders, and where it would be myopic to continue to keep literatures and language within closed national compartments” (2021, 124) so that people, being free from all nationalistic, linguistic and other cultural and identity oriented constraints, would go on negotiating with their ‘disorientation,’ as a mode of adapting the existential crisis of the present world of connection.

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