

The Omnipresent Time and Space in Joyce Carol Oates's *The Wheel of Love & Other Stories*

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ABSTRACT

Joyce Carol Oates, in *The Wheel of Love and Other Stories*, has depicted the varied nature of love omnipresent in the chaotic times and aptly placed in the prevailing spatial dimensions of the women living in the threatening world around. Love has been presented with different approaches as well as varied forms and visions reflecting the upheaval of the times. The movement of characters back and forth in time and space brings forth the mental dilemmas and adds to the beauty of the stories in this collection. Her characters keep fighting the terrifying battle against time in their quest for attention but are obsessed with the events in their life and are unable to emerge from their past experiences and cravings which haunt them perpetually. The concept of Time and space in literature and its infinite nature has always intrigued the writers and the relative aspects have been a part of various literary studies. The literary text that is situated in a particular time depicts that period and also reflects certain aspects of space related to it which can be real or virtual. The paper examines the temporal and spatial aspects represented in the stories in the short story collection, *The Wheel of Love* by Joyce Carol Oates.

KEYWORDS

Omnipresent; chaotic; spatial dimensions; temporal; virtual.

Introduction

Space and time contribute to literature by setting the context and scene of the fictional world and play a crucial role while critically analyzing literary texts. The spatial aspect adds to the creation of the background in which the characters live and move back and forth in time. The temporal and the spatial elements are an integral part of literature and are expressed in an artistic form through the narratives built beautifully in this 'Literary Artistic Chronotope' which means- 'time-space'.

In the literary artistic 'chronotope', spatial and temporal indicators are

fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time as it were thickens, takes on flesh and becomes artistically visible; likewise space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history. This interaction of axes and fusion of indicators characterizes the artistic chronotope (Bakhtin 85).

The time and space concept sets the imagination and virtually transmits the reader into the world inhabited by the characters. The Socio-Cultural Milieu that is reflected in the literary work also brings forth the concept of time and space. The

reading experience is enriched by the mingling of time and space and sets the storyline and the plot as well as the characters depicted. The space inhabited by the character is referred to as the 'frame' and can be considered as inner or outer spatial characteristics that affect the lives of the protagonists.

Joyce Carol Oates is an American Writer who explores the American experience in her fiction and beneath the melodramatic surface of her works lays the vision of reality that can be explored in terms of the cultural context, the spatial element and the turmoil of the times that it reflects.

Oates' America is built up as a reverberating symbolic structure from such material common places as highways, automobiles, super markets, shopping malls, money, cleanliness, success, marriage, motherhood all heightened into the fabric of gothic parable (Creighton 30).

The America of 60s and 70s which witnessed a massive transition in the thought process of women mainly as an impact of the feminist movement which led women towards autonomy is evident in Oates' writings. *The Wheel of Love and Other Stories* symbolizes complicated love relationships tormenting the lives of characters in the twenty short stories in this collection. Lives of ordinary people living in the streets of New York and Detroit, their struggle, dilemmas and psychic imbalance are depicted in this collection with continual reference to time and space inhabited by the varied characters entangled in their complicated lives. The setting of the different stories and the plethora of relationships explored in different settings stimulate the imaginative boundaries of the readers and are a true reflection of the times.

Doris is an adolescent girl from the story- *Boy and Girl* who is a typical teenager of the period of transition and

followed the ideal of assertion for free sexual relationship, she wanted to break out of the rigid age old customs and the defined role of a woman. She lived in her own dream world, her spatial domain and her mental state are mingled- "It occurred to her that the atmosphere of a typical school dance was the atmosphere of life itself" (283). She was living in a fabricated world asserting her independence by flaunting her beauty in the violent world dominated by men who exploit her. She was brutally beaten up by a man and as she was unable to accept being overpowered she ended up psychologically disturbed in a mental hospital. Alex's mother reveals- "Some boy beat her up. It was such a shock" (298).

Oates represents the passions of human beings by exploring the element of love, anxiety and dilemmas of her characters in different backgrounds taking the element of space to create melodramatic scene coupling it with the time effect. *The Wheel of Love* is a symbolic representation of the lives of characters moving on this frame like structure where various forms of complicated love relationships and mental stress and tensions of characters are bound in a closed frame intersecting each other in the upward and downward journey reflecting the ups and downs in life. The temporal and spatial aspect is evident in the title of the collection of twenty stories in which the characters move in a state of torture being punished due to the circumstances of their lives. The title story "The Wheel of Love" in this collection brings forth the disturbed mental state of the protagonist, David. His failed love relationship with his wife Nadia - who commits suicide - is like a palindrome. This is presented like a trap in which he is caught and keeps reminiscing the past. His past has strong implications in his present trauma.

Time led up a slight incline, like a cracked sidewalk, and at its feeble peak was the top of his life: those

several minutes when they had explained to him that she was dead. Then, time led downward again, the same modest cracked sidewalk (190).

The time travel and the background of the story reflect the technique of apt utilization of space and time to heighten the emotional trauma and suffering of David and attracts the reader's imagination transferring them into David's world. The reality of human existence is the domain of the writer which is well reflected in the experiences of the character who moulds every perception of the present and past according to the mental dilemma which is present throughout the story.

Oates presents a visionary conception of human experience through her well framed stories and presents the ego-consciousness of a culture that can be a mirror of the profane world inhabited by her characters. She uses the descriptive power of language to powerfully depict the time reference and spatial context in her works. The short story "How I Contemplated the World From the Detroit House of Correction and Began my Life over Again" is another example of her experimental fiction where the long title itself sets the scenario of the story. The events of the story are arranged in a chronological order and reveal the life story of fifteen-year-old girl who is unable to control her urge to steal. The readers can visualize the department store from where she steals pair of gloves even though she has enough money: "Bills she doesn't know how many bills" (481).

Her stories aptly reflect the dynamics of the times and the social and moral conditions of the generation portrayed in her works. The story "Where Are You Going Where Have You Been" is another example of the dichotomy of Space i.e. the inside and outside spatial elements that reflect the life turmoil of Connie, the protagonist. The outside refers to the external world which Connie inhabits that

is outside the secure environment of her home. It may include the restaurant, the car of her friend Eddie, the theatre, etc. where her security is threatened by external elements. Connie is a young adolescent who lived a life bathed in her trashy dreams that included the semi-secret world of the American Teenager that included shopping malls, flirtations, drive in restaurants, romances, highway hitchhiking, and the fascination of loud rock music - all symbolic of newly attained freedom with the wave of feminist movements of the times. She was unable to understand the threatening outside world of men ready to assault vulnerable women like her. She gave importance to physical attractiveness: "She knew she was pretty and that was everything" (34).

She escapes the familial atmosphere and goes to the shopping mall several times a week where she cheerfully passes her time in a teenage hangout. Oates describes the shopping mall as a center of enjoyment in most of her works as it reflects the spirit of freedom and fun for young teenagers like a 'mandala', a source of wonder, excitement, a place of revelation and purpose. Connie experiments with sexual provocation in the mall with cheap clothes and makeup away from her mother's eyes:

She wore a pull over jersey blouse that looked one way when she was at home and another way when she was away from home. Everything about her had two sides to it, one for home and one for anywhere that was not home (30).

Connie was well aware of her position in the patriarchal order and the dangers of the times in which she lived but still she experimented with the autonomy offered by the transitional period of adolescence and also the turbulent social era and thus suffered. Joanne.V. Creighton points out that this story "is enriched by the very ordinariness of Connie and her

friends and their dreamy infatuation with the sleazy and experimental no man's land of adolescence" (Creighton 38).

The story develops in swift, realistic strokes where on a Sunday Connie stays alone at home dreaming of the boy she was attracted to but when she woke up from the dreams the growing weeds and the "smallness" of her asbestos 'ranch' house startles her. Her spatial dimension and its insignificance in keeping her secure is highlighted when Arnold Friend visits her, the devil in disguise leads her towards her own downfall. The tension of the story is incrementally heightened through Connie's gradual awakening to the nature and intent of the visitor. She is first puzzled and flattered in her own spatial and temporal dimensions, her dream world where the miserable popular music of the times and the coyly flirtatious attitude overpowers her but when the reality dawns on her it is too late and it leads to her inevitable rape and murder. Oates's strategic use of the two words 'house and 'home' exhibit the difference between the two where 'house' is merely a physical area whereas 'home' is the one inhabited by the family which symbolizes protection. The title question "Where are you going?", indicates to the physical places Connie visits and their mental implications which provide her with a false sense of security. For example, the restaurant which Connie considers as safe from the dangers of the world turns out to be the place where older kids visited and the clientele was not Connie's age thus, dangerous for her. Thus, there is a mingling and interchange of the inside and outside in the story where Connie is unable to decipher the real place where she is secure and really does not know where she is going or where she has been. The house that she considers home is the place where she is molested in the absence of her family members. Connie's home is deconstructed when she tries to protect herself from Arnold friend in those four walls which were no longer her 'home'

but a 'house' where she meets her downfall. Oates visualizes freedom to be above the restrictions imposed by family, society and the space thus it implies isolation as being the personal space where an individual struggles and surrenders. Friedman aptly states:

Oates is a writer obsessed with experiential plurality, with human reciprocity and human limitation and with reconciliation to time and the manifest world. Oates is preoccupied with the idea that the self is not a substitute for the world but that a selfhood is possible only when it is located in and delineated by a specific temporal and spatial environment..... As America loosed its bonds from England, Oates's protagonists find themselves by a variety of ways free from the strictures of family, place and history. Yet when they attempt to follow the imperatives of the self they inevitably confront chaos, madness or death. (4)

Another theme that Oates explores in her writings is recognizing the limits that bring forth the boundaries beyond which one cannot know the answers to the varied mysteries projected by life. In her fiction, the temporal and spatial restrictions of the body are explored in multiple ways recurrently. In her short story "In the Region Ice", the protagonist Sister Irene is a teacher of literature in a Catholic University and finds herself psychologically linked to a Jewish student. She continuously faces the intellectual challenges posed by the varied questions asked by the student in the class but later she comes to know that the student is in a mental institution when he does not appear continuously in her class. On his incessant plea for help she even decides to take it as a mission to extend her support but later withdraws into her 'Region of Ice' despite of a few efforts to see Allen's parents, discuss his condition and help.

Despite of Allen's request for help she is unable to connect and thinks:

She could only be one person in her lifetime. That was the ugly truth, she thought, that she could not really regret Weinstein's sufferings and death; she had only one life and she had already given it to someone else... (32).

The reality is 'the region of ice' which leads to the stubborn integrity of sister Irene who chooses to remain within bounds and not violate them and risk the loss of self outside the created rigid boundaries.

It has been rightly stated by G.F. Waller: "Oates's work reveals her to be among the most sensitive recorders of the intellectual, social – and most important of

all-the emotional dynamics of our time" (2). Thus, in Oates's stories the sense of history, place and the self, form the spatial element and is well pronounced and it has a deep impact on the lives of her characters. Her America is that of racial conflicts, riots, migrant labor camps, suburban greed, motorcycle and race car jocks, violent sex, assassinations, preaching, death as well as drugs. She reflects the American life on the large canvas of American history and these implications are evident in her plethora of works where her characters are overpowered by their realization and feel that an individual is helpless while trying to assert his will and struggles against the tide of time.

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