Exile as a Spatial Metaphor in the Postcolonial Short Story

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Abstract: *The aim of this paper is to examine how the theme of exile embedded in spatial metaphors is taken up in the postcolonial short story. I will begin by contextualizing the postcolonial short story, its characteristic features and major themes. My argument will focus on in what way and why the theme of exile is an important issue in postcolonial literature and on the manifestations of the exile theme as a metaphor of space in the short story genre. The role of space will also be discussed within this context since it is firmly bound to the idea of postcolonialism in its literary, psychological and sociological sense. My argument will be illustrated through stories by representative postcolonial writers whose works display a distinctly "post-colonial" concern with the theme of exile.*

Keywords: *post-colonial literature, short story, exile, spatial metaphors*

Since the advent of cognitive perspectives of metaphors in the 1980s, especially after the work of Lakoff and Johnson (1980), metaphorical language has been regarded as a tool in human communication rather than being merely a component of stylistic language (Hastürkoğlu 468). This study examines the role of metaphors in expressing postcolonial themes and experiences by analysing texts which relate to a particular concern in the postcolonial short story, namely the theme of exile in spatial metaphors, which represents the voicing of the postcolonial experience. Initially, it may be worthwhile to set up a frame for the vantage point of the relation between postcolonial literature and the short story as a genre which avails itself to create the best space possible for the articulation of the postcolonial themes.

Postcolonial studies gained ground following a period of rapid decolonisation as one after another colonial country gained independence. In the first decades of the 20th century European states and mainly the British Empire ruled "more than 80% of the world's territories and peoples" (Innes vii). These territories ranged from Africa, Asia, North America and the Caribbean to the Middle and Far East. Gradually, the anti-colonial resistance and a succession of conflicts erupting from political and ideological initiatives and leaderships turned all the former colonies in these territories into independent states in the period following WWII. As Innes writes in her book *Postcolonial Literatures in English* (2007), to a greater or lesser degree, all these territories shared a history of cultural colonialism, including the imposition of the English language and British educational, political and religious institutions, as well as economic relationships and systems. One of the major and unintended consequences of British colonialism has been an enormous flowering of literature in English by postcolonial authors, presenting the story of colonialism and its consequences from their perspective, and reclaiming their land and experience through fiction, drama and poetry, a

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representation and reclamation requiring a reinvention of the English language and English literary traditions from a postcolonial perspective (Innes viii). With the advent of these ex-colonial – now postcolonial – nation-states it became imperative to find an outlet to the expression of the colonial and postcolonial experience within the literary and cultural realm of these countries since these experiences were closely connected with the forging of a national spirit and also for the reconciliation of the past and present, especially among the intellectuals and artists. Apart from what was evolving in the new states' cultural and literary polysystem, the diasporic and exilic communities from former colonies in contemporary Britain who regarded themselves as displaced either by force or voluntarily created themselves space in literature where they could have an opportunity to be heard and to be able to negotiate with the culture they now live in. The short story genre in this sense provided those artists or authors with the space where due to the genre's limited length, they could concentrate on the characters and focus on one aspect of their subject matter, which was displacement and its spiritual and mental effects on the characters. Jaspir Jain writes, in *The Diaspora Writes Home* (2017), on postcolonial literature:

> Postcolonial writing is not merely an account of resistance but it is an unwriting of the western representations of the colonies carried out through stereotypes, exoticism, magic, darkness, smallness and powerlessness… Postcolonial writing is a questioning of history, of perceptions of reality as seen by one side and seeks to present the other, not merely as a response but as an understanding of one's own position. It is a questioning as well as remaking, but the journey is always difficult and arduous as one has to wade through layers of records, histories and hybrid formations in order to find out the truth about oneself. It compels us to work through traditions of the home country, where somewhere or the other lie the roots of our difference. (Jain 3-4)

Among the pioneers of the short story one can name Joseph Conrad, Maupassant, Turgenev. The oral tradition of story-telling is another dimension of the foundations of the short story genre, especially in the postcolonial cultures where writers have affinity with the language, content and imagery of the folkloric tradition as opposed to the written and lengthy narratives. The presence and continuing development of Africa's and other former colonized geographies' verbal and oral traditions forge a link between oral and print cultures, which has contributed to the creation of a tradition from the folktale to the contemporary short story as practised by postcolonial writers (Awadalla, March-Russell 2-3). As explained earlier, the limited space for the author to exercise his/her writing makes the short story an attractive medium to express acutely and extensively postcolonial themes such as fragmentation, displacement, exile, diaspora and identity

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(Awadalla, March-Russell 2-3). The short story is also characterised by an emphasis on heightened and even epiphanic moments which can take place metaphorically within the boundaries of the short story and the space the story takes place.

This statement seems highly relevant to the works of the authors I have chosen to examine, namely Ben Okri and Jhumpa Lahiri, because both authors try to express the exilic themes of dislocation and displacement, which are also viewed as a human condition in our new century, within the spaces offered by the short story genre. The short story usually appears as a collection of short stories which are fragmented, rather than unified in terms of subject-matter, although they might share a common theme and follow a pattern of style. As explained by Chatterjee, "they are a group of disparate narratives about a range of different characters, though each story might have its own internal unity and be a complete artistic piece in its own right" (Chatterjee 97). This definition explains why the short story has become a suitable medium for the voicing of the displaced, disconnected exilic spirits: because it enables the author to depict more powerfully the fragmentation he/she experiences in an array of different characters and settings and from different points of view.

In this study, postcolonialism is used in terms of the time span from after colonization to this day. Consequently, the effects of colonization emerged since the 1950s or 60s, when themes of displacement, fragmentation, alienation or hybridity of cultures and identities began to be expressed in literatures. This scope extends from the work of short story writers typically understand as colonial, in whose writing the motifs of place and displacement and the themes of longing and belonging are discernible, to the work of contemporary writers whose postmodern short stories deal with the exilic concerns and postcolonial themes from an angle of postmodernist fragmentation and multiple crises of identities and experiences of trauma. In order to dwell on the nature and consequences of postcolonial issues in literature, it may be worthwhile to identify the term exile and exilic from a postcolonial perspective.

The original meaning of exile is banishment, which is usually the result of an economic or political commitment that necessitates one to leave his (*sic*) home and country. Being an exile is not the same as being a refugee, expatriate or one of a diaspora in a foreign country. However, these three terms now refer alternately to people who have willingly or unwillingly left home and live in a country other than their own. Exile is the space where one constantly experiences the acute feeling of not being at home and cherishes memories of home with a massive desire to go back. The exile is in a state of un-homeliness. Lois Tyson explains this feeling as follows:

> Being un-homed is not the same as being homeless. To be un-homed is not to feel at home even when you are in your own home because you are not at

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> home in yourself: your cultural identity crisis has made you a psychological refugee, so to speak. (Tyson 55)

For Bhabba, on the other hand, exile no longer refers to a permanent political expulsion from the home country or the impossibility of returning to a certain country. It has become more of a reference to cultural displacement (in Morley 42). Gayatri Spivak, in one of her interviews, says that "one is never at home" (qtd. in Shands 8). We know that Said's definition of exile is connected to his loss of true home, his self-imposed exile. He believes that a whole genre of 20th-century Western literature is extraterritorial, it is a literature by and about exiles, symbolizing the age of refugee (in Tally 133). Hence Tally Jr. explains Said's notion of exile as a condition that is produced by human beings for other human beings, and that like death but without death's ultimate mercy (Tally 133) exile has torn millions of people from the nourishment of tradition, family and geography; the prevalent connotation of exile is therefore negative. According to Tally Jr, Said lumps together forced exile and voluntary exile. Said uses exile as a metaphor to describe his vision of the modern intellectual, who needs a critical, detached perspective from which to examine his culture, and wants exile to be the condition and space in which the intellectual preferred to work (Tally 133). So the condition of exile, according to Said, does not have to be one in the sense of physical displacement, but may be a spiritual absence of "tradition, family and geography" (Tally 133). This situation describes the actual position of the expression of exile in postcolonial short stories where the metaphors of space stand for both physical and spiritual states of exile. In the postcolonial short story, spaces or spatial metaphors refer to displacement. Space becomes an important social or historical agent. For the displaced colonized, space becomes a way of telling the story of exile. Using spatial metaphors makes possible the uncovering of the trauma and the experience in a temporal dimension that were not significant in a natural environment or at home. The use of spatial metaphors in the short story offers the exile an outlet to forge an account of their displacement and what it brings about. Then, space becomes a catalyst for new knowledge because it allows the exile to propose multiple, simultaneous observations and then different and mutable readings of the exilic experience. The spatial metaphor of exile is the need to tell a story (Bishop 7-8).

Elizabeth Bishop, in her Introduction to *Cartographies of Exile*, discusses exile in relation to space and time in literature and particularly in postcolonial literature. She states that displacement is the main subject in postcolonial literature. The spatial turn in literary studies has enabled the postcolonial exile to define and identify where they are and where they are not within a temporal perspective. Most people are aware of one culture, one home, one setting. Exiles experience at least two (Bishop 14). The exile inhabits multiple spaces and temporalities at once. The exile needs to be comfortable in one, while longing for the other left behind.

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He/she is navigating the temporal and spatial divide while longing for some other time and some other place. Bishop goes on to say that the exile, as opposed to the native, is living with a language not his/her own. So, he/she is trying to negotiate with multitude spaces, temporalities, and languages by way of finding an outlet to voice this major undertaking in the medium of the short story as the author, or the character in it, or both. Spatial metaphors in the short stories construct the images of the exilic feelings of displacement, homelessness and disruption of time and location either forced or self-imposed. In real life one cannot apprehend space apart from time and movement. We cannot talk about our temporal experience without referring to spatial metaphors or space. Hence space and time are interdependent. According to J. T. Mitchell:

> Space is the body of time, the form, the image, or the metaphor that gives us the intuition that something that is not directly perceivable but which permeates all that we apprehend. Time is the soul of space, the invisible entity which animates the field of our experience. (Mitchell 545)

Among the best known spatial metaphors in postcolonial literature is the "home," which is a metaphorical, temporal, but also concrete space. These spatial images speak for the displacement, uprootedness, belonging and not belonging, in short, the fragmented vision of the exilic person. Exile is built and speak for itself on the grounds of these spatial images.

Postcolonial spatial metaphors for exile in the two exilic authors who write about their experience suggest a deep-rooted desire for movement, which is both personal and political, spiritual and material, directed inward and outward. These metaphors represent the dissolution, confusion, attachment and disentanglement of the characters who are exposed to the consequences of the exile in the postcolonial situations.

The writers and short stories I am going to refer to in this presentation are Ben Okri and his "Belonging" and Jhumpa Lahiri and her story '"Mrs Sen's" from her collection of short stories *Interpreter of Maladies*.

I would like to begin with a little biography of the authors, who are considered representatives of the postcolonial literature.

Ben Okri is Nigerian born, although he is now included in anthologies of Black British writers. He describes himself as a Nigerian with mixed ethnic background who lives in London and writes in English. This description subtly denies labelling, as it evokes the exilic condition. Okri was born in 1959 to an Igbo mother and Urhobo father. He grew up in London before returning to Nigeria with his family in 1968. The politics of Igbo and Yoruba rivalry and his ethnic background were influential in his early writings. At the age of nineteen Okri returned to London, which has remained his permanent residence ever since. He received a grant from the Nigerian government to read Comparative Literature at

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Essex University. Since then, he has produced several fiction and poetry volumes; in 1991 he received the Booker Prize for fiction for his novel *The Famished Road*. He has participated in many literary organizations and activities and in TV broadcasts and has received many literary awards in Europe for his fiction and poetry. He is also a vice-president of the English Centre for International PEN. In his book *A Time for New Dreams*, Okri describes poetry as "the great river of soul-murmurings that runs within humanity" and true literature as "the encounter of possibilities that tear up the script of what we think humanity to be" (British Council Literature n.p.). Poetic metaphors as such and humane concerns characterise the peculiar charm of Ben Okri's writing. He blends African oral storytelling with magic realism, deriving from the post-colonial history of his homeland Nigeria. Although as an adolescent living in Nigeria, Okri wrote about the social injustices in Africa in a fusion of transnational and transcultural motifs which are Pan-African in nature (*Encyclopaedia of Afroeuropean Studies*). Almost in all his writings there is a search for new ways of writing. He is innovative in the sense that he has wanted to create a new way of writing to convey his postcolonial experience. Ben Okri comes to the fore as an exilic writer who simultaneously draws upon a wide range of cultural references belonging to the western canon and his own West African cultural heritage. The fact that he writes from London about Africa enables him to adopt a critical vision of both worlds in an eclectic mode of writing that is a fusion of both realism, naturalism and innovative techniques such as dream fantasy and magical realism. Hence, the short story format with its structural limitations has become a strategic space with which Okri has been able to experiment with a new writing. The story "Belonging" which I refer to here is included in the collection of short stories *Tales of Freedom* (2009). According to the publisher's notes, this collection aims to reach beyond our everyday perception, developed by a style called *stokus*, a hybrid of the short story and haiku which, in essence, is a kind of story inclining towards a flash of a moment, insight, vision or paradox (Parini 1). "Belonging" tells the story of a mistaken identity, called on intentionally by the protagonist who aims to go to a certain place, but, instead, finds himself in a flat where a party is going to take place. An older man mistakes him for his son-in-law and confides in him family secrets. The protagonist chooses not to correct him, for some mysterious reasons that he is unable to explain, and even enjoys being mistaken:

> I watched him. When the misunderstanding began I tried to correct his error, but he seemed so keen to believe who I was and he was so absent-minded and yet single-minded in his rattling on that I didn't get a moment to correct his mistaking me for someone else.
>
> Besides, I found I rather began to enjoy it. I enjoyed being someone else. It was fascinating. It was quite a delight suddenly finding myself part of a

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> ready-made family, finding myself belonging. The thrill of belonging was wonderful…
>
> I began to think that maybe I was the man he took me for. And if he saw me as another then maybe I was the other… (Okri 109)

This story of confusion, mistaken identity, the flat as the home of the extended family illustrated the understated dilemma of the exile in search of his real self and grounds for belonging to somewhere. The home and the large family are the spatial metaphors for the protagonist's dream-like search for his true identity. Although Okri never explicitly takes up postcolonial dilemmas of the exile, he fuses them in a magical, dreamlike narration like in the story "Belonging" where the mistaken person somehow ends up in a wrong place amidst dreamlike movements and directions. He says: "I wanted to belong, I wanted to belong" (Okri 2), even though he knows that at any moment the actual in-law can come in and his own false identity will be uncovered. Before he strayed into that flat, he was going to meet his last living relation, which seemed to him the last stop in the world for him. But now he feels he has a big family in this flat and possesses the family he yearns for. This flat, the home of a totally strange family, and his attachment to this false identity is the metaphorical symbol of his true search for belonging, as a Nigerian living in London, writing in English. As Said says, his exilic spirit is not only material displacement, but spiritual alienation of an intellectual in search of belonging. The dissolution, and unresolved dilemma of his inner struggle takes on a new shape as the story unfolds, his false identity is uncovered. He sees that he is mistaken for someone whom he despises at the first glance:

> And then as I stood there the door behind me opened. A black, Arabic, pock-marked elderly gentleman came into the room, and I knew instantly it that this was the man I had been mistaken for…And my first shock was I looked nothing like him at all. I was younger, fresher, better looking. I had vigour and freedom. I wasn't trapped by tradition. I was lithe. I could go any which way. I had many futures open to me. This man seemed weighed down. There was an air about him of one whose roads were closed… He was in the worst sense of the word, middle-aged; with no freedom, even to think independent thoughts. All this I sensed in a flash, but realized fully afterwards. But I was profoundly shocked to have been mistaken for this man. (Okri 109)

The "I" of the story is somebody who is not comfortable with his native identity. The fact that he is ethnically like the in-law causes his being mistaken for him, which he enjoys at the beginning. But when he sees the actual in-law, whom he regards as his inferior, in a moment of epiphany, he realizes that he does not want to belong to that inferior family. Likewise, it becomes clear that the family

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too sees him as incongruous, rather than as one of theirs: "People glared at me as though I were a monstrous criminal… I feared for my life…" (Okri 110). So he admits: "It was a mistake. I was looking for Margaret House" (Okri 110).

He suddenly finds himself outside the building among a carnivalesque crowd, in a mystical, even sinister crowd composed of the extended family members in a ritualistic activity. He tries to turn into the direction of Margaret House, but the man whom he met at the flat warns him not to go in the direction of the crowd instead of his actual destination. Thus, the old man resembles the wise man of the African tribe, a fortune-teller, a folk-tale figure.

This prophetic warning triggers the moment of revelation for the protagonist, who rids himself from the feelings represented by both spaces, that is the flat he walks in and the Margaret House he is actually going to, and chooses to lead a life of his own. In that sense, Okri introduces a solution to the exilic experience of the displaced people, a way out of the condition of the exile that traps him between two temporal dimensions of the ancestral land and his adopted home: "Then I changed direction, and went back towards the crowd, then out to the street, towards a life of my own" (Okri 110).

My second writer is Jhumpa Lahiri. She was born in London in 1967 to Bengali parents, with whom she moved to Rhode Island, where she spent her adolescence. Jhumpa Lahiri attended Barnard College and Boston University and received degrees in English, Comparative Studies and in Renaissance Studies. She also worked for a short time at Boston University and Rhode Island School of Design, and as a consultant to President Obama during his mandates.

Lahiri has travelled extensively to India and has experienced the effects of colonialism as well as of diaspora and exile. She maintains strong ties to her parents' homeland, to her birthplace England and to where she lives now, the USA. Growing up in such a landscape has caused in Lahiri a sense of displacement and homelessness and a strong yearning for belonging. She explains this as an inheritance of her parents' ties to India:

> It is hard to have parents who consider another place 'home' – even after living abroad for 30 years, India is home for them. We were always looking back so I never felt fully at home here. There's nobody in this whole country that we're related to. India was different – our extended family offered real connections. (Lahiri, qtd. in "The Maladies of Belonging")

Yet, her familial ties to India were not enough to make India "home" for her. Lahiri explains: "I didn't grow up there, I wasn't part of things. We visited often but we didn't have a home. We were clutching at a world that was never fully with us" (qtd. in "The Maladies of Belonging").

At a press conference in Calcutta in January 2001, Lahiri described this absence of belonging: "No country is my motherland. I always find myself in exile

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in whichever country I travel to. That's why I was tempted to write something about those living their lives in exile" (Rediff, n.p.). In a brief biography, Antara Chaterjee writes that although Lahiri's works are products of American cultural space within the American landscape, she can "definitely be called a key practitioner of the contemporary postcolonial short story" (Chaterjee 96). Her stories about Bengali and being a diasporic or exilic Bengali focuses on the American home configured as an image of the nostalgic space-substitute for the home left behind.

This theme of exile runs consistently throughout Lahiri's Pulitzer Prize winner book *Interpreter of Maladies*. The story I will discuss is "Mrs Sen's" because the story focuses on the spatial metaphor of "home" temporally and spatially as well. Home is the actual place where the story is set; simultaneously, it is the metaphorical space for the exile experience, the homeland the characters yearn for. Indeed, the whole collection displays the exilic themes the characters experience from different perspectives.

In "Mrs Sen's," Mrs Sen and her husband, a university professor, are immigrants from Calcutta, India. Mrs Sen does not work, but babysits an 11-year old American boy, Eliot, in her home. The story centres on the theme of displacement and Mrs Sen's incapacity of adapting to the American culture. Mrs Sen lives in her new home in the USA and rarely goes out, but her actual location "home" is in another temporal dimension, still in Calcutta. Her Bengali identity is her dominant feature, her real self and existence. She is lost in the USA, not belonging there spiritually, yet not belonging physically to her Bengali past and home either. She tries to create her Bengali home, its traditions and customs in her American home: "By then Eliot understood that when Mrs Sen said 'home,' she meant India, not the apartment where she sat chopping vegetables" (Lahiri 114).

The spatial metaphor of "home" becomes the epitome of her pains inflicted by her feelings of exile and her exilic yearnings for her metaphorical "home" in Calcutta, which symbolizes her true self, her identity and her space of belonging and existence. Even the flat she lives in on the university campus looks out of place, decorated in neglect, as if the Sen family did not actually live there:

> White drum-shaped lampshades flanking the sofa were still wrapped in the manufacturer's plastic. The TV and the telephone were covered by pieces of fabric with scalloped edges… Neither Mr nor Mrs Sen wore shoes… (Lahiri 112)

The objects of home in the story are gathered and laid out in such a way that they do not belong to a typical American home style. Mrs Sen's displacement and nostalgia are obvious in the way she dresses, cooks and even thinks. At one point she asks Eliot: "Eliot, if I began to scream right now at the top of my lungs, would someone come?" (Lahiri 116); "Eliot shrugged. 'Maybe'" (Lahiri 116); "At home

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that is all you have to do…" (Lahiri 116); "... and the whole neighbourhood and half of another has come to share the news or help" (Lahiri 116).

Mrs Sen still calls Calcutta "home." The blade with which she chops the vegetables has accompanied her all the way from India. She cherishes it, which is a concrete symbol of her ties with her homeland. She practises driving because she wants to believe it will enable her to drive all the way to Calcutta. Even Mr Sen knows she suffers, when he proposes her to learn driving:

> Mr Sen says that once I receive my license, everything will improve. What do you think Eliot? Will things improve?... Could I drive all the way to Calcutta? How long would that take, Eliot? Ten thousand miles, at fifty miles per hour? (Lahiri 119)

The effects of her displacement are felt in her relationship with her husband, too. They do not display affection to each other. She is too occupied with her longing for "home." The only thing that connects her to her home at the moment is the Calcutta home she builds in America and the Bengali food she so insistently keeps cooking, at the cost of looking weird and smelly.

The end of "Mrs Sen's," unlike that of "Belonging," does not seem to offer a solution. The former story ends on a sense of the impossibility of going back or moving forward. The protagonist does not have the confidence and strength to find a way out of her dilemma, to overcome the exilic sentiments that she is trapped in. When she accidentally hits a telephone pole while in one of her driving practices along with Eliot and Mr Sen, the incident causes her to stop babysitting for Eliot, her only friend in the USA. Following the accident, she shuts herself in her room, crying, probably because of her conviction that she cannot go back home. This is her moment of epiphany:

> Then she went into her bedroom and shut the door… he apologised (Mr Sen) on behalf of Mrs Sen. He said she was resting, though when Eliot had gone to the bathroom he'd heard her crying. (Lahiri 135)

Consequently, the short story provides the writers of exile and diaspora with the necessary structural tools to exercise their postcolonial themes and topics. Within the context of this paper, spatiality and temporal differences serve as the main metaphorical devices evolving around the notion of "home" to narrate and express trauma and its effects caused by displacement, exile and diaspora, no matter from which perspective one looks at these terms.

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