

La Quotidienne: The Residue of Everyday in Jhumpa Lahiri's Whereabouts

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ABSTRACT

Transcontinental displacements and the attendant cultural anxieties set the backdrop of the fictional world of Jhumpa Lahiri. But *Whereabouts*, the recent novel of the author, taking a departure from the oeuvre, narrates the lonely life of a woman in vignettes and in a fragmentary fashion without specifics. The paper analyses the everyday of the narrator which evinces the paradox of the iterative quotidian banality juxtaposed with the astonishing and bizarre. Hence, the argument is that the litany of everyday pitted against the anxiety of displacement as an antidote by the narrator is a failed project. The narrator finds herself in the liminal zone between stasis and mobility and the mundane and exciting. In order to escape from this precarious existence, the narrator resorts to mobility and displacement. Hence this novel too winds the same trajectory of the oeuvre of the author.

Key Words: Litany of Everyday, the Quotidian, Paradox, Chaotic Interior, Dislocation

INTRODUCTION

Jhumpa Lahiri is considered as "a literary default for Indian-American experience in fiction" (Gill). Cultural anxieties of an Indian immigrant in America and the complexities of setting roots in an alien culture set the backdrop of her fictional world.¹ But her recent novel, originally written in Italian and translated into English by the author herself, *Whereabouts* (2021) is a marked departure from the oeuvre of the author as it attempts to debunk most of her fears and anxieties of geographies and hyphenated identities.² The present novel takes a sharp deviation from these usual cultural scenarios and basks in the euphoria of being able to live in an anonymous culture without carrying the tag of insider and outsider. Here in this novel, the author's recurring fear of displacement has been somewhat resolved as the novel is anchored in the ruminations of the psychic spheres of the author. The author, through fragments presents the iterative quotidian banality of her life where specifics are intentionally avoided. The story is told in vignettes, unconnected with the previous and succeeding chapters which seldom make a linear realistic narrative. These vignettes that the author narrates are perceived through the lens of her inner psychic realm and that exposes her extreme solitude in an urban space. Through these fragments, the author attempts to conjure up her identity and unveils the priorities of her existence. The author seems to be deeply unsettled by both the change and stasis of her life and the mundane activities of such a life make the core of her being. The titles of chapters are given as temporal prepositional markers and that make a peep into the quotidian life of the author's existence. The story is narrated by a middle aged single woman who is an academic and a writer. The author narrates the iterative banalities of her life weaving a rhythmic pattern for her life which is uninterrupted by a partner, children, siblings or friends. The sanctity of the solitude that the narrator cherishes and considers precious is remaining considerably uninterrupted throughout the tenure of the narrative.

Apparently, the trajectory of the novel is formed by chronicling the listlessness and frustrations of a life that lack drama and action. The narrative moves furtively and gloomily in a fragmentary fashion from events to events conveying the glimpses of the reclusive character of the narrator's banal life. The narrator provides the subtle details of her de-aesthetised and uneventful life in which she has been cocooned. In a way, it's the story of a barren everyday existence lived invisible from the pressures of the society. But on a closer examination, it can be perceived that this reclusiveness that the narrator adorns is a rather vulnerable one and enough of life's conflicts and contradictions lurk in the inner world of the author's mind. Under the veneer of the quotidian everyday lurk the deeper pressures and frustrations of her life. This paradox of the quotidian banality is the characteristic feature of the novel *Whereabouts* which carry the marks of deep fissures within this existential barrenness of the narrator's life. In the present paper I propose to study the contradictions and paradoxes that

lurk in the quotidian life of the narrator for the purpose of substantiating my argument that the recurring anxieties of geographical dislocations and its cultural dilemmas inform the present novel too albeit Lahiri has pitted the nuances of the narrator's quotidian life as an antidote to the pains involved in cultural displacements.

The Litany of Everyday and the Paradox of Mundane and Bizarre

The novel *Whereabouts* is an epic of everyday life where the undramatic and banal activities and events of life are narrated by the author in a fragmentary fashion. Henry Lefebvre, a leading theorist of the everyday, observes that "everyday life" is "in a sense residual, defined by „what is left over“ after all distinct, superior, specialized, structured activities have been singled out by analysis" (*Critique* 97). It's worth quoting Lefebvre's most articulated definition of everyday life here:

Everyday life is profoundly related to all activities, and encompasses them with all their differences and their conflicts; it is their meeting place, their bond, their common ground. And it is in everyday life that the sum total of relations which make the human-and every human being-a whole takes its shape and its form. In it are expressed and fulfilled those relations which bring into play the totality of the real, albeit in a certain manner which is always partial and incomplete: friendship, comradeship, love, the need to communicate, play, etc. . . the critique of everyday life studies human nature in its concreteness (97).

The residue of the everyday life of the narrator, singled out from the socio-political churning of the time, in Lahiri's novel is, analysed and processed recurrently by the narrator in the crucible of her inner realm and taken out as the paratactic piling of fragments. The ennui of this everydayness is detailed by the narrator in each chapter which is titled in temporal prepositional markers. By extensively referring to the details of the humdrum of her life, the narrator is persuasively drawing the attention of the readers to the dejection and immobility of her life. Evidently, this scheme patterns the whole narrative.

Though Lefebvre emphasized the notion of the every day as the "residual" or "left over", he further views that that every day is "[a]t once empty and miraculously full" (Sheringham 143). The quotidian life potently carries the larger significations of the socio-political realities in which the human lives are embedded. The familiar texture of human existence carries within it the works of ideology. Narrating the everyday serves the purpose of documenting the micro politics of everyday life. Discourses of every day are neither neutral nor innocent as we presume but it carries with it the potent realities of the socio-political and cultural scenarios in which we live. Mark Poster believes that "every day is a region in which the human is most fully expressed in its totality" (740). Litany of daily activities is often unorganized, serendipitous, informal, chaotic and unstructured still an analysis of it will expose its contradictions and paradoxes. Lefebvre observes: "a philosophical inventory and analysis of everyday life that will expose its ambiguities-its baseness and exuberance, its poverty and fruitfulness- and by these unorthodox means release the creative energies that are an integral part of it" (*Everyday Life* 13). The novel *Whereabouts* by Jhumpa Lahiri is a narrative of the tedious and mundane everydayness of the unnamed narrator in a dispassionate and detached manner but it gives enough clues about the chaotic and emotional interior of the narrator. The bizarre and astonishing often erupts from the cracks of humdrum and mundane in the narrative.

At the trattoria where the narrator used to take her lunch, the narrator spots a father and a daughter who was recently separated from her mother. The narrator of Jhumpa Lahiri's novel observes them and comments about the father's inability in convincing the daughter about something:

The father gives in. He stops trying, this week, to convince her. Now he, too, looks at his cell phone. She only eats part of her dish, and he finishes it for her (Lahiri 13).

Here the feigned calmness of the father and daughter deceives their emotional state of mind. Father simply looks at his cell phone and finishes off the dish. This discrepancy between the external calmness and deeper churning in the inside is typical of Lahiri's novel. Everyday acts like a calm superficial surface but under the facade of it churn the deeper pressures. The narrator of the novel looks at the humdrum of life's moments and documents it as the poetics of the everyday albeit it contains the drama of life. Lahiri's everyday is textured with emotion. "I am content with a firm embrace even though I don't share my life with anyone", she writes (6). The narrator of the story keeps this aloofness from the moments of intimacies. This mix of the mundane with the extra ordinary is a characteristic feature of this narrative. Glimpses of extraordinary lurk in the ennui of the everyday.

The narrator of the story presents herself as glued to a life of stasis. She intermingles her everyday with the frustrations of personal losses which are tinged with its attendant emotional baggage. The narrator writes:

Every blow in my life took place in spring. Each lasting sting. That's why I am afflicted by the green of trees, the first peaches in the market, the light flowing skirts that the women in my neighborhood start to wear. These things only remind me of loss, of betrayal, of disappointment (14).

The attendant paraphernalia of the spring season, which are recurring and ordinary, poignantly remind the author her losses and its disappointments. The plight of the author's existence remains latent in the greenness of the trees. The dailiness is pitted against the emotional churning of the author in the narrative. While describing the everyday, the author is neither dispassionate nor unaware of the emotional baggage that she carries within. Epstein observes that the repetitive nature of everyday life is "not something to be decried or celebrated, but rather as a paradoxical and complex phenomenon worthy of exploration" (Epstein 760). More than as a tangible thing or set of experiences, everyday is an ongoing, fluid and dynamic process. The everyday of the narrator's life in Lahiri's novel is an indication of a deeper emotional world and it carries the paradoxes within it. The novel is abundant with moments like this where the narrator details on the quotidian whereas it carries the tag of the emotional limbo. Writing of her experience of meeting her ex in a bookstore, she narrates her experience of meeting another woman who knew her boyfriend as she did; she writes:

We sat down and started to chat. Pulling out our agendas, we reviewed, point by point, details of our parallel relationships: vacations and other memorable moments, herniated disks, bouts of flu. It was a long and harrowing conversation. A meticulous exchange of information, of disparate dates that solved a mystery, that dispelled a nightmare I'd been unconsciously living. We realized that we were two survivors, and in the end we felt like partners in a crime (26).

After this moment of recognition that the woman too is loved by her boyfriend, and the parting of her ways from him, the life went on without apparently any emotional turmoil. The author describes the following actions and feelings like this; "I felt as if I were finally coming up for air. The sun started to set and we were hungry, and when there was nothing left to say we went out to share a meal" (26). The whole incident of meeting the other woman has been given as detailing an uneventful incident of life. The detached objectivity that the narrator dons in such an emotionally charged situation is apparent here. Another chapter titled as „In the Sun“ begins like this:

Today there are protests downtown, and the helicopters have been circling the city all morning. But it's the sun that wakes me up, and it beckons me to my desk, where I write, wrapped in my robe, and then it draws me down to the piazza, where I am greeted by the contained mayhem of my neighborhood (60).

Here the author juxtaposes the everyday with the political. This is an instance of Pearsall's "conflation of the political and the mundane" (99). The author makes casual remarks about the protests and circling helicopters in the city and sweeps the political turmoil of the day to the background and foregrounds the polymorphic every day. The author purposively shrugs off from detailing the political incidents of the background and speaks of the humdrum of her life. This passage symbolically speaks about the preferences of the narrator. Juxtaposing the contained mayhem of her neighborhood with the „uncontained“ political turmoil of the day, the author intentionally desists herself from speaking about the latter. But clichéd realities of life carry the politics of the day in an implicit and abstract manner.

The narrator in Lahiri's novel is fond of leading a minimal life with scanty needs, aspirations and desires. The cloistered life that the narrator has fallen in love with was kept as sanctified as possible and she always resisted any kind of intrusion into it. The ennui of the ordinary is visible in the incident of visiting a therapist who asked the narrator to speak of a positive thing in her life. She narrated the therapist about her habit of "taking breakfast in the balcony with the sun shining" or "writing down a sentence or two sitting outside" (Lahiri 33). Maurice Blanchot, another theorist of the everyday, observes that the everyday is "what we are first of all and most often; at work, at leisure, awake, asleep, in the street, in private existence. The everyday, then, is ourselves, ordinarily" (Cited in Pearsall 12). In this sense, the narrator in the present novel is fond of the ennui of her life and she assiduously maintains the sameness and perpetual recurrence of it. The mundane dailiness has entered the nook and cranny of her lonely existence. This is evident in the author's declining of invitation for dinner by her lover or her inability to make a lasting friendship with a philosopher scholar whom she met at an annual academic conference, which she felt as another drab affair. The narrator writes of how she has been displaced from the couch of her insularity when she was visited by her friend, her husband and child. She doesn't like anything that transports her away from the humdrum of the everyday. Even an errant line on the white covering of her couch made by the child leaves her deeply distracted and then onwards, she stopped reading sitting on it. Similarly, her memories of a date with a married man were described in quotidian details and this is symptomatic of the narrator's intentional feigning of a dispassionate and impersonal attitude to the incident. She writes:

A few faltering memories. Some trips outside the city at lunchtime, in his car. He liked to drive, take a random exit and find a tiny place in the country-side to have a good meal (Lahiri 95).

Even such passionate moments of life becomes, to the narrator, a different program of insistent focus on the everyday. In the similar vein, she writes about her ignorance of him;

I had no idea where he lived with his wife; I never asked which city he returned to. He never came to my place. I waited for his phone call and showed up for every date. It was an incendiary surge that has nothing to do with me anymore (96).

So, the passionate and dramatic moments of life such as these are purposefully presented in a distanced and detached manner. The author conceals the momentary emotional response to these situations within her and she vitiates the personal agency of such moments. The placid and distant exterior of the author covers the intimate and passionate interior. This dichotomy is typical of this narrative. Obviously, the narrator has mastered the craftsmanship to conceal the exciting and bizarre under the rubric of the quotidian or reinvest the habitual with a sense of astonishing.

This is the fault line in the schema of the narrative. Under the veneer of detailing the banality of life, the author passionately indulges in the momentary and the astonishing and this often moves towards the level of fantasy. Once, while the narrator was walking, she came across an elderly man and woman with a draining mechanism that emerges from her belly; “two tubes, two plastic sacks. One is full of blood and the other holds liquid, relatively clear but viscous” (98). Seeing this for a moment, the narrator became conscious of “the substances that flow inside our bodies, which need to circulate, which need to be eliminated at intervals. All those hidden functions, ugly and essential” (99). Moments of epiphany like this regarding the existence of corporal frame erupts and the narrator seems to be vacillating between the mundane and the astonishing. At another occasion, while she was living in the countryside cottage of her friend, the narrator spots a mouse with its head missing and this decapitated body began to deeply distract her. She writes; “something is churning inside me. The creature can’t harm me, but I am terrified” (104). This terror of the narrator has been grown into an absurd terror of “that creature might spring back to life” (104) and this began to cling to her more terribly. The seething emotional turmoil to which the author occasionally plunges into is evident in an incident that occurred in a small party. While discussing a film, she got infuriated at the comment of the other woman for which she retorted: “Do you realize you have no idea what the fuck you are talking about?” (81). This short temperedness reveals her emotional abyss that lurks under the façade of the genteel behavior of ordinary. Each time she paid a visit to her ailing mother, she gave her the warning; “prepare yourself...prepare for the catastrophe” (136) as if her mother was giving credence to the fact that the mundane dailiness of her daughter’s life is latent with the catastrophic. All these incidents point to Lefebvre’s “totality of real” (*Critique* 97) in the everyday of the narrator which contains the paradoxes of mundane and bizarre between which the narrator makes constant fluctuations.

The narrator intentionally decided to move out of the everyday of her life by deciding to move on a fellowship to a place “that she had never been before” (Lahiri 129). The day before she goes, she went out to get the last glimpse of her surroundings and for running a few errands. While detailing the minutiae of the fixities of the life around her usual surroundings, she had the surreal experience of meeting another woman looked like her double. She writes:

As I walk and turn sad at the thought of soon leaving this place, I see another person out of the corner of my eye: a woman, walking at the other end of the block, dressed almost exactly as I am. She too wears a wide red skirt flecked with black threads. A woolen coat, black like mine, tall boots, a woolen cap on her head. She too carries her bag over her right shoulder (150).

This strange notion of meeting the woman as her double baffles the narrator and this is indicative of the dichotomy that the lens of her perspective keeps. While the narrator details over the minutiae of her everyday existence and its prosaic paraphernalia, the author is lurking in the bizarre and exciting that exist as the exact opposite of her mundane life. This double sidedness of her perception is allegorized in the glimpse of the other woman as her double. The narrator admits this:

My double, seen from behind, explains something to me: that I’m me and also someone else, that I’m leaving and staying. This realization momentarily jostles my melancholy, like a current that stirs the branches, that discomfits the leaves of a tree (151).

This is another moment of epiphany in the novel where the author perceives the allegorical other as a representation of the deeper schism in the persona of the narrator which she hitherto either didn’t admit or easily brushed aside. The author’s life is neatly split into the quotidian everyday and the astonishing and the bizarre that lurks in it, her being lonely and being connected, the personal and public and the her inner realm and outer perceptions.

CONCLUSION

Jhumpa Lahiri is known as an acclaimed writer of Indian diaspora in America. The multifarious dilemmas involved in the transcontinental displacements and anxiety of geographies are the recurring themes of her fictional world. Analyzing the

story titled as “When Mr.Pirzada Came to Dine” from the Pulitzer winning collection *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) by Lahiri, Keith Wilhite argues that “Lahiri adeptly exposes maps as fields of exchange that troubles our assumptions about settled and unsettled identities, but she also uses these maps to draw our attention to other social constructions at the intersection of race, gender and geography” (91).³ This remark pithily sums up her priorities in fiction writing. Territorial displacements and its attendant complexities recur in her fictional works. But the recent novel *Whereabouts* apparently takes a marked deviation from the known routes but in a way, this novel too winds the same trajectory of representing the anxieties of displacements. First, the narrator’s project of sweeping aside the emotional limbo under the rubric of the mundane and the quotidian seems to be failing here as each incident in which the quotidian is emphasized unveils the grotesque and the bizarre lurking in it and this act as the other of the quotidian banality that the narrator inherits. Secondly, the chapters are titled as the prepositional markers pointing to the mobility of the narrator. This hints at, though the narrator is rooted in the territory of an unnamed city, the mobility from places to places which makes up the core of her life in that unnamed city. The narrator finds herself in a liminal zone between stasis and mobility and the quotidian and the bizarre. For the purpose of freeing herself from this precarious existence, at the end of the novel, the narrator decides to move out of this city on a fellowship. Here, temporary displacement from the city she has been dwelling in apparently resolves her inner crisis. Hence, it can be concluded that the novel *Whereabouts*, like the previous fictional works of the author, is too on the dilemmas and inner conflicts related with territorial displacements and its attendant complexities albeit it’s not transcontinental journeys. Thus an analysis of the everyday contained in the novel exposes the ambiguities involved, as Lefebvre suggested, and this provides the creative energies to the author/narrator to tide over the recurring anxieties of geographical displacements.

A note on the form of the novel too. The novel is narrated in vignettes of the daily occurrences of the narrator without being linearly connected with the preceding and following chapters. This rupture that each chapter makes in the linear, realistic narrative corroborates Lefebvre’s idea of everyday “evades the grip of forms” (*Everyday Life* 182) and it marks a break with the “entrenched conventions of representation and realism and to develop a new, often challenging methods and forms” (Epstein 744). Sheringham also views that “the everyday is inherently resistant to being captured in the nets of realism” (42-43). Hence it could be argued that Lahiri’s novel is narrated in a non-linear, non-realistic and fragmentary fashion to propound the essential paradox of the everyday. Highmore observes that “the everyday represents an impossibly evasive terrain: to attend is to lose it” (cited in Epstein 20). The essential paradox regarding the everyday life of the narrator in *Whereabouts* that I have hitherto deliberated is reinforced by the fragmentary and non-linear form of the novel as well.

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