

The Elements of Metacommunication in Whereabouts

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Abstract: The present study is based on the theoretical framework of metacommunication. Metacommunication takes place when a linguistic text generates indirect or ulterior meaning. In a literary text such as poetry or fiction, which thrives on metacommunication, there are several ways of conveying meaning without using explicit statements of facts and feelings. In fact, the more a literary work suggests than it describes or conceals than it reveals, the more it appeals to the readers. In other words, the beauty of a literary work lies in its implications than direct information. Therefore, all great literary texts have in them combined elements of metacommunication. From action patterns of characters to the instrumental music in the background, many aspects of a fictional work can feature several elements of metacommunication. The literary text selected for the present study is *Whereabouts*, the latest novel authored by Jhumpa Lahiri, a renowned fictionist. First, an attempt has been made to identify all the elements of metacommunication in the selected text. Second, an in-depth analysis of those elements has been done with citation of textual evidences using the Discourse/ Content analysis method.

1 INTRODUCTION

Whereabouts is Jhumpa Lahiri's third novel which is originally written in Italian and later self-translated into English by the author. The novel is about an unidentified single woman's emotions recorded in a style which integrates several metacommunicative elements. The narrator in the novel is flummoxed between the need to belong and the refusal to have lasting ties. She has female friends, male friends and colleagues who at the same time settle and unsettle her. The narrator's sense of attachment is invariably followed by estrangement. The newness of a strange setting always attracts her, but after some time as she gets familiar to the surroundings, she feels suffocated and there is an urge to seek a new setting.

2 REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Gregory Bateson coined the term 'metacommunication' to denote the underlying message in what we do and what we say. If communication is the outcome of what is clearly expressed, then metacommunication is what is suggested or symbolized by that which has not been stated. Joseph DeVito defines metacommunication as 'communication that refers to other communications,'

(2015) and maintains that the meaning of a message lies in the words used as much as in other modes of expression. Meaning can be generated by paralanguage (Mehrabian, 1981), kinesics (Pease, 1988), facial expressions (Mehrabian, 1981), proxemics (Pease, 1988), haptics (Montagu, 1987).

The way the message is transferred is equally important to the actual message transferred. There is always an implicit meaning carried through the expression during the interpersonal communication "Since human communication happens between two subjectivities" (Mateus, 2017). The concept is "constructed between the lines of the relations individuals are building while they socially interact. Beyond the communication messages, we encounter instructions that enable us to cope with one another. In other words, communication always presupposes a metacommunicative element or meta-message indicating how to be interpreted." (Mateus, 2017),

In the context of literature and literary studies, metacommunication has utmost significance since literature thrives on multiplicity of meaning and absent signs (Derrida) such as pauses and silence (Mehrabian, 1981) contribute immensely to the connotation of literary texts. Moreover, language when implemented in a cultural context generates added meaning. In this context Derrida's speech given to the Congrès international des Sociétés de

philosophie de langue française, at Montreal in August 1971 entitled "Signature, Event, Context", which was quoted by Kiesler later, may be cited: "Communication had several meanings, and if this plurality could not be reduced, then from the outset it would not be justified to define communication itself as the transmission of a meaning, assuming that we are capable of understanding one another as concerns each of these words (transmission, meaning, etc.). Now, the word communication, which nothing initially authorizes us to overlook as a word, and to impoverish as a polysemic word, opens a semantic field which precisely is not limited to semantics, semiotics, and even less to linguistics. To the semantic field of the word communication belongs the fact that it also designates non-semantic movements" (Qtd. in Kiesler 1988).

3 ANALYSIS

3.1 Absent Signs

Proper names play an important role in understanding a linguistic description as they grip the reader's mind to establish a relationship of the name bearer to a specific culture. Proper names have the semantic perspectives of referring and presupposing the behavior of a character according to a specific culture. In Lahiri's first novel *The Namesake*, Gogol, the central character, felt like an outsider everywhere because of the unusual name he was bearing. In her second novel, *The Lowland*, the name Udayan gave the reader a hint about the revolting character he played against the conventional society. In *Whereabouts*, however, Lahiri has avoided giving any proper names to her characters so that they can be interpreted without having any specific cultural presupposition. The absence of proper nouns in the novel sets it free from any geographical or cultural identity. The absence of proper nouns for the purpose of referring to persons and places connotes universal character. The protagonist in the story can be anyone, a European, an American, an Italian or an Indian. Lahiri's art of characterization has given the readers complete freedom to interpret the narrator with no cultural or social identity labeled to the character. The deliberate reference to the characters as he and she has enabled the global readers to identify themselves with the character for who she is and not because from where she is. Reading *Whereabouts*, anyone can identify himself or herself with the protagonist because of the absence of her name and nationality. In an interview with Mary Louise Kelly, Lahiri

explains dropping of proper names to her character as well as places in *Whereabouts*. According to her, "...if we take away the names of the places, the name of the city, it's more open. I find it more liberating. I think that identity can be a trap at times. I think we can become too fixated on who we are and where we're from. And I think this can actually- and do lead to a lot of very grave problems in the world and for our society and for the way we communicate and exist and coexist" (Kelly et al, 2021).

3.2 Proxemics

Proxemics is the study of space that can be identified as an element of metacommunication in order to infer the proper meaning of a message received. Edward T. Hall an American anthropologist and a cross-cultural researcher coined the word proxemics to identify "the hidden dimension" of interpersonal communication through the study of space used by human beings (Hall, 1966). Venetin Aghostin-Sangar in the research paper "Human behavior in public spaces" has established a relationship between the human behavior and the environment. His stimulus load theory defines environment as, "a source of sensory information, that provides people with psychological stimulation. These stimuli can range from simple ambient features such as light, sound or temperature, to complex physical features such as buildings, streets, land forms and the presence of other people."

The unnamed narrator in *Whereabouts* is very particular about the physical space she occupies. She has a preference for a compact zone like a modest corner or a cozy little room. While she is at the therapist she likes the beautifully furnished small room. The walls covered from top to bottom of the room attract her and that's why she chooses to visit that therapist. The narrator finds herself at ease in that place and confesses her nightmares to the therapist. A small place ensures everything organized at its place and at the arm's reach, whereas bigger places involve a risk of losing important things. The small bedroom of her friend's daughter appeals to her more than the master bedroom. The slanting low roof with dark heavy wood single bed fascinates her and she feels comfortable in this setup. On the contrary the spacious hotel room where she has to spend three nights for a convention appears to be a parking garage designed for human beings. The spacious lobby, high ceiling are unimpressive to the narrator.

Her office room is small and cozy too, but she does not have any attachment towards the room as she says "I am here to earn a living, my heart is not in it" (*Whereabouts*, 8) However, when she lands at her

friend's country house to spend a few days, she likes the landscape and the interiors of the house. She leafs through the catalogues of art exhibits in the city instead of reading the books she "brought to keep" her "company": "I always prefer surrounded by things that don't belong to me. (*Whereabouts*, 102). Space acts as a conditioner in the case of this unnamed narrator. Change of mood comes with change of place. At her friend's place in the country she prefers to cook her meal which she would have normally purchase from a store near the place where she resides.

3.3 Chronemics and Chronotopes

Chronemics is the study of one's attitude towards time and this attitude towards time has a lot to reveal about one's nature and circumstances. The narrator in *Whereabouts* is fascinated to see everything neatly arranged in its place in the country house of her friend. The tranquility of the place motivates her to take a walk around the place, but without any company, she finds the walk too lengthy and decides to return before sunset: "Solitude demands a precise assessment of time, I've always understood this. It's like the money in your wallet: you have to know how much time you need to kill, how much to spend before dinner, what's left over before going to bed. But time seems different here. My walk took an hour, but to me it felt much longer" (*Whereabouts*, 102).

Bakhtinian theory of chronotopes can be used to inspect the place imageries and the chronological constructions in the narrative for a better understanding of characters and contexts. Bakhtin's notion of chronotope sheds light on spatiotemporal interconnections in terms of how one participant narrates her desires for place and place-linked identities. It is important to note how the narrator reacts to these intersections of "chrono" (Time) and "topes" (Place) in *Whereabouts*. Space has also linked with human emotions which the narrator expresses with her interest to buy the used household items. In the chapter, 'At the Stationer', she narrates how she used to give a visit every year to her favorite stationary shop with a fixed list of items to purchase. It was an interesting place for her as she was charmed to see the objects decked up so nicely that gave a festive look to that shop. She was more amused to see the whole family involved in maintaining that shop. The father, mother and the lanky son would always debate on the newspaper articles at the same time helping each other in managing the shop. However, one fine day she is sad to see that the stationary shop has been replaced by a luggage store displaying brand

new empty suitcases. The thought of ever changing world comes to her mind and she realizes that the time has changed where the demand for office stationary has gone down. The changing world of education too is condemned here: "My students can barely write by hand, they press buttons to learn about life and explore the world. Their thoughts emerge on screens and dwell inside clouds that have no substance, no shortage of space (*Whereabouts*, 120).

Lahiri in the above lines is hinting at the modern gadgets that have replaced the traditional educational tools. The popularity of digital class rooms and use of modern gadgets have put a halt on the sale of the office stationeries. So there is no surprise in finding a luggage store in the place of an office stationery shop. Again in another chapter, 'In August' she is unhappy to find the son disposing the used household items just to get some space that will please her girlfriend to spend time with him. In doing so he was getting rid of all the memories of his parents. At this point, in a flashback, the narrator remembers how she was trained from her childhood not to spend money on unnecessary things. She was the virtuous daughter who often could hold her emotions for the things she liked at stores but avoided purchasing them. However, she is attracted to the signboard of cheap sales in the neighbourhood. She invades the store and purchases a few things even though she is not in need of them. It was not the low price that compelled her buy the things, but she could feel the emotions behind the used up things that were on sale. Every morning having the day's first coffee from one of those chipped cups and reading the thirty three year old magazine she had brought from that cheap deal reminded her of the bare truth of life that emotional attachments vanish in this mundane world and what is left is the unpleasant reality of ever changing life. We know that the narrator feels contented with fewer things around, but the scraps she had bought from the neighborhood gave her company and entertained her.

3.4 The Colour Codes

From a study of the colour codes used by Lahiri, one cannot say that the narrator has a preference for any colour. She likes her wall colours to be bland, but makes sure that the entire wall remains covered. Her office has bland coloured walls and she always desires her bookshelf to cover the entire wall. She admires the crockery in her friend's house, "the thick yellow plates and the thin transparent glasses." Spring is the season of happiness and new beginnings. There is the colour green all around. The entire world rejuvenates with the invigorated nature, but this

season brings bleak memories to the narrator. The green trees, peaches in the market do not attract her. She prefers to stay in bed even though she is awake. The spring season stings her with all the loss she had born over the years. She prefers to stay in the darker speck than in the light colors of the season. There is no description of the particular losses she suffered around this time of the year, but it is clear that she certainly did.

3.5 Silence and Pauses

The unnamed speaker of the novel has the affinity with the character Gauri in *The Lowland*. Like Gauri, who could enjoy her sound sleep in the balcony in spite of the heavy traffic noise outside, she finds her isolation in the mid of commotion. The absolute silence of the night disturbs her sleep. The absence of movements on the road brings her the gloomiest thoughts and it continues until there is sunlight and movement on the road: "That silence combined with the black sky, takes hold over me until the first light returns and dispel those thoughts, until I hear the presence of lives passing by along the road below me" (*Whereabouts*, 107). When it comes to relationships, however, the narrator has a very different attitude to silence. She never confesses any romantic feelings for her male friend with whom she spends time frequently. She has no verbal communication with the gentleman in the adjacent room of a hotel in which she has to spend three nights, but they coincidentally wait for each other in the morning and the evening to share the elevator before going their own ways and "for three days" their "tacit bonds" puts her "obscurely at peace with the world" (*Whereabouts*, 55). She feels connected to someone she has not exchanged a word with, whereas all the intellectual deliberations for which she has traveled up to that place do not appeal to her at all. That is the kind of effect silence has on her relationships.

4 CONCLUSION

In *Whereabouts*, Jhumpa Lahiri has adopted a different approach to fiction writing with the introduction of an unnamed universal character which represents a transnational milieu. Lahiri's efforts to convey the universal human feelings without having any burden of national or cultural identity add a freshness to her own literary output which had so far focused on the issues pertaining to individual identity. In the narration, she has used metacommunicative

elements like absent signs, silence, colour codes and chronotopes as the communicating agents to articulate the emotions and thought process of the protagonist. The study is a multidisciplinary approach to research as it lets the domain of creative writing intersect with that of Communication sciences. The analysis can help communication practitioners understand the concept of metacommunication better. Due to the constraint of word limit, limited number of metacommunicative elements have been analysed in this article. These elements can be further elaborated along with the other elements not included here in future research on the same topic.

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