

“Fra some foreign parts”: A Transcultural Reading of D.H. Lawrence

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Culture plays a vital role in Lawrence’s writings. His novels like *The Rainbow*, *Sons and Lovers* and *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* foreground the “contact zones” across transcultural symbols which get synthesised in the narrative space. The cross-border mobility of the characters symbolizes their cultural dichotomy as well as collective consciousness. Such a mobility also affirms a transcendental spiritual existence of the characters. The empirical process of travelling across various countries and continents invites a psychoanalytical discourse of these texts. The protagonists experience a self-knowledge or epiphany and knowledge of the “other” while undergoing a transitional relationship with fellow characters during the course of their terrestrial journey.

In *The Rainbow*, Lydia’s foreignness is the product of her physical features which are also her cultural identifiers. In the words of Soumitra Mukherjee, “cultural identifiers like skin colour, ethnicity, language etc. affect the identity of the person.” (*The Manifestation of Cultural Identity*, 107). Therefore, Lydia’s “wide mouth” is worth mentioning by Lawrence because it is not an indigenous and homely feature but a foreign one, “Her face was pale and clear she had thick dark eyebrows and a wide mouth curiously held” (*The Rainbow*, 22).

These cultural identifiers are important to be discussed here. Complexion, physical features and dress-codes are the vital identifiers of one’s culture. The “Other” is defined in terms of the physical features and the definition itself symbolizes the distinctiveness or “Otherness” assigned to the foreigner. Lawrence’s emphasis on Lydia’s physical features is the justification of his consciousness about the very idea of the “Other”. Not only this but even her daughter’s face, like “fresh rose” is foreign for Tom Brangwen. Her rosy face is the face of the “other”; not like the Brangwens or the fellow-countrymen whom Tom is familiar with.

Lawrence associates a mysticism with her foreignness which is symbolized through Tom’s enchantment with her persona. She is unknown to the general masses of the town and nobody knows about her origin covered in ‘dark’ attire-

“...She was dressed in black, was apparently rather small and slight, beneath her long black cloak, and she wore a black bonnet. She walked hastily, as if unseeing, her head rather forward. It was her curious, absorbed, flitting motion, as if she were passing unseen by everybody that first arrested him.” (*The Rainbow*, 22)

Her persona is defined by mysterious symbols like “dark”, “black” and “unseeing”. It is this mysterious mysticism that attracts Tom’s attention towards her. This paradox continues to dominate their relationship throughout the plot.

The defamiliarisation of the ‘other’ parts of the world through the portrayal of characters and their immigration is vital to the treatment of spatial locations by Lawrence. One may be reminded of Benedict Anderson’s theory of the *Imagined Communities* here (my italics). Tilly is not sure of Lydia’s origin but she imagines her to be an outsider, “she’s from some foreign parts or the other” (*The Rainbow*, 23). This estrangement surrounds Lydia’s character even though she is married to Tom Brangwen.

She is the “other” one; the stranger whose origin finds a global impression in the novel as being “foreign”. Her migration to Derbyshire is insufficient to localise her. Her empirical identity revolves around the history of being from a German origin. Lawrence’s enchantment with different countries is autobiographical to the extent that his wife Frieda was a German and they retired in Cornwall during exile. His marriage with a German national was a setback during the World War II as Lionel Kelly puts it in his introduction-

“His wife Frieda was a German National and this was enough to make the British authorities suspect him of unpatriotic sympathies. In 1916 he and Frieda went to live in Cornwall where it was thought that the sea air would benefit his health. In October 1917 they were forced to leave by order of the military authorities who suspected Lawrence of spying for Germany- an example of the kind of spectacularly stupid Xenophobia that surfaces in times of war” (“Introduction”, IX).

Migration as a form of attempted cultural assimilation has been deconstructed by Lawrence. The idea of the nation as being synonymous to one’s home is also problematized throughout his life as he writes in *Twilight in Italy*, “Thank God I need not go home : never perhaps” (158). Similarly, her dead husband originated from Germany only to be migrated or exiled to London. Throughout the course of the first four chapters of the novel, Lawrence’s plot progresses with Lydia and her past not only by temporal but also spatial experiences.

Similarly, Ursula's empirical figure is another instance of cross-cultural interaction. Her encounter with Skrenbesky symbolises the dislocation of a man from his native space. The encounter offers a cultural and nationalist critique to the narrative. Skrenbesky deconstructs the notion of nationality as a homogenous space by choosing to go back to India. In his "foreword" to *The Wretched of the Earth*, Homi K. Bhaba problematises the idea of cultural homogeneity in nationalism "... uphold this view that the building of national consciousness demands cultural homogeneity and the disappearance or dissolution of differences is deeply troubling." ("Foreword", ix)

Skrenbesky and Lydia are both antithetical to Ursula. The former is an immigrant and the latter an exile but Ursula lives and experiences her nativity of England. Likewise, Mellors in *Lady Chatterley's Lover* is permanently back to England but Skrenbesky is not. He must go back and leave behind his personal experiences with Ursula. This is temporal and spatial dislocation as Ursula must become his past and seize to be his present as he moves to India, while she reclaims her native identity. Here, Ursula's national identity is reclaimed as she refuses to accompany Skrenbesky to India. She must grow in England and experience its consciousness.

Her experiences of life must be conscious of the Englishness in her while transgressing her rural boundary to move to the city. Lawrence, in *Fantasia of the Unconscious* delineates the importance of rootedness with one's "land" as he puts it, "the Promised land, if it be anywhere, lies away beneath our feet. No more prancing upwards." (3)

The formation and establishment of identity involve both locating and transgressing boundaries as Soumitra Mukherjee puts it. Ursula must transgress her relationship in the sequel- *Women in Love*. Skrenbesky goes back to the temporal past as Ursula moves to the Urban Locale- "There comes the cablegram from Skrebensky: 'I am married'. A old pain and anger and contempt stirred in her. Did he belong utterly to the cast-off past?" (*The Rainbow*, 417). Therefore, her spatial movement from the rural to the urban cult is juxtaposed with the temporal movement. Her migration to the urban locale adds to her *duree* in the Bergsonian sense of the term. It is her liberation as she leaves behind the Marsh Farm to join the township as a teacher and scholar. Her *duree* is transformed towards an intellectual quest for the 'other' culture of the city. This liberation and spontaneous growth is portrayed through Lawrence's narratives as he describes this novel, "Like a novel in a foreign language." ("General Introduction", vii).

Lawrence justifies his idea of the linguistic foreignness associated with the Novel as a genre. Language, therefore is a cultural symbol in his novels. It distinguishes the native from the foreign. Lydia's speech is said to be like a "curious detached way of one speaking a foreign language." (*The Rainbow*, 26). It differentiates the internal as well the external "Otherness" of the characters of his novels. The characters are distinguished in terms of their linguistic approaches in almost all of his canonical texts.

The cultural space is dominated by the linguistic codes in Lawrence. It is juxtaposed with the class discourse which divides the cultural as well as geographical spaces. The "Standard English" of Connie, thereby is segregated from Mellors' North English. Hilda's disapproval of Mellors' dialects symbolizes the dominant linguistic politics in the contemporary cultural discourse- "'Still!' she said as she took a little cheese. 'It would be more natural if you speak in normal English, not in vernacular.' He looked at her, feeling her devil of a will." (246)

Lydia speaks and thinks in foreign language. Mellors' bilingualism both divides and attaches him to the aristocratic class of England as he speaks in Standard as well as Derby but "thinks" only in Derby English. This cultural dichotomy is represented by the regional and class consciousness through linguistic impressions. The colliers speak in Derby English as against the Standard English of the high-brow English society. Therefore, the Derby English used by Mrs. Morel and Mellors is the signifier of their collier class as class consciousness is reminiscent to linguistic conscious. Mellors deliberately switches between the two Englishes and boasts of knowing both of them as a representative of collier as well as the educated gentry.

The ideals of Nationalism amidst the World War II has been ironized by Lawrence. He appears as a critique of the nationalist discourse as he divides the nation into bits and bytes of linguistic, class and political divides. Connie's ideological conflict with her husband is the microcosmic representation of the disintegration of the English culture, although her class betrays her socialist ideology when it comes to the linguistic politics. She is not only conscious of Mellors' otherness due to his language but also alienates and questions it as an aristocratic woman. Although she is a socialist, she is not completely antithetical to the class that she represents as far as the linguistic codes are concerned within a national boundary.

Transgressing the national boundary is also a mode of self-liberation which Connie and other protagonists of Lawrence must experience as Benedict Anderson puts it, "What I am proposing is that nationalism has to be

understood by aligning it, not with self-consciously held political ideologies, but with the large cultural systems that preceded it, out of which — as well as against which - it came into being” (*Imagined Communities*, 11). So, Connie’s journey to Venice is an embankment towards liberation.

Also, just like Ursula, Connie fancies the spatial ‘other’ claiming regional and cultural foreignness. If Ursula wants to leave the Marsh Farm in the quest of the mystique oriental for spiritual liberation, Connie wants to go travelling across the Third World or the New world, “To Africa or Australia, shall we? You have never been to the colonies, have you? He asked her. No! Have you? I have been to India, South Africa and Egypt. Why shouldn’t we go to South Africa? (*Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, 216)

This spatial movement foregrounds not only the cultural but relational movement with Mellors. An escape from England and Europe means a liberation from the “old-stable ego” of the “young intellectuals” and their culture of mechanic capitalism like Clifford and his friends. The Third World countries symbolise the mysterious blood-conscious relationship between herself and Mellors away from the impotent machinery of “a generation of ladylike prigs with half a ball each” (*Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, 218).

Connie’s periodic escapes to the woods are symbolic of her disgust against the cultural decadence of the intellectual society. Her liberation starts with the destabilisation of the institution of marriage by falling in love with Mellors. The “scandal” created by this affair is a *carnavalesque* in Bakhtin’s theory which Connie desires to normalise by validating and justifying it against cultural norms. The burden of national identity is rejected by her when she gets on with Michaelis-the foreigner. Therefore, Venice as a cultural space is the symbol of her social and personal liberation.

Here, Venice symbolizes the social space where “disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination ...as they are lived out across the globe today” as Pratt puts it while defining Contact Zone. A critique of the conventional definitions of culture has, therefore been offered by Lawrence due to the alienation it subjugates an individual into. Lawrence offers a Jungian philosophy of organic existence in the cosmos which “spontaneously appear(s) in the universe out of nothing” in *Psychology of the Unconscious*. This is symbolised by placing the pre-conscious framework of an individual above the conscious. The conscious is not the spontaneous existence of any individual as

discussed in *Fantasia of the Unconscious* by Lawrence.

Such a cultural liberation offered by the spatial movement does not always end on an optimistic note. Lawrence balances this in *Sons and Lovers* through William's decadence and death while seeking a liberation in London away from his town. Unlike Ursula, he had no "time" but only "space". This temporal and spatial antithesis is reflected as he says, "There was no time, only space" (*Sons and Lovers*, 429).

The global space also forms an important part in these narratives. Lawrence's characters also undergo several geographical and cultural transitions. The symbol of "land" becomes vital here to locate the spatio-cultural identity of the characters. The spatial boundaries are important in the novels like *The Rainbow*, *Lady Chatterley's Lover* and *Sons and Lovers* because they are the spaces which need to be transcended. It is at this juncture that Lawrence cautions against the land as being synonymous to national culture. Land, in Lawrentian sense is the abstract transcendental cosmos as against the individual's existence within a specific cultural paradigm. This he foregrounds in the very first chapter of his book *Fantasia of the Unconscious*:

"The promised land, if it be anywhere lies away beneath our feet. No more prancing upwards. No more uplift. No more little Excelsiors crying world-brotherhood and international love and Leagues of Nations. Idealism and materialism amount to the same thing on the top of Pisgah, and the space is very crowded. We're all concerned on our mountain top, climbing up one another and standing on one another's faces in our scream of Excelsior." (3)

This transcultural discourse is also foregrounded by Soumitra Mukherjee as the "strangeness existing between two cultures" (104). In the words of Fernando Ortiz, "transculturation is the merging and converging of cultures rather than segregating or diverging them- transculturation encompasses more than transition from one culture to another. It does not consist merely of acquiring another culture or uprooting a previous culture. Rather, it merges these concepts and additionally carries the idea of the consequent creation of new cultural phenomena."

Religion is deconstructed in London and so is the filial relationship which has been the crux of pre-modern England. His Mother's prayers are as vain as her existence for William who no longer identifies her due to his mortal illness. Not only the body but the soul is sick due to quest for a city-life, "she prayed for William. Prayed that he would recognize her" (*Sons and lovers*, 152).

Therefore, the urban cosmopolitan culture offers alienation and death to William. Even the personified concept of love is deconstructed. Ms. Western is the “Other” for William. She is his gypsy or “gyp” as he calls her. This seemingly illusionary “otherness” fails ultimately as William prophesies her ingenuity and transiency of love. “She’s very much in love with me now, but if I died she’d have forgotten me in there months” (*Sons and Lovers*, 149). The cult of Christianity is also destabilised. Rituals are a mere ‘show’ in Lawrentian portrayal- “Nonsense or not, she has! That’s what confirmation means for her- a bit of theatrical show where she can cut a figure.” (149).

Similarly, Lawrence blurs the margins between Christianity and paganisms by synthesizing Christianity with Paganism in *The Rainbow* as “...the Greeks had a naked Apollo, the Christians a white-robed Christ, the Buddhists a royal prince, the Egyptians their Osiris.” (287). Such a synthesis of paradoxical cultures is vital as Jane Costin puts it, “Lawrence was now making between the sacrifice and all the mysteries of pre-Christian days” (“Etudes Lawrenciennes”, 1) and also, “... a risen Christ has no place with us”, says Lawrence representing the loss of faith in modern England. (*Rainbow*, 236).

Therefore, the image of Christ as a “white-robed” saviour seems to be alienated by Lawrence. Not only does Lawrence synthesise various spatial and religious cultural codes but also the customary ones like “...pencils and Indian rubbers” (333). The scene in which Connie disposes off the antique furniture symbolizes her rebellion and liberation from the “old-stable ego” and decaying culture of the contemporary intellectual England and an aspiration for rejuvenation in life, “to a new germination, to a new growth...” (*The Rainbow*, 418).

New germination is the spontaneous process through Transculturation as foregrounded by Lawrence in his writings. He offers it as an alternative to the otherwise insufficient cultural codes like national identity, race, ethnicity, class and matrimonial ties. The transcendence beyond these means different ways of finding liberation which can be physical or abstract although Lawrentian liberation is more abstract, spontaneous and pre-conscious than being concrete. Ursula finds her liberation by migrating to the city like Paul Morel. City symbolizes not only the geographical location but also an inner side of these characters’ hope amidst death and decadence as Paul Morel walks away to the transcended self towards the “glowing town” and Ursula finds new hope through the Rainbow-

“And the rainbow stood on the earth. She knew that the sordid people who crept hard-scaled and separate on the face of the world's corruption were living still, that the rainbow was arched in their blood and would

quiver to life in their spirit, that they would cast off their horny colouring of disintegration, that new, clean, naked bodies would issue to a new germination, to a new growth, rising to the light and the wind and the clean rain of heaven. She saw in the rainbow the earth's new architecture, the old, brittle corruption of houses and factories swept away, the world built up in a living fabric of Truth, fitting to the over-arching heaven" (418).

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