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**Dynamics of Displaced Lives and Subjective Spatiality in Lan Samantha Chang's *Hunger***

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**Abstract**

This paper is an attempt to trace the displaced life of an Asian American family, focusing on the subjective experiences of spatiality. The protagonists find the moral climate in America conducive to full and free expression of their dispositions. This urban phenomenon attracts urban dwellers who aim at economic prospects and cultural assimilation. The American Midwest region serves as a place of representation for the characters as relations of power get set and solidified. Memory gets associated with certain places, creating a subjective spatial history of feelings and emotions. The city and the space encompassed by it can shape one's personality, establish one's identity, and alleviate the effects of contemporary processes of globalization. The novella *Hunger* epitomizes the struggles of two cultures – the traditional Chinese culture of the immigrants and the American culture of their children. The story progresses through the lived experience of the characters in deciphering and making meaning out of cultural tensions.

**Keywords:** Spatiality, displacement, representation, culture, globalization

**Introduction:**

For a long time, space as a metaphor has been perceived in various forms like gendered space, body space, and representational space. Of late, the pervasive influence of physical space on human behavior and identity has garnered the attention of scholars and theorists. More than a physical backdrop or location, space in human life is more complex and forms dynamically. It is an amalgamation of threshold and limitlessness, centers, and margins. Explicit theories of space would foray into quantifications that can only generalize rather than offer interpretations. Therefore, the study and knowledge systems of space are best humanistic.

When the representations of space remain customized, weaving space and its fermenting depths into literary narratives may be cumbersome. Fiction, especially novels, has attempted to portray in human lives the nexus between time and space as the Russian literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin defines chronotype as "the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in

literature" (84). Time and space, their representation becomes physically palpable, concrete, and alive. Individuals experience space not merely as a physical entity but as an integral part of their existence, drawing from the phenomenological perspectives of philosophers like Martin Heidegger and Tesoro Watsuji. Heidegger's notion of 'Dasein' emphasizes that human beings are fundamentally spatial entities whose identities are shaped by their interactions with the world around them. Watsuji expands on this by introducing the concept of 'Niagara' or 'betweenness', which underlines the relational aspects of spatiality—how individuals exist in relation to others and their environments.

The novella *Hunger* (1998), the titular story in the short story collection, explores the Chinese American experiences of immigrants torn between two radically different cultures. Lan Samantha Chang won the California Book Awards Silver Medal for Fiction for her short story collection. The stories were hugely inspired by her parents' sense of disengagement after leaving China for the U.S. The generational silence Chang had to grapple with in the house she grew up in Wisconsin was heavily linked to the inadequacy of family history. Chang delves into themes of longing, nostalgia, and the intricate relationship between physical spaces and emotional landscapes through her characters' journeys.

The story *Hunger* is told by Min. An immigrant from Taiwan, Min is married to Tian, an adept violin student and teacher. Their marriage becomes promising and a result of the pursuit and desire of love for each other. Both were obligated by their mutual connection of immigration to New York. Min quickly adorned the role of the housewife, but Tian struggled to be accepted as a musician. His frustrations and often futile endeavors coagulated into strained marital relationships, rupturing the very fabric of their life. Tian's unreasonable obsession with his motherland and ambitions wreck Min's precocious life, leaving her feeling helpless and alone. Emotional turmoil seeps into their household, subsequently leading Tian to become increasingly neglectful and verbally abusive towards his daughters, particularly Ruth, which creates a toxic environment that threatens to unravel the family. Min navigates her role as a mother and wife amidst the chaos of her husband's emotional instability and tries to maintain a semblance of stability for her children.

Global migration has a long history in Asia, and in recent years, it has attained an unprecedented scale and dimension. Globalization, increased levels of educational opportunities, the influence of media, better transportation facilities, and standards of living are factors facilitating migration. The global diffusion of Chinese immigrants seems to be accelerating since the 1990s (Song 5). Family reunion and student migration are major forms of emigration from China. Economic incentive serves as a powerful tool to drive youngsters out and China's ever-deepening integration into the global economy. One of the most significant challenges for Chinese immigrants is the language barrier. Limited English proficiency can hinder effective communication, making it difficult to access essential services, find employment, and

engage with the local community. This barrier often leads to feelings of isolation and frustration as many immigrants struggle to express themselves or understand cultural nuances. Chinese immigrants frequently encounter difficulties in securing suitable employment. Discrimination in the job market can limit their opportunities compared to other immigrant groups.

Racial discrimination remains a pervasive issue for Chinese immigrants. Historical prejudices, such as those stemming from the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, continue to influence societal attitudes today. Chinese immigrants often struggle with balancing their cultural heritage with the pressures of assimilation into the dominant culture. This tension can lead to identity conflicts and feelings of alienation from both their heritage and their new community.

Diasporic writers have, over the years, illustrated lives displaced and exiled. Better economic prospects have always encouraged people to explore faraway lands with the intention of settling. Tian was ambitious, and after completing a master's degree, he went on to become the instructor of pre-college students who were "in pursuit of an assistant professorship" (Chang 20). New York was a land of opportunities – a metropolitan chronotype for Tian and Min. It was a space of limitless possibilities, as Bakhtin ascertains. The protagonists displaced themselves from their homelands in lieu of the endless encounters. But they grapple with a series of binaries like past and present, China and New York, citizenship, and immigrant identity. The chronotype of the metropolis of New York is characterized by its anonymity and constant flux. Min, on coming to New York, vowed to practice speaking English, but she found it difficult working in the restaurant. Min's attempts at assimilation, or rather Anglo-conformity, were met with fear and futility, but she was open to changes. While their transformation Tian was enormous, his experience of the subjective spatiality of New York as a physical space of opportunities in the beginning started affecting his behavior, leading him to stay detached from familial duties. His cultural background contributed to his perception of the city space, making him more rigid and structured in his perception of everyday affairs. The initial enthusiasm gradually gave way to silent melancholy and moody demeanors. Being a member of a traditional family in China, Tian was brought up to be a scientist, so he wanted to stay in China and help his family. But wanting to pursue his passion for music, he left for New York, never receiving the blessings of his father. This painful memory stays imprinted in his mind as he perceives his existence in the new city. The everyday experience of feeling "other" in the U.S., coupled with an inability to achieve dreams, contributes to the complexity of the immigrant experience. Tian was always made to feel precarious about his position as a music teacher. In a particularly upset situation, he opens up with Min, "They say I can't teach theory. They said the students have trouble with my English. They said my English has not improved, and they don't think they will be able to wait for it." (Chang 53).

Min grapples with her identity as an immigrant while embodying the struggle between her cultural roots and her new environment. This tension is illustrated through her interactions with food—a recurring motif that symbolizes both sustenance and cultural heritage. The act of eating becomes a means of connecting with her past while simultaneously confronting her present dislocation. This longing for the past is tied to her cultural identity and memories associated with family meals, evoking feelings of warmth and connection to her roots. But on the other hand, it also highlights her disconnection from the culture around her. This duality creates a poignant sense of loneliness as she navigates her immigrant experience.

The portrayal of displacement in the narrative is multifaceted; it encompasses not only physical relocation but also emotional estrangement. The protagonist often reflects on her memories of home, revealing how nostalgia shapes her identity. This longing for connection to her origins creates a complex dynamic where she feels both drawn to and alienated from her new surroundings. The interplay between memory and present experience underscores the challenges faced by immigrants in reconciling their past with their current realities.

Human beings exist in a state of interrelation with one another, shaped by cultural, emotional, and spatial contexts. Min's experiences reflect this concept as she grapples with her sense of self in a foreign environment. Her identity is not static; it is continually influenced by her relationships with family and friends and her cultural heritage. As she navigates life in a new country, she often feels caught between two worlds—her cultural heritage and the pressures to assimilate into a different society. This tension creates a complex emotional landscape where feelings of alienation coexist with moments of connection.

The dynamics of interpersonal relationships are integral to understanding the theme of displacement in *Hunger*. Characters navigate complex relationships that are often strained by shared experiences of loss and longing. These connections serve as both sources of comfort and conflict, illustrating how shared experiences can unite or divide individuals during times of upheaval.

Thus, subjective spatiality emphasizes how physical spaces can evoke strong emotions in displaced individuals. Certain environments may trigger feelings of nostalgia, comfort, or isolation. Understanding these emotional landscapes is important for designing spaces that are welcoming and supportive for immigrant and refugee communities.

Lan Samantha Chang's *Hunger* intricately weaves together themes of displacement, subjective spatiality, longing, interpersonal relationships, and the significance of food to create a rich tapestry that reflects the complexities of immigrant experiences. Through her characters' journeys, Chang illuminates how displacement shapes identity formation while emphasizing the emotional landscapes

constructed within physical spaces. *Hunger* serves as a poignant exploration of what it means to be displaced—how individuals grapple with their identities within unfamiliar spaces while seeking connection through shared experiences.

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