

KAUSHIK'S ŽIŽEKIAN “SUBJECT”: SUBJECTIVITY IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S “GOING ASHORE”

ALIREZA FARAHBAKHS¹ & MOSTAFA TAGHAVI ZAD²

¹Research Scholar, University of Guilan, Iran

²MA, Azad University, Tehran Central Branch, Iran

ABSTRACT

The present article studied Jhumpa Lahiri's short story "Going Ashore" from her latest collection *Unaccustomed Earth* with the focus on one of the protagonists, Kaushik and examined the grounds on which the subject of this character is formed based on the Žižekian definition of the term. The article focused on Lahiri's techniques and devices in the story to see whether they confirm Žižekian subjectivity in the character of Kaushik or not. Drawing on Žižek's own definition of "subject", the writer attempted to display the character of Kaushik with reference to his career and lifestyle. In the course of the study it was revealed that the character of Kaushik remains a Žižekian "subject" since he does not devote himself to any fixed culture and remains in the void of Žižekian subjectivity and finally dies in this void.

KEYWORDS: Subject, Void, the Thing, Trauma

INTRODUCTION

Jhumpa Lahiri's "Going Ashore", the last story of the trilogy of "Hema and Kaushik" from *Unaccustomed Earth*, is concerned with the ending of the story of two second generation Indian immigrant characters with their social and cultural difficulties in the host culture. As it is apparent in the context of the narrative, the second generation characters have lost their self in their double edge state in the society and they try to make sense of their in-between state. In search of meaning and in an effort to shape up their fragmented selves, characters of "Going Ashore" are nominees of being Žižekian "subjects". This article sets out a study of the way Žižekian "subject" is illustrated in the character of Kaushik and the grounds on which it is helped to be formed.

Žižek proposes that if you take away all your distinctive characteristics, all your particular needs, interests and beliefs, what you are left with is a "subject". The "subject" is the form of your consciousness, as opposed to the contents of that form which are individual and specific to you. One cannot see the world if he/she is a part of it. As Myers has stated,

A "subject", for Žižek is, therefore, a piece of the world which has detached itself from the world and is a void where that world can now be seen. This is what makes a "subject" subjective as opposed to objective. The "subject" is a particular or individual view of the world. (2003, 12)

Žižek locates the subject in the empty space devoid of all content. The subject is, in other words, a void. It is this void that, for Žižek, makes possible the shift from a state of nature to a state of culture. This is because if there was no gap between a thing (or an object) and the representation of that thing (or word), then they would be impossible to tell apart and there would be no room for subjectivity. Words can only survive if we first 'murder' the thing, if we create a gap between them and the things they represent. This gap, the gap between nature and the beings absorbed in it, is the subject.

Žižek's use of "subject" is as a split subject, what Lacan points out by the symbol \$, the "subject" as a gap or void. As Butler states, it is around this "subject" that the essential connection between philosophy and psychoanalysis might be made. It is around this "subject" – the subject as split and the subject as introducing a kind of split – that the originality of Žižek's work is to be found (2005, 17).

From a psychoanalytic angle, Žižek's initial position is that the self must embrace its own otherness (the antagonistic negativity fixed in the unconscious) to become and recognize itself as "subject". For Žižek the subject is formed by a loss, by the removal of itself from itself, by the expulsion of the very Ground or essence from which it is made. The subject, in this sense, is always a nostalgic subject, forever striving to recover its loss. However, this Ground must remain outside of the subject for the subject to keep hold of its steadiness as a subject. The subject, in other words, must externalize itself in order to be a subject at all.

Lahiri's second generation characters face the opportunities and challenges of belonging to two different cultures, and must continuously negotiate an intermediate position within and between two cultures. They occupy a middle ground which could easily turn into a battle ground between the Indian and the American parts of their identities, but they strive to maintain ties to both cultures, identifying themselves as Indian Americans. According to Olstedal, no matter how predominantly Indian or American they feel, Lahiri's characters still retain a sense of self as Indian Americans (2011, 5). In "Going Ashore", we are informed of Kaushik's job and lifestyle as a second generation immigrant that detaches him from both his root and host cultures. His lack of belonging and his place in a void detached of any content makes his character a good illustration of Žižekian "subject".

This article aims to have a close look at the Kaushik's job and lifestyle in Lahiri's "Going Ashore" and analyzes the feasibility of Kaushik's character to be a Žižekian "subject". It starts with a summary of the story, provides a critical account of the structure of the Žižekian "subject", and finally explores those structures in the protagonist of the narrative.

DISCUSSIONS

A Žižekian "subject" is a void empty of any interest, belief, or content. This "subject" does not belong to any determined ideology, sets of behavior or culture. This "subject" lives on the border between beliefs, interests or culture and this means he/she is able to understand and define and react to both sides of the spectrum. This in-between state is ubiquitous in Lahiri's second generation characters and especially the character of Kaushik in "Going Ashore" can be inferred as the best instant of this in-between state. Kaushik escapes his root culture by leaving his traditional family and becomes a photojournalist who belongs to no permanent place and one who detaches himself of the incidents around him by his camera.

"Going Ashore" includes both of the main characters of the final trilogy of *Unaccustomed Earth*: Hema and Kaushik. They meet again in Rome after two decades. Hema has now taken temporary refuge from her teaching job at Wellesley, has a study grant and a visiting lectureship, is tormented with her dishonest married boyfriend Julian and her parents trying to get her back into family life by planning her marriage to Navin, a professor of physics, in Calcutta, a man she hardly knows. After years of refusing similar requests from her parents to meet someone and after believing that Julian would leave his wife, she'd agreed to meet Navin. While Hema's meeting Kaushik at a friend's house in Rome is predictable enough, the novella's denouement is not. We learn about Kaushik's life as a photojournalist, his anguished encounter with death and destruction documenting abysmal and gruesome human conflicts from Gaza and West Bank to Guatemala and El Salvador. Waiting in Rome before his move to Hong Kong as a desk editor, he inevitably meets Hema. They consummate their deeply buried connection and profound passion even though Hema knew "clear-eyed, aware that in

a matter of weeks it would end" (Lahiri, 2008, 317). Neither Hema nor Kaushik had experienced any real love or connections before. Their story in Rome seems to represent an independence from the traditional forces that have shaped their lives; however, this independence does not last long. Finally, she cannot ignore the expectations imposed by her parents and she rejects Kaushik's offer to live together.

Kaushik had called her a coward when she refused his invitation to go with him. She last saw him before she took her bangle off, her grandmother's gift that Kaushik had remembered she wore as a child, to go through security on her way to India, to marry Navin whom she did not love. Too late she remembered leaving the gold bangle on the tray.

Kaushik is on a beach resort bereft of anger and yet longing for Hema, the only woman who knew his past, without whom he was lost. On a flawless day near Phuket, he is invited to go for a swim with the Swedish family he had met, but he is not a good swimmer. The boatman is a Thai boy and Kaushik follows him into the water, "white foam like soap suds hissing around his ankles" (Lahiri, 2008, 330). The consequences of their final separation are Kaushik's death and Hema's obligatory marriage to Navin. The narration returns to first person where Hema still writing to Kaushik as she marries Navin in gruesome recognition that he lives while Kaushik and the turquoise waves of the Tsunami had become one.

Kaushik makes his living as an international photojournalist and tries to remove and run away from his harsh private past by capturing and broadcasting dreadful public and political incidents. For Kaushik, his job conveniently takes him far away from Massachusetts and his father's new family. This is a path which leads Kaushik to form a Žižekian "subject". As Žižek asserts in *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture*, the subject attempts to fill out its constitutive lack by means of identification, by identifying itself with some master signifier guaranteeing its place in the symbolic network (1992, 126). Kaushik's job as a photojournalist fills the lack for him.

Kaushik is never totally off-duty from his work as a photographer as he is always equipped to document the world around him through his camera. Though Kaushik is similarly wrapped up in his job as Hema, he too feels some regret at how his career shapes his life. As Oltedal asserts, Kaushik feels that he has become single-minded, to the point where he acts as a photographer before being a fellow human being (2011, 48). He tells Hema about one of these incidents:

Two cars had collided at an intersection. A crowd gathered, but the police had not yet arrived. Inside one of the cars, a child was crying. It turned out that the passengers were not badly hurt. Kaushik had pulled over, rushed out, but the first thing he'd done was take a picture. "The first thing," he told Hema. "Before even asking if they were okay." (Lahiri, 2008, 317)

Kaushik's indifference to the horrible incidents around the world and his stance behind his camera are indicators of Kaushik's detachment and going toward the Žižekian void to form the Žižekian "subject". According to Žižek, everything that I positively am, every enunciated content I can point at and say 'that's me', is not 'I'; I am only the void that remains, the empty distance toward every content (qtd in *Cogito and the Unconscious*, 1998, 225-226).

Like Hema, Kaushik has also chosen a job that allows him to negotiate the postcolonial world. After college he travelled in South America, beginning his career as a photographer in El Salvador, which he recognizes as a place "so obviously at war with itself" (Lahiri, 2008, 303), a state which has been typical of much of the postcolonial, decolonized world. His work brings him into aggressive conflicts in parts of the world that used to be under colonial rule. To his surprise, his vague status as Indian American fares him well in these troubled parts of the world: "the Salvadorans were never sure what to make of Kaushik" (Lahiri, 2008, 303). This again indicates his lack of belonging to any culture and in Žižekian terms the subjective void. To Kaushik, documenting the violence and calamities of the world makes him feel

useful. However, when it comes to his own life, he is hesitant to document any of the people or situations that move him. This is obvious when he makes a conscious decision to leave his camera at college when coming home for his first Christmas with his father's new family, and once again when he abstain from photographing Hema on their brief Italian holiday. It seems that having documentation of such situations is too excruciating to bring him to take pictures. Looking at pictures of his mother surely is, and pictures of Hema might be all the more agonizing to view.

Kaushik has traveled widely throughout his life, and finds that he desires a more settled existence. This proves the significance of being grounded to one place and its centrality to the negotiation of identity. The inclusion of those on the move shows that migrants are not exempt from this identity formation. Kaushik's restless lifestyle stands as a contrast to the other characters in *Unaccustomed Earth*. This homelessness also shows the void of Žižekian subjectivity. As Žižek mentions in *In Defense of Lost Causes*, in a case of constituted anxiety, the object dwells within the confines of a fantasy, whereas we get the constituent anxiety only when the subject "traverses the fantasy" and confronts the void, the gap, filled up by the fantasmatic object (2008, 327). But even Kaushik, who throughout his life has been continually on the move, finds that he needs stability. Although he is pessimistic about entering into office life and building a home somewhere, imagining that he will detest it, he apprehends that he needs to lead a different life and "be still" (Lahiri, 2008, 308). However, he is not capable of planning for more than perhaps a few years into the future, and does not have anyone else's feelings to consider, until he meets Hema in Italy. When Kaushik offers that she call off her wedding, and join him on his way eastward to his new job in Hong Kong, Hema is maddened and hurt by the proposal. Oltedal asserts that just as Ruma is unwilling to accompany her husband on his various business trips, Hema is not prepared to let Kaushik's movements run her life. Both women find that they need a secure place to strike their roots, and that a rootless existence as migrant women, totally dependent on their men, is not an option (2011, 97). Hema needs to be belonged to a place and time and this makes her escape the Žižekian void that Kaushik wants to drag her into

Kaushik likes living in Rome both because he is so far from his family and his past, and at the same time because he is so much in touch with his memories of his family and their past. His mother has marked Rome for him, and by living there, he feels more in touch with his former self and with her. The motherless young Kaushik who avoids contact with his family and his Indian and American roots, feels a connection to his deceased mother on the streets of Rome. This connection is what causes him to hold physical ties to the Italian capital, in the shape of an apartment and some associates. Ruma in "Unaccustomed Earth", shares with Kaushik the sense of being in between. As Filipczak explains,

Her mother's death makes her identify strongly with Indian heritage. Ruma lives immersed in the memories of her dead mother, and even though it contradicts her American upbringing, she starts imitating her example. She does not reject American clothes, taste for American food, nor does she use Bengali, her parents' native language. She rejects something more fundamental: her independence, professional success, and sense of equality with her husband. (2012, 5)

This in-between state of Kaushik's identity opens up the Žižekian void and forms his Žižekian "subject". As Žižek points out in *Living in the End Times*, all the philosophico-ideological topics we have been dealing with reverberate in Seconds: the reduction of the subject to a tabula rasa, the emptying of all its substantial content, and its rebirth, its recreation from a zero-point (2010, 78).

A small apartment in Rome affords an impermanent home between travels to war-torn lands and refugee camps. According to Behdad and Thomas, the title of the concluding story that is also the conclusion of the collection, "Going Ashore", is deliberately and provocatively ironic because in deciding to move to East Asia, more precisely to Hong Kong,

Kaushik, cautiously treasures the promise that for the next few years at least he would be still (2011, 432). On the other hand, Kaushik himself finds refuge behind the lens of his camera, "dependent on the material world, stealing from it, hoarding it, unwilling to let it go" (Lahiri, 2008, 309). One last short holiday in Indonesia, before settling in Hong Kong for the immediate future, in a small resort to the north of Phuket, Kaushik enters the calm, warm, and welcoming sea, and as "his feet touched the bottom ... he let go" (Lahiri, 2008, 331).

Kaushik's desire to photograph everyday incidences during his adolescence and his later, brief career as a war photographer are a means by which he tries to regain the past. However, his attempts are continually undermined by the fact that representing a moment photographically takes the form of a haunting: photographs paradoxically heighten loss by bringing around memory. Banerjee asserts that instead of providing him with roots and access to the past that would give him a secure sense of diasporic identity, photographs and photography simply exacerbate Kaushik's sense of phantom loss and diasporic mourning (2010, 446). His camera detaches him from his root and detaches him from the life around him. The act of photographing is a path to Kaushik's Žižekian "subject". According to Salecl in "I Can't Love You Unless I Give You Up" that is in *Gaze and Voice as Love Object* edited by Salecl and Žižek,

Every screen of reality includes a constitutive "stain," the trace of what had to be excluded from the field of reality in order that this field can acquire its consistency; this stain appears in the guise of a void Lacan names *objet petit a*. It is the point that I, the subject, cannot see: it eludes me insofar as it is the point from which the screen itself "returns the gaze," or watches me, that is, the point where the gaze itself is inscribed into the visual field of reality. (1996, 189)

Unaccustomed Earth opens with an epigraph from Hawthorne about human nature not prosperous "if it be planted and replanted in the same worn out soil" (Lahiri, 2008, front matter). While this seems to allude to the advantages of migration, many characters in this collection (as in Lahiri's earlier work) feel anachronistic and disempowered as they endeavor to strike root in unaccustomed earth. Even second-generation children of immigrants are incapable of assimilating fully into American culture. Kaushik is mostly affected by two chaotic upheavals – his move away from America when he is nine and then his return to America with his parents when he is sixteen. In "Going Ashore", Kaushik becomes the typical trans located citizen of the world, occupying a number of cracked spaces. He virtually severs connections to both his ordinary home (India) and his diasporic home (the US): he does not return to either place for years and feels no need to do so. Kaushik thinks: "As a photographer his origins were irrelevant" (Lahiri, 2008, 310). According to Banerjee, photojournalism gives Kaushik a sense of control over his existential reality, perhaps combating the rootlessness he feels as a twice-displaced individual. However, the double edge of photography constantly makes us aware of the falsity and ultimate failure of such a sense of belonging and security (2010, 447). Kaushik's photography marks his distance from any specific culture and demonstrates his move toward Žižekian "subject". Kaushik commits suicide by devoting himself to photography. As Zupancic asserts in "A Perfect Place to Die: Theatre in Hitchcock's Films",

Every real act is a 'suicide of the subject'. The subject may be born again in this act, but only as a new subject. The act is an act only if afterwards the subject is no longer the same as before. It is always structured as a symbolic suicide; it is a gesture by means of which symbolic ties are torn up. (1992, 93)

Kaushik strongly identifies with the non-interventionist role. One of his first published photographs, taken when he is living in Guatemala, is of a man who has been shot in the head: "When he thought back to that afternoon, he remembered that his hands were shaking but that otherwise he felt untouched by the situation, unmoved once he was behind the camera, shooting to the end of the roll" (Lahiri, 2008, 304-305).

When Kaushik comes home from college to visit his father and his new family over Christmas, he intentionally does not bring his camera with him, “knowing that [he] would not want to document anything” (Lahiri, 2008, 280). It is as though by not photographing this particular Christmas, he is refuting its legitimacy. Later, when he is a professional photojournalist and Chitra and his father visit him in Rome, he takes them to the popular tourist sites, and takes pictures of them, “handing his father the rolls of film before they left as if it had been any other job” (Lahiri, 2008, 307). As Banerjee mentions, this cold professionalism disavows his pain at not being able to make himself part of the new family unit with Chitra at its centre (2010, 448). Kaushik resists and tries to keep in touch with the Indian culture at the same time and this is another indicator of his Žižekian "subject". According to Daly and Žižek in *Conversations with Žižek*, the subject exists as an eternal dimension of resistance-excess towards all forms of subjectivation (or what Althusser would call interpellation). The subject is a basic constitutive void that drives subjectivation but which cannot ultimately be filled out by it (2004, 4).

Unlike his mother, who “had set up households again and again in her life ... always given everything to make her home beautiful, always drawn strength from her things, her walls” (Lahiri, 2008, 309), Kaushik “never fully trusted the places he’d lived, never turned to them for refuge” (Lahiri, 2008, 309). He is disturbed by memories of his family’s moves every time he visits a refugee camp and observes life reduced to and eventually defined by a few earthly belongings. As Banerjee asserts, living in a rented apartment with furniture and even sheets and towels that are not his own, he likes to believe that he is different, that in very short time he could be on his way to anywhere in the world (2010, 448). Although he has few belongings of his own, through his photography he collects things – “he knew that in his own way, with his camera, he was dependent on the material world, stealing from it, hoarding it, unwilling to let it go” (Lahiri, 2008, 309).

Lahiri’s use of photography contradicts Kaushik’s pride in his lack of rootedness. Although as a photojournalist he desires the excitement of chasing after news, there is something in his life that is deeply unsatisfying. Overlooking his friend’s warning that such a job meant “death to the photographer”, Kaushik accepts a position as photo editor of an international news magazine in Hong Kong, only because of “the promise for the next few years at least, that he would be still” (Lahiri, 2008, 308).

As a photojournalist, Kaushik grants a certificate of presence upon everything he photographs; but, in doing so, he himself is authenticated as documenter of the moment. There are several moments in the story when Kaushik’s photographs stand in metonymically for him. As Hyldgaard asserts in "The cause of the subject as an ill-timed accident: Lacan, Sartre and Aristotle", the subject is indeed a picture, a photograph: the subject is the "subject of representation" (2003, 239). Travelling the world, Kaushik deliberately distances himself from his family, not even going back for graduations and weddings: “And yet ... thanks to his work, Kaushik continued to wash up on his father’s doorstep, in the form of his photo credit in one of the news magazines his father read, announcing that he was alive, indicating where he’d been and what he’d seen” (Lahiri, 2008, 306). Kaushik’s photographs root him to a particular time and place. A touching example of the same phenomenon takes place at the end of the story when Hema goes to the newspaper stands in Calcutta the day after the tsunami “and bought the papers, studying every picture, looking for your name in one of the credits, hoping that you had been lucky and had continued to do your work” (Lahiri, 2008, 332).

Death is connected to migration in intricate ways. Kaushik dies on his way to live in yet another foreign land, the journey of translocation cuts short by an unfortunate death. As Žižek points out in *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture*,

Precisely by "circulating only around itself," the subject circulates around something that is "in itself more than itself," the traumatic kernel of enjoyment that Lacan refers to by the German word *das Ding*. The subject is perhaps nothing but a name for this circular movement, for this distance toward the Thing which is "too hot" to be approached closely. It is because of this Thing that the subject resists universalization, that it cannot be reduced to a place—even if it is an empty place—in the symbolic order. (1992, 130)

CONCLUSIONS

In "Going Ashore", Kaushik lives in the Žižekian void, free of his Bengali heritage and of American norms. Living in the modern culture, he was physically and of course psychologically far from his Indian culture but by choosing war photojournalism and hiding himself behind his camera and being indifferent to the calamities around him, he detaches himself of the modern culture around him. He lives in the void free of any determined content. Being in the void, Kaushik leaves nothing behind after his death. He becomes nothing in the sea, without any tombstone or any certain way of burial. Kaushik dies as a Žižekian "subject" since he was not reduced to a place and was not belonged to any culture or tradition.

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