

# Own-Other Space: Play with the Concept in British and American Cross-Cultural Fiction<sup>1</sup>

Arina R. Shevchenko<sup>2</sup>, Olga O. Nesmelova<sup>3</sup>, & Natalia A. Vysotskaya<sup>4</sup>

## Abstract

The paper deals with the novels and short stories of multicultural writers, descents of immigrants from different countries but born and bred on the territories of Great Britain and the USA. Their literary works can be also related to cross-cultural fiction due to the national and cultural heterogeneity and reciprocity depicted in the narration. It is important to say that interaction and interpenetration of several histories, traditions, customs and cultures lies in the basis of any cross-cultural text. Therefore, the concept of OWN-OTHER is claimed to be one of the most important for both authors under study and characters they create, as hybridity, being a key characteristic of contemporary multicultural situation, leads to an erasure of borders between the so-called *own* and *alien*. The crucial point of the research undertaken is to analyze how contemporary cross-cultural writers play with the concept of OWN-OTHER in regard to the category of space and its significance in connection with the personages' self-identification and acculturation.

**Keywords:** British Postcolonial Literature; American Multicultural Prose; Cross-Cultural fiction; Own-Other.

## 1. Introduction

British postcolonial literature, being established after the collapse of the British Empire, and American multicultural prose, combining the variety of texts created by writers of diverse racial and ethnic origin (Karasik & Sadykova, 2017), seem to form an interesting field for literary comparative analysis. Despite absolutely different background, the representatives of two literary tendencies aforesaid and, to be more exact, their works can be amalgamated under the name of *cross-cultural prose*, as, for instance, Tolkachev (2013) calls them. Moreover, it can be added that nowadays postcolonial or multicultural approach cannot be excluded whether any research in the field of contemporary literature studies is being conducted (Karasik &

---

<sup>1</sup> Please cite this paper as follows:

Shevchenko, A. R., Nesmelova, O. O., & Vysotskaya, N. A. (2019). Own-Other Space: Play with the concept in British and American cross-cultural fiction. *Journal of Research in Applied Linguistics*, 10(SP), 1139-1146.

<sup>2</sup> Kazan Federal University; [sheara@inbox.ru](mailto:sheara@inbox.ru)

<sup>3</sup> Kazan Federal University

<sup>4</sup> Kiev National Linguistics University (Ukraine)

Pomortseva, 2015). Generally, these authors are first or second generation immigrants, what motivates their interest in the reflection of migrants' experience 'through the prism of underlying psychological and cultural aspects' (Tolkachev, 2013). The specific of chronotope in such pieces of literature is in the fact that particularly *time* and *place*, within which the personages function, are inseparably bound with the depiction of various realities they face. Thereby, a term *multicultural chronotope* is used by such significant researchers of the literary phenomenon mentioned as Tolkachev (2013), Tlostanova (2008), etc. This term allows to characterize the heterogeneous time and space described in the works of postcolonial or multicultural authors most brightly and clearly.

The works of immigrant writers are the stories of adaptation to the circumstances changed dramatically, not losing the bond with one's own roots at the same time. The characters of suchlike writings are in a constant search of a way to preserve their own identity as well as to adapt to a new reality, what can be considered a well-established tradition for late postcolonial and multicultural literary works (Zinnatullina & Khabibullina, 2017). That is why, according to Tolkachev (2013), 'travel and 'dislocation associated with it become substantial tropes' in suchlike texts. The authors belonging to the second generation of immigrants, vice versa, concentrate on coalescence and integration of miscellaneous national and cultural traditions. Ipso facto, the representation of *interstitial space* (Bhabha, 1994) (a term of Homi Bhabha, a prominent Indo American scholar), which demonstrates both binding with new reality and simultaneous estrangement from it, gains its relevance in terms of fiction (Kor et al., 2019).

## 2. Methods

The article represents interaction of new and traditional methods of literary analysis. It is essential to observe how the characters of the works under study percept the space of their existence within the narrative created by the writers, playing with the concept of OWN-OTHER. That is why the specific of multicultural chronotope and its functioning is highlighted, too. Also, due to the works of fiction chosen the postcolonial and multicultural discourses cannot but included in the research. In addition, the research undertaken has determined the interdisciplinary approach including the elements of culture and social studies. The related works of such prominent scholars as Bhabha (1994), Karasik (2015), Khabibullina (2017), Tlostanova (2008), Tolkachev (2013), etc. serve as the methodological base for our research (Pour & Bibi, 2018).

## 3. Results and Discussion

To begin with it can be noted that Zadie Smith, a British female writer with Jamaican roots, introduces a curious plot twist into *White Teeth* (2000), her debut novel, where the narration is focused on a story of three multinational families. One

of the characters is Samad Iqbal, a Bangladeshi immigrant living in London and a father of Madgeed and Millat, his twin-sons. In a fit of desire to save his teenage children from pernicious, in his opinion, influence of western civilization – at least, one of them – he decides to conduct an unusual experiment. Thus, Madgeed goes to live in Bangladesh with his relatives for some years, whilst Millat stays in England. An astounding turn of events happened to the boys is ironically described by the author. By the way, here we could not but agree with Karasik and Schepacheva (2015), determined to state that in cross-cultural works of fiction ‘the author's irony is aimed at contemporary tendency to celebrate multiculturalism and due to it, the formation of new social and literary stereotypes’. So that Madgeed returns from Bangladesh a true to type Englishman, even stereotypical to some extent. Turned into an absolutely irreligious materialist, he proclaims British imperialistic values and demands pork bacon and eggs for breakfast in a local halyal eatery. By means of such an image Zadie Smith alludes to British colonial past and its extant impact on Bangladesh as one of the former colonies. Meanwhile, Millat becomes a member of KEVIN – Keepers of the Eternal and Victorious Islamic Nation (Smith, 2001) – an extremist Muslim gang, invented by the author. The ideas of the gang, aggressive and hostile, are extremely far from those values that Samad has been eager to instill in his sons. The path chosen by Millat is much more similar to the stories from American gangster movies, which the boy has been watching during his childhood. Thus, the writer brings in the theme of Americanization of modern occidental world and touches upon some problems of neo-colonization within the narration. From the early years of his life Millat, a second generation immigrant of Indian origin, has witnessed tense relationships between the representatives of diverse diasporas and local dwellers of East End, where the family of Iqbals has been living for the first time. The realization of his own difference from Englishmen and critical attitude towards parents intrinsic to adolescents could serve as a push to such a radical choice and overwhelming concentration on issues of religion and national minorities.

The theme of radical Islamic groupings organized by migrants on the territory of ex-colonizing country is also involved in the debut novel of one more British female writer of mixed racial and ethnic origin. In her novel *Brick Lane* (2003) Monica Ali, a daughter of an Englishwoman and a Bengali Indian, introduces a character by name Karim, a son of Bangladeshi Muslims, born and brought up in East End, London. The guy faced the racist views of people surrounding him from an early age. This is how he recalls his adolescence spent in Tower Hamlets: ‘When I was at school, we used to be chased home every day. People getting beaten up the whole time. Then we got together, turned the tables. One of us got touched, they all paid for it’ (Ali, 2004). Despite Karim calls England but not Bangladesh his own country and speaks English much better than his native Bengali (he even stops stammering as soon as he switches to English), he feels the need to realize his own self within East End. So he becomes the leader of *The Bengal Tigers*, a radically minded Bangladeshi grouping, which is opponent to *The Lion Hearts*, an anti-Islamic gang. A real war

between the two feuding sides begins in Tower Hamlets, what transmutes East End streets into a battlefield. Surprisingly, living at war with the alien culture is much more convenient for Karim than going back to his historic homeland and becoming a full part of his own one. Moreover, he refuses to accept sociocultural space of London as it is, insisting on safekeeping of Islamic traditions, which are strange for European world. The race for power in the district is shown as the only life goal for Karim, his sole feasible way of existence and self-realization in London urban space.

Thus, cross-cultural writers outplay key issues of contemporary multicultural society at fiction level. If Monica Ali concentrates on some dramatic moments closely connected with her personages' self-identification within cross-cultural space, Zadie Smith in turn introduces an element of an ironic play with the space and cultures, interacting inside of it.

A partly similar situation is observed in *Once in a Lifetime*, a part of Jhumpa Lahiri's trilogy *Hema and Kaushik* published in her collection of short stories *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008). Lahiri is an American female writer of Bengali origin, who also pays her attention to sociocultural interplay of immigrants with each other as well as with American reality where they dwell.

*Once in a Lifetime* is a first-person narrative, where all the events are told through the eyes of Hema, a girl born in an Indian family but brought up in the USA. The plot is centered on a visit of her parents' old friends – Doctor Choudhuri, his wife Parul and their son Kaushik. Being shown through the prism of Hema's perception, two immigrant families are constantly opposed to each other for the plotline that is why the contrast functions as the main artistic means in the story. The parents of Kaushik, firstly immigrated from Calcutta to America and then lived in Bombay for many years, return from the Indian megalopolis, behaving as typical representatives of western world: 'Bombay had made them more American than Cambridge had' (Lahiri, 2008). They are not religious, do not wear traditional national clothes, do not follow Indian customs and rules and even have some bad habits – for instance, the facts that Parul smokes or she and her husband drink Johnny Walker everyday are permanently highlighted in the text. Their son is neither burdened with the ancestors' heritage – that is how Parul characterizes him: 'Even in Bombay we managed to raise a typical American teen-ager' (Lahiri, 2008). Unlike Doctor Choudhuri's family, Hema's parents embody mediocre *ageless* immigrants, rejecting assimilation and contraposing themselves to American culture. Their morose existence and centrality on Indian values incarnate a hypertrophied national identity, so frequently inherent in the images of homesick first generation migrants.

Concerning the images of second generation immigrants, the episodes of their travel to historic homeland or those reflecting their attitude to it cannot but seem interesting. It is worth noting that, for example, the children of *Brick Lane's* (Monica Ali's aforementioned novel) protagonist are horrified by moving to native for their parents Bangladesh even if it is casually mentioned. In contrast with the father, dwelling on coming back to Dhaka and nostalgic for the foretime, his younger

daughter Bibi cries at nights in fear of the forthcoming leave. The older, Shahana is constantly repeating ‘I didn’t ask to be born here’ (Ali, 2004) as the main counterargument and even kicks her own mother to take her anger out on her. If first generation migrants long for their native places and crave any opportunity to find themselves thereat, suchlike journeys provoke stress and trials for their descents of one and the same racial and ethnic origin but experiencing the crisis akin their mothers and fathers have had while moving to foreign countries.

One of the scenes in *The Namesake* (2003), a novel of Jhumpa Lahiri, shows an annual eight-months trip of Ganguli family to Calcutta, where their relatives live. Their children, Sonya and Gogol, named after his father’s favorite Russian writer, ‘dread the thought’ (Lahiri, 2004) of this travel, which ‘frustrates’ (Lahiri, 2004) them. If the parents joyfully hug their Indian folks as soon as they meet together in the airport, their daughter whispers to her sibling about feeling scared, pronouncing it in English which is much more accustomed for her than Bengali. The first thing they pay attention to as they arrive, ‘breathing in the sour, stomach-turning, early morning air’ is ‘a damp, drab sky’ (Lahiri, 2004) – such an unsightly impression Calcutta landscape produces on them. Their life in America, where they have been born and bred, is strikingly different from that they see in native by origin places, in which they are to ‘sleep under a mosquito net, bathing by pouring tin cups of water over their heads’ (Lahiri, 2004). Sonya and Gogol are quite uncomfortable to feel like foreigners in the city they come every year and still not orienting themselves in it, whereas their parents are like a duck to water there. As they return to the United States, the siblings, at last, are free to behave like typical American teenagers, ‘so the eight months are put behind them, quickly shed, quickly forgotten, like clothes worn for special occasion, or for a season that has passed, suddenly cumbersome, irrelevant to their lives’ (Lahiri, 2004). The situation of estrangement from roots is closely connected with the loss of identity, which the generation of immigrants’ children usually encounters. Their parents’ inner conflict is associated with the East-West dichotomy, as if it divides their living into the period before and after within the frames of sociocultural borderline state. As for those born on a new land, a transformation of OTHER space in the view of their predecessors into OWN one for themselves seems to be more relevant and influential in terms of acculturation and self-identification.

What about Lahiri’s creativity, it can be mentioned that a story of Americanized Indians embarking on a journey to their historic homeland arose for the first time in *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), the writer’s debut collection of short stories. The eponymous piece of the collection tells us about Das family and their trip to Konarak Sun Temple in India (Lahiri, 1999). Due to the genre of short story taken as the narrative framework, some artistic details are of greater importance than a full plot development. Thus, for example, to point out that the young Indians who come from America behave as stereotypical tourists, the author highlights the characters’ ignorance about their native culture, the skimpy clothes of Mrs Das or the fact that

all the family is constantly chewing mint gum. The children, by advice of their parents, even offer some gum to a she-goat they meet on the way. The fight of the kids at the walls of the temple or the boredom of their mother and father, preoccupied only with a possibility to take a photo help the writer to picture the images of Americans who do not feel any belonging to their Indian ethnic identity as the majority of second generation immigrants. Being brought up in a different country, within another space, they do not possess any special feelings to their ancestors' culture.

#### **4. Summary**

Unlike first generation authors, whose characters 'make a real physical voyage from the third world to the first, overcoming specific established concepts due to their origin' (Tolkachev, 2013), those pictured by second generation migrants find themselves in another situation. Their space of existence, whether it is America or Britain, turns out to be much more accustomed and familiar for them than for the parents, perceiving it as something absolutely alien and strange. Being able to speak more than one language and recognize various values, enriched with several sociocultural traditions – defined by the place of living and in addition those due to their racial and ethnic identity – these characters embody a new type of a modern personality, ambivalent and multicultural by nature. Therefore, it is significant to note that many scholars classify cross-cultural prose as borderline literature not by chance. The reason lies in the portrayal of characters at the intersection of two and more cultural paradigms and manners of worldview, in a state of a mental crisis. Also, it is appropriate to quote Tolkachev (2013), who claims that 'on a borderline one tradition often overlaps another, what finally leads to an erasure of borders between OWN-OTHER'. Thus, a peculiar *escape* to the so-called third space becomes the only way out in situation formed. According to Tlostanova (2008), such kind of space 'is determined not by 'either-or' dichotomy, but rather in compliance with an anti-positivist principle of 'a little of both'. Hence, multicultural characters gain hybrid identity, which includes an experience of existence in actual reality and its results as well as a realization of one's own self as an integral part of certain history, nation, tradition and family.

#### **5. Conclusions**

To sum it up it can be said that the influence of space on characters' self-identification is considerably demonstrated in British and American cross-cultural literature. Multicultural authors frequently play with the concept of OWN-OTHER in regard to the categories of narrative space as well as in point of their personages' attitude to them and its depiction. Thus, the category of space has a specific meaning for both British postcolonial and American multicultural fiction.

## Acknowledgements

The work is performed according to the Russian Government Program of Competitive Growth of Kazan Federal University.

## References

- Ali, M. (2004). *Brick lane*. London: The Random House group Ltd, Black Swan edition.
- Bhabha, H. (1994). *The location of culture*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Karasik, O., & Pomortseva, N. (2015). Multicultural challenges: Teaching contemporary American literature for Russian philological students. *Procedia. Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 199, 684-688.
- Karasik, O. B., & Sadykova, A. I. (2017). On the border of magic and reality: On magical realism in R. Anaya's "The man who could fly". *Turkish Online Journal of Design Art and Communication*, 7, Sp. Ed, 388-392.
- Karasik, O. B., & Schepacheva, I. V. (2015). Not black enough: African American identity in percival Everett's novels. *Journal of Language and Literature*, 6(1), 222-225.
- Lahiri, J. (1999). *Interpreter of maladies*. Boston-New York: Mariner Books.
- Lahiri, J. (2004). *The namesake*. Boston-New York: Mariner Books.
- Lahiri, J. (2008). *Unaccustomed earth*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Smith, Z. (2001). *White teeth*. London: Penguin Books.
- Tlostanova, M. V. (2008). *From philosophy of multiculturalism to philosophy of transculturation*. Moscow: PFUR.
- Tolkachev, S. P. (2013). *Multiculturalism in post-colonial space and cross-cultural English literature*. Information and Humanities Portal Znanie. Ponimanie. Umenie. URL: [http://www.zpu-journal.ru/e-zpu/2013/1/Tolkachev\\_Multiculturalism-Cross-cultural-Literature](http://www.zpu-journal.ru/e-zpu/2013/1/Tolkachev_Multiculturalism-Cross-cultural-Literature), free.
- Zinnatullina, Z., Khabibullina, L., & Popp, I. (2017). The opposition of East and West in "The long day wanes" novel by Anthony Burgess. *Journal of History Culture and Art Research*, 6(4), 623-630.
- Pour, M. R., & Bibi, M. H. (2018). Investigation of juridical and legal challenges of violation (Bogh'i). *UCT Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities Research*, 6(03), 12-16.

Kor, L., Teoh, S., Binti Mohamed, S. S. E., & Singh, P. (2019). Learning to make sense of fractions: Some insights from the Malaysian primary 4 pupils. *International Electronic Journal of Mathematics Education*, 14(1), 169-182. <https://doi.org/10.29333/iejme/3985>.