

The Metrics of Spaces, Marginality, Identities and Culture in Chandani Lokuge's Softly, As I Leave You

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Abstract

This paper examines Chandani Lokuge's novel *Softly, As I Leave You* (2011) from the perspective of interlacing cultural, domestic, national, and international spaces. Lokuge depicts the spatial intersections and development of uprooted characters from their comfort zones and placed in an unaccustomed earth, where they explore their identities and space. Lokuge focuses primarily on the female characters pushing the male characters into the peripheries. Her narratives constantly deal with alienation, loneliness and fractured identities of female protagonists and other female characters juxtaposing their male counterparts.

KEYWORDS: Marginalization, national space, international space, familial space.

Chandani Lokuge is a Sri Lankan Diaspora writer whose characters are mobile in international space and project nomadism and spatial shift through their act. Lokuge vocalizes the pangs of Diaspora female subjects as they move from Sri Lanka to Australia. They move from cultural fixities to freedom and, as a result confront cultural clash and fractured identities.

Lokuge's novel *Softly, As I Leave You* discusses migrant's world in Diaspora with fractured identity, cracked consciousness and half-fulfilled relationships. It is a story of loss and separation within a family whose members are suspended between a sense of togetherness and separateness. The novel traces the life of Uma, a Sri Lankan girl, who migrates to Australia to pursue her doctoral research. She, actually, escapes the predetermined life that her family has planned for her. Uma's sense of independence makes her rebel against the set life of an arranged marriage with someone of suitable status and the expected role of taking over the family responsibility, providing them the grandchildren and looking after her husband's aging parents. Her stay in Australia leads her to Chris's bookstore which houses unusual and rare collection of books. Chris, an undemanding, composed and intelligent young man is the son of a mixed parentage, culture and nationality – his father is a Venetian and mother is an Australian. He is instantly drawn to Uma's exotic beauty and passionate nature. Their common love of literature, art and music strengthens the bond that eventually leads to marriage. The parents of Chris represent hybrid identities and space that they occupy. Similarly, Chris, being their son represents hybridized identity that accepts Uma to create further hybrid identity, culture, language and space.

Further, Chandani Lokuge presents the story of Chris and Uma's marriage as an example of intricate complexity of intercultural relationships. For Chris the boundaries of race are not of a great concern; he acknowledges his Venetian ancestry without the migrant's anxiety in the hostland. He is quite happy to accept Australia as home. Chris's sense of belongingness is grounded in his current abode but Uma constantly seeks closeness with her homeland and cultural legacy. Contradictory emotions and loyalties keep her oscillating between her past in Sri Lanka and present in Australia. Uma enmeshes herself in the history and traditions of her homeland. She shares her sense of tradition and culture with Chris and later with her son, Arjuna.

Uma and Arjuna try to seek information from various media about Sri Lankan refugees and their condition in Australia. This affinity with the refugees and with the homeland brings forth the connectivity of Diaspora subjects with their native. This also shows strong ties of Uma with Sri Lankan identity, culture, people and land. For instance, she gets disturbed by the latest news given by Chris. Chris informs Uma:

‘The news on Sri Lanka is a bit depressing, Uma. Yet another boatload of Sri Lankan refugees has landed in Queensland. They were all walking inland in single file when the police got them. They've been taken off to a detention camp. I just heard it on the 7o' clock news. Who knows how long they'll be there. It's a wretched business.’
(Lokuge 4)

Uma keeps sympathy and love for her nation and solidarity with the victims of civil war who are forced to move out of their homeland and seek refuge in unknown lands. She also desires Arjuna to develop affinity for Sri Lanka and feel for Sri Lankan public. She makes Arjuna read news articles along with her. Despite leaving Sri Lanka, the memories of her homeland chase her. “All she heard was how war raged there, how children huddled in their homes, how suicide bombers were rampant. And how violence crouched at every door.” (Lokuge 18) This also underlines the connectivity of Diaspora subjects with their native.

Chris, on the other hand, feels left alone by Uma and Arjuna due to their primary concern about Sri Lanka. For him, his own native land becomes a restrained space as he is placed with Sri Lankans. His hybrid identity which he inherited from his parents projects him lonely within homeland.

Love for the motherland is a patriotic and natural feeling by the Diaspora when placed in hostland. As a result, Uma and Arjuna are much concerned with the increasing terrorism in the homeland. This terrorism brings forth uncertainty of life within the homes in Sri Lanka. Therefore, home becomes unsafe space for Sri Lankans who fly to safer spaces. For them Sri Lanka is both a motherland and a fatherland as well. To reassert the idea Cohen's concept of motherland and fatherland – same space with different perspective can be evoked. Robin Cohen says, “Complex interplay between the feminine and masculine versions of motherland”. Motherland is perceived as the “feminine rendition” where it is “a warm, cornucopian breast from which the people

collectively suck their nourishment.” The fatherland is seen as a place where, “the nurturing white milk of the motherland is replaced by the blood of the soldiers.” (Cohen 103)

Lokuge also talks about the institution of marriage wherein the space between husband and wife increases as time passes. The couple – Chris and Uma – get involved into their personal spaces which results into widening of marital space. The faith and love withers gradually as Chris gets involved into his business. This results into extramarital affair of Uma with an Australian married man, Liam. She often visits Sydney in order to meet Liam. She has separate space for Liam to fill and comfort her loneliness. Whenever she is lonely, she escapes to Liam. Both Liam and Uma are married and enjoy their extramarital relationship without harming their families and familial spaces.

Juxtaposingly, Lokuge draws the character of Chris as a loyal husband who is honest with his wife. Uma rebels not only against Sri Lankan culture of monogamy but prefers promiscuity by establishing extramarital relationship with Liam. On the contrary, Chris’s wishes and choices revolve around her. For Chris, the spatial explorations are limited with his family and bookstore. Uma is the space for Chris whereas Chris is not a sufficient space for Uma. This also indicates Uma is more curious and enveloping in her nature. Uma is a symbol of hungry generation who not only explores international space but also human identities keeping intact her familial nexus. Lokuge points, “She thought suddenly of Chris as she walked, how all his choices weaved around her. But that was choice too, of a kind. She needed more; he didn’t.” (Lokuge 13)

Uma’s stay in Australia does not cut her tie with her homelands. In the international space also she feels for her national space. Uma could not break her ties with Sri Lanka and her traditions. She truly realizes the culture she is rooted in and often feels alienated in a society and space she has adopted to live in with Chris. Due to her love for native land she always pursues her son Arjuna to learn more about Sri Lanka through books and newspapers. Also, she takes him with her to Sri Lanka to make him aware about the country and culture of which he is a part. Uma bestows upon her son Arjuna, the passion for her heritage.

As the novel progresses, Uma and Chris’ world shatters when Arjuna is mistakenly accused of supporting terrorist acts through the funds he has raised for the war relief. Unfortunately his genuine deed turns out to be the reason for his sufferings. Uma later thinks over her decision to make Arjuna more Sri Lankan than Australian:

Should she have let Arjuna develop his identity uncomplicated by her own? Was she wrong to have immersed him in his Sinhala ancestry? Sri Lanka was not even his motherland, as Chris reminded her often enough. He was born in Australia. He was Australian.

‘But he does not look Australian, does he? He looks Sri Lankan as much as Australian. He is Sri Lankan’. (Lokuge 112)

Lokuge points that Arjuna's initiative of collecting funds for Sri Lankan public is mistook by the Australian media and people as they think he is helping the terrorist organizations of Sri Lanka. The media presents him as a terrorist which turns his life upside down. These unexpected development makes Uma realize her mistake in pushing Arjuna for her concern which indeed results in inviting threats to his life. Lokuge narrates "... without foreseeing the consequences she'd involved Arjuna in it all. She was distressed for her son's safety in this country in whose eyes he was being transformed into a terrorist." (Lokuge 114)

Arjuna's untimely death devastates Uma and Chris. They could not accept the fact that Arjuna is dead. Uma is unable to come to terms with his death and holds herself completely responsible for pushing Arjuna to death. She feels lonelier than ever before. Uma feels guilty for nurturing Arjuna as a Sri Lankan rather than an Australian. This forced identity upon her son in the international space pushes him towards death. This is clearly known by Uma as a results she suffers. The narrator brings forth the melancholy of Uma, "But how could there be healing when sorrow was cancer spreading into her blood, sucking the marrow of her bones, strangling every nerve? Nor did she want to be healed. She was responsible for her son's death; she was guilty of an insidious kind of murder." (Lokuge 170)

Softly, *As I Leave You* narrates the leaving of Arjuna from the world which affects the familial, physical, spiritual and social world of Uma and Chris. Arjuna being the only child is the centre of the family who is dead; hence the central place of the familial space is lost. There is vacuum in the familial space. This vacuum is filled by memories of Arjuna. Both Uma and Chris search for reasons of Arjuna's death. They hold responsible personally and independently for the loss of the son.

Despite individual community experiences and responses, Diasporas live mobile, transitional, changing and evolving lives. They are decentred in the sense that they have moved away from their original centres – nations, communities and affiliations. Paul Gilroy's image of a ship is quite apt to define diasporic destiny of perpetual shift in space and identity politics. Gilroy writes "The image of the ship – a living, micro cultural, micro political system in motion effectively captures the trans-nationality and intercultural relations, the exchange of ideas and activism". (Gilroy 24) Travelling is quite useful in understanding the dynamics of diasporic experiences. The conception of the shore also acts as the margin, boundary, periphery and both the last territory as an exit from a homeland and the entrance to a new land. Diasporas are conditioned by the home shore they have left and the new shore they arrive at. Their writings are testimony to this 'in-betweenness' or 'nowhereness'. (Gilroy 24)

The transformation of space is significant in that it represents intricate social and gender problems and the dual motifs of home and community. The importance of the spatial transformation in the novel is associated with the exploration of the psychopathology of women characters. The novel presents different kinds of spaces, multiple and dynamic interrelations within space, and important agents facilitating the transformation of space. All of them show the multiplicity and flexibility of space, the vitality and energy of Sri Lankan women Diaspora. It is Lokuge's narrative strategies of

space that represent the resistance of the space and the integration of two diverse cultures in Sri Lankan women in Diaspora. The dual functions of space that McAuley indicates – space is socially constructed and space transforms itself – are applied into this novel. Lokuge examines different problems within different spaces. By the interaction of various spaces as the novel proceed, the past memories, cultural oppression, physical violence, and even men's vulnerabilities and failures are exposed, making the whole space more conflicted and turbulent. Various spaces in the novel present Sri Lankan women's inner conflicts, sufferings and distorted images.

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