

Historical Poetics: Revisiting Gender in Isabella Bird's Polychronotopic Account of Malaya

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the representation of time and space in Isabella Bird's *The Golden Chersonese and the Way Thither* (1883), her travel narrative on Malaya, through a Bakhtinian discussion of the chronotope. The study examines the historical poetics of the text and compares the intra-textual relation between time and space, as described by Bird, with an extra-textual account of the historical cultural condition of Malaya in 1883. This paper further seeks to underline the issue of gender and its influence on the narrative. *The Golden Chersonese* can be seen as a portrayal of an imperial look at the land and people of Malaya; whilst the narrative thus points to the costumes and religion of the Malays, it cannot escape the influence of its narrator's gender. Bird's individuality as a female traveller against the background of her native land is discussed with regard to her gender. In addition, chronotopes of 1883-Malaya, with greater focus on social, cultural and religious issues, and 1883-England as an imperial power, besides the perception of gender, are also compared. Finally, by examining various chronotopic units in *The Golden Chersonese*, the paper concludes that Bird's narrative is a polychronotopic text. This research fills the gap in literature regarding a Bakhtinian perspective on travel narrative writing, with reference to time and space.

Keywords: Time, space, chronotope, history, gender, Bakhtin, Malaya, England

INTRODUCTION

Every entry into the sphere of meanings is accomplished only through the gates of the chronotope."
(Bakhtin, 1981, p. 258)

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Bakhtin's chronotope functions as the primary means for materialising time in space; it performs a central role in harmonising and granting life to the entire work of art. Owing to the subjective nature of time, individuals are able to move/travel between chronotopes. It should be noted that, in Bakhtin's term, chronotope is the time-space correlative as represented in literary fiction. A reading of Isabella Bird's *The Golden Chersonese and the Way Thither* (1883) is primarily concerned with the ways in which the chosen text both confronts and deviates from Bakhtin's formulation, specifically regarding the issue of gender. Bakhtin's description of chronotope is generally gender-neutral, but Bird's travel account as a female traveller, between the chronotopes of the coloniser's land, England, and the colonised, Malaya, reveals that all time and space are gendered, that every chronotope, like every house, city or nation, is identified by the sex of its representer. One must bear in mind that wherever we travel in this world, in past, present and future or, in the cities of our minds, gender, travels with us – and we cannot escape its influence.

In addition, for the purpose of this research, the chronotopes of Malaya-1883, with particular emphasis on social, cultural and religious issues, and England-1883, and the issue of gender perception in England in the 19th century and its influence on the description of events, are discussed. By examination of various chronotopic units in Bird's narrative, the following discussion attempts to establish *The Golden*

Chersonese as a polychronotopic text. The main reference for this analysis of travel writing is two essential essays by Mikhail Bakhtin, "Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel" from his *Dialogic Imagination* (1981), and "Bildungsroman" from *Speech Genre and Other Late Essays* (1986). In this paper, the representation of hero/narrator in the travel-writing genre, in the context of specific time and space, is delineated.

CONCEPTUAL THEORY: CHRONOTOPE AND POLYCHRONOTOPIC TEXTS

In his essay "Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel", Bakhtin discusses the term chronotope, literally meaning time-space, which is derived from Einstein's "Theory of Relativity". Bakhtin defines chronotope as "the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relations that are artistically expressed in literature" (1981, p. 84). What attracted Bakhtin to Einstein's theory was mainly the fact that it perceives time and space as somehow inseparable and this, he reasoned, was obviously the case in the representation of time and space in the novel:

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, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history. (1981, p. 84)

A careful reading of Bird's travel narrative indicates that among the three novelistic chronotopes introduced by Bakhtin, the adventure novel of ordeal, the adventure novel of everyday life, and the ancient biography and autobiography, *The Golden Chersonese* mixes the two latter categories and creates a full spectrum of features of both adventure and biographical accounts in the context of a real-life chronotope. In adventure novels of everyday life, in contrast to novels of ordeal, 'metamorphosis' serves as the basis of a method of portraying the whole of an individual's life in its critical moments, basically in order to demonstrate how an individual becomes other than what he/she was. The episodic adventures of the hero/heroine and his/her experiences do not end in a simple affirmation of his or her identity but, instead, in the creation of a new image of the hero/heroine, a man/woman who is now purified and reborn. The most identifying feature of this form of fiction is the way in which it combines the course of an individual's life with his or her actual spatial course or road i.e. with his/her wanderings and travelling from one place to another. Consequently, the metaphor of "the path of life" is recognised. This path expands through familiar native territory, in which there is nothing exotic, alien or strange. As Bakhtin affirms:

An individual's movement through space, his pilgrimages, lose that abstract and technical character that they had in Greek Romances ... space becomes more concrete and

saturated with a time that is more substantial: space is filled with real, living meaning, and forms a crucial relationship with the hero and his fate [...] the concreteness of this chronotope of the road permits everyday life to be realized within it. (1981, p. 120)

In ancient autobiography, as described by Bakhtin, what relates that chronotope to this study of Bird's travel writing is that it is completely determined by events: both verbal praise of civic and political acts, and real individuals presenting a public account of their lives and adventures. Of this third kind of chronotope Bakhtin notes that:

The important thing here is not only their internal chronotope (that is the time-space of their represented life), but also the exterior real-life chronotope in which the representation of one's own or someone else's life is realized either as verbal praise of a civic-political act or as an account of the self. (1981, p. 255 emphasis added)

The life of the self and other are laid bare and made public in this real-life chronotope, and the restrictions of a human image and the life it experiences are revealed in all their specificity. Bakhtin declares that in literature it is sometimes possible for chronotopes to coexist while there is a "complex interaction among them" (1981, p. 252). This essential notion helps critics to

place the chronotope beside Bakhtin's more general dialogic theory, because the notion of a text consisting of multiple independent – yet also interdependent – chronotopes demonstrates a structure apparently similar to his (Bakhtin's) definition of a polyphonic novel (Morris, 1994). Lynne Pearce, in her *Reading Dialogics*, refers to this phenomenon as *polychronotopic text* (1994, p. 175). In this way of reading a text, an individual chronotope in a single text, like individual voices are distinguished by their autonomy and independence; speaking thus, they are "independent centres of consciousness". Bakhtin affirms that the chronotopes, without merging into one another, initiate a complex dialogue which is, at all times, a dialogue inscribed by power:

Chronotopes are mutually inclusive, they co-exist, they may be interwoven with, replace or oppose one another, contradict one another, or find themselves in even more complex interrelationships.
(1981, p. 252)

In the same way that multiple voices appearing in a text may be constantly seeking to dominate one another, so do chronotopes, although the polychronotopic *text*, like its polyphonic counterpart, needs to hold the contending forces in equilibrium. One chronotope may attempt to dominate, but it is not allowed to overcome other juxtaposing chronotopes.

DISCUSSION: CHRONOTOPIC UNITS IN BIRD'S NARRATIVE

More specific to the genre of travel writing is the notion of the "road" that links these kinds of writing to the concept of chronotope. In this way, Bakhtin's conceptualisation of the "chronotope of the road," as described in novels of everyday life, appears to be a feasible approach to the discussion of travel writing where the hero is a moving spot, traversing from one point in time and space to another. Excellence in such writing, Bakhtin declares in "Bildungsroman", depends upon "a keen eye for all visible markers and signs of time in nature" (1986, p. 30). The specific type of subjective experience which Bird depicted in her travel writing, which the hero or persona undergoes in the objective world, is the main theme of this essay where time-space and the image of man in works of art are represented. In this kind of "Adventure Time", Bakhtin argues further, the plots of travel accounts are based on "adventure time, which consists of the most immediate units—moments, hours, days—snatched at random from the temporal process" (1986, p. 11). In combining these units into a unique whole, writers often make use of transitional links relating to simple narrative, such as "at the same moment", "the next moment", "the next day". Hence, life remains in the balance throughout the journey and is reduced to what Bakhtin terms an alteration of various contrasting conditions: success/failure, happiness/unhappiness and victory/defeat.

In terms of the structure of the text as a whole however, the representation of time

in Bird's narrative, in the form of episodes relating the culture and reporting the events in her visit to Malaya – everyday life – is, as Bakhtin affirms, “scattered, fragmented, deprived of essential connections” (1981, p. 128). Hence, Bird's episodic narrative colours her travel account and presents a heteroglossia of differences, from the cultural and religious values of Malays to the tropical weather of Malaya. In this light, *The Golden Chersonese* is an example of a narrative that mixes an “adventure everyday” chronotope with an “autobiography” chronotope and, in this way, gives full flesh to time and space.

In Bird's narrative the representation of time, in the form of episodes reporting and describing the events and her encounter with the culture of the Malays, a real-life chronotope, is, as Bakhtin declares, very indicative of a thorough sense of place and time in the keen eye of the observer. Bird's episodic and seemingly fragmented storyline mixes “adventure everyday-life” chronotope with “autobiography” chronotope and, in this way, giving full flesh to time and space, creates a genuine real-life chronotope in the context of her journey from England to Malaya – a “path of life”. The whole narrative consists of twenty-three letters sent to her sister back in Britain, each containing episodes which give a careful and to some extent exact description of the Malay people and their culture, their social institutions, religion and even the tropical weather. Bird begins her detailed and comprehensive account of her journey to Malaya with specific concern for

the places she visits; a sense of mystery and vagueness pervades her opening description:

“Canton and Saigon, and whatever else is comprised in the second half of my title, are on one of the best beaten tracks of travellers, and need no introductory remarks [...] But the Golden Chersonese is still somewhat of a terra incognita; there is no point on its mainland at which European steamers call, and the usual conception of it is as a vast and malarious equatorial jungle, sparsely peopled by a race of semi-civilized and treacherous Mohammedans. In fact, it is as little known to most people as it was to myself before I visited it.”
(1883, p. 1)

What follows in this study is the specific relation of Bird's description to the chronotopic qualities of the adventure-everyday form of fiction, and with the historical time and space of the England and Malaya of 1883 – a particular chronotope in which the narrator experiences her life. In Bird's polychronotopic text, three kinds of chronotopes are identified and explained in detail; chronotope of “the path of life”, chronotope of 1883-England and chronotope of 1883-Malaya. Initially, the outstanding sense of place in Bird's *Golden Chersonese*, with reference to the chronotope of the “path of life” or “road”, is exemplified. Next, the doubly-revealing 1883-chronotopes, of Malaya and of England, the former with

more emphasis on the cultural and social qualities of time-space in the context of Malaya of that time, and the latter with a focus on the gender issue concerning the perception and status of the female traveller in the context of England of that time, are discussed.

CHRONOTOPE OF “THE PATH OF LIFE”

Bird has an excellent sense of place that is apparent in her detailed description of the places she visits; it seems that she has experienced every moment of their existence:

Many Chinese mansions contain six or seven courtyards, each with its colonnade, drawing, dining, and reception rooms, and at the back of all there is a flower garden adorned with rockeries, fish-ponds, dwarf trees, and miniature pagodas and bridges. (1883, p. 50)

She continues with a description of the ancient city of Canton. She presents a picturesque account of the outdoors, the streets:

...in which the poor dwell are formed of low, small, dark, and dirty houses, of two or three rooms each. [...]. This is a meagre outline of what may be called the anatomy of this ancient city, which dates from the fourth century B.C., when it was walled only by a stockade of bamboo and mud, but was known

by the name of “the martial city of the south,” changed later into “the city of rams”. (1883, p. 50)

Fascinated by this scenery, she contemplates and brings forth the notion of time and the moments that are passing:

My admiration and amazement never cease. I grudge the hours that I am obliged to spend in sleep; a week has gone like half a day, each hour heightening my impressions of the fascination and interest of Canton, and of the singular force and importance of the Chinese. Canton is intoxicating from its picturesqueness, colour, novelty and movement. Today I have been carried eighteen miles through and round it, revelling the whole time in its enchantments, and drinking for the first time of that water of which it may truly be said that who so drinks “shall thirst again”—true Orientalism. (1883, pp. 50-51)

Then, in a very revealing passage, Bird yearns for an escape from time and fancies how it might be if time could stand still:

As we sat at mid-day at the five-storied pagoda, which from a corner of the outer wall overlooks the Tartar city, and ever since, through this crowded week, I have wished that the sun would stand still in the cloudless sky, and let me dream of gorgeous sunlight, light

without heat, of narrow lanes rich in colour, of the glints of sunlight on embroideries and cloth of gold, resplendent even in the darkness, of hurrying and coloured crowds in the shadow, with the blue sky in narrow strips high above, of gorgeous marriage processions, and the "voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride," of glittering trains of mandarins, of funeral processions, with the wail of hired mourners clad in sackcloth and ashes, of the Tartar city with its pagodas, of the hills of graves, great cities of the dead outside the walls, fiery-red under the tropic blue, of the "potter's field" with its pools of blood and sacks of heads, and crosses for crucifixion, now, as on Calvary, symbolical of shame alone, of the wonderful river life, and all the busy, crowded, costumed hurry of the streets, where blue banners hanging here and there show that in those houses death has stilled some busy brains forevermore. (1883, p. 51)

During the course of narration, many times Bird gives information about the different paths she had taken and, in some parts, reports the road-building processes in Malacca. Yet for Bird, a road is not a linkage between countries and cities but, on a metaphorical level, a bridge between humankind and nature:

I have said nothing about the magnificence of the scenery for a part of the way, where the road goes through a grand mountain pass, where all the vegetable glories of the tropics seem assembled, and one gets a new idea of what scenery can be; while beneath superb tree-ferns and untattered bananas, and palms, and bright-flowered lianas, and graceful trailers, and vermilion-coloured orchids, and under sun-birds and humming birds and the most splendid butterflies I ever saw, a torrent, as clear as crystal, dashes over the rocks, and adds the music of tumbling water to the enchantment of a scene whose loveliness no words can give any idea of. The pass of Bukit Berapit, seen in solitude on a glorious morning, is almost worth a journey round the world. (1883, p. 304)

CHRONOTOPE OF 1883-ENGLAND

Bird's journey is classified as simply a part of the time-space belonging to the historical present of nineteenth-century England, 1883. To discuss this chronotope with reference to the gender issue, this section will deal mostly with Bird's situation as a travel writer in the male-dominated society of England at that time.

Isabella Bird was born into the British upper-middle class of the Victorian era, at a time of the professionalisation of the academic disciplines. As a female, she had no access to the academic training that

could confer on her the appropriate status of 'scientist', yet she found that fieldwork, in the sense of exploration, was as open to her as to anyone with adequate resources. As the disciplines in general were professionalised, and particularly geography came to be strictly defined, women like Bird were removed from the newly-defined label of 'geographer' (Cosslett, 1996). Domosh, in her feminist study of women travellers in the Victorian era, points out that this fieldwork was limited to only a few elite white males, and was promoted within the male club atmosphere of the Royal Geographic Society (RGS) in England and in American Geographical Society in the United States (1991, p. 97). Denied institutional support, Victorian women travelled and explored at their own expense and to their own preferred destinations. Therefore, their solitary travels were neither followed up with full-scale explorations nor sponsored by institutions – as was the case with their male counterparts. The episodic stories of Bird, as was the case with other nineteenth-century women travellers, are extremely diverse; nevertheless, they share some common threads, one of which is their rather obvious recognition of the personal goals of their travels. The so-called objective discoveries of new places were not separated from the discoveries of their own selves.

If one were to draw Bird's journeys on a map, her routes would not resemble rather direct lines to the sources of rivers or tops of mountains or cities, if comparing with most of her male counterparts. Instead, her

routes were frequently circular, appearing to have no specific destination. Her routes repeatedly took the form of what Stoddard calls planned journeys, "of which the aim is simply to proceed between known points, with no suggestion of adding to knowledge other than through traversing unfamiliar routes" (1986, p. 142). Bird's choice of direction mostly came from internal sources, since she was on a quest for a place where she could live a type of life denied her at home. Growing up in a world restricted by Victorian standards and expectations, her life had been shaped for her. Therefore, her freedom came from living in places removed from that circumscription (Dorana, 2010). Generally, those women like Bird often spoke of the empowerment they felt when they were exploring and of their utter despair on losing that power when they returned home. This was felt most acutely when they were visiting regions that were located within the colonial power structure. "Colonialism allowed women to be powerful as representatives of the white race; it created a structure for a type of power dependent on race, not on sex" (Domosh, 1991, p. 98).

The chronotope of nineteenth-century England is not Bird's "natural" safe home, even though much of her "textual" time is spent there; she needed to travel for her health because once she returned home she was often diagnosed with severe physical problems. When speaking of her decision to travel through Japan, she claimed it was recommended for her health:

Having been recommended to leave home, in April 1878, in order to recruit my health by means which had proved serviceable before, I decided to visit Japan, attracted less by the reputed excellence of its climate than by the certainty that it possessed, in an especial degree, those sources of novel and sustained interest which conduce so essentially to the enjoyment and restoration of a solitary health-seeker. (qtd. in Domosh, p. 98)

Her fulfilment was derived not in the external discovery of 'new' geographies, but in the process of exploring, in experiencing a world in which she could participate in her own definition:

The women travellers followed invisible red lines across a map into a distant unknown. But the pot of gold they were chasing was not the mountain, the source of the river, or the oasis in the desert, but the long shadows, cast by the tropical sunlight and mountain glare, of themselves. (Birkett, 1989, p. 71)

Many such women found that their inclination as sympathetic observers could act as a basis for their authority within their own culture, and therefore they were keen supporters of the uniqueness of fieldwork. Bird made a point of noting that, as a woman travelling alone, she was able to observe matters that others may have missed:

As a lady travelling alone, and the first European lady who had been seen in several districts through which my route lay, my experiences differed more or less widely from those of preceding travellers; and I am able to offer a fuller account of the aborigines of Yezo, obtained by actual acquaintance with them, than has hitherto been given. (qtd. in Domosh, p. 99)

Bird, as a representative of a colonial power in the colonised land of Malaya, as mentioned earlier, found the power and the identity she was denied in her own land, since she was judged by the Malays, not by her race, to be superior. This empowerment facilitated Bird to suggest her own sometimes personal observations, rather relying more on facts and, in most cases, to consider the native people and inhabitants of Malaya to be an inferior race, whilst overlooking her own status as female back in her own country.

CHRONOTOPE OF 1883-MALAYA

Chronotopes in literary texts are not separated from the cultural environment in which they arise; Bakhtin points out in his discussion of chronotope that "out of the actual chronotopes of our world – which serve as the source of representation – emerge the reflected and created chronotopes of the world represented in the work" (1981, p. 253). This is how we can see

many references to cultural values in the chronotope of Malaya-1833. In her introductory chapter, Bird describes the people of Malaya thus:

The Malays undoubtedly must be numbered among civilized peoples. They live in houses which are more or less tasteful and secluded. They are well clothed in garments of both native and foreign manufacture; they are a settled and agricultural people; they are skilful in some of the arts, especially in the working of gold and the damascening of kris; the upper classes are to some extent educated; they have a literature, even though it be an imported one, and they have possessed for centuries systems of government and codes of land and maritime laws which, in theory at least, show a considerable degree of enlightenment. (1883, p. 18)

Of Malays' religion, laws, customs and morals, Bird affirms that they are bound up together. They practise Islam and are "strict Mussulmen", while the uneducated Malays mix up their own traditions and superstitions with the Koran, their Holy Book. A pilgrimage to Mecca is the "universal object" of Malay ambition. Of their religious values she continues:

They practice relic worship, keep the fast of Ramadhan, wear rosaries of beads, observe

the hours of prayer with their foreheads on the earth, provide for the "religious welfare" of their villages, circumcise their children, offer buffaloes in sacrifice at the religious ceremonies connected with births and marriages, build mosques everywhere, regard Mecca as the holy city, and the Koran, as expounded by Arab teachers, as the rule of faith and practice. (1883, p. 18)

Of their social habits, Bird refers to cock-fighting which has the "dignity of a literature of its own" and is one of the popular Malay sports; meanwhile:

...the grand sport is a tiger and buffalo fight, reserved for rare occasions, however, on account of its expense. Cock-fighting is a source of gigantic gambling and desperate feuds. The birds, which fight in full feather and with sharpened steel spurs, are very courageous, and die rather than give in. (1883, p. 23)

Despite a "realistic" reflection of these experienced events in a work of art, Bakhtin points out that once a man is in art, he is not in life, and vice versa, but he recognises these different places as contained by a larger unit of which they are constituents. In this regard Holquist declares, "both art and lived experience are aspects of the same

phenomenon, the heteroglossia of worlds, values, and actions, whose interaction makes dialogue the fundamental category of dialogism” (2002, p. 111). In Bird's travel account, the reader can perceive the actual life experiences of the narrative plot and how they are interwoven with the general theme of the voyage. Chronotope in this case provides a means to explore the complex, indirect and permanently-mediated relation between art and life (Mutnick, 2009).

According to Bakhtin, literary chronotopes are highly sensitive to historical change; different forms of communication and societies result in different chronotopes, both inside and outside literary texts. In Bird's narrative particularly, we can see that specific chronotopes, such as the influence of the Arabs and their religion, Islam, do in fact shape themselves into a sort of association to the exterior condition in which they arise; one will convincingly presume that this correlation between a particular historical intra-textual world and an equally particularised extra-textual world should in each case be unique (Holquist, 2002, p. 112). Bird offers an example of such cultural and religious influences on Malays:

Their theory of medicine is derived from Arabia, and abounds in mystery and superstition. They regard man as composed of four elements and four essences, and assimilate his constitution and passions to the twelve signs of the zodiac, the seven planets, etc., exaggerating the

mysterious sympathy between man and external nature. The successful practice of the hakim or doctor must be based on the principle of “preserving the balance of power” among the four elements, which is chiefly effected by moderation in eating. (1883, pp. 20-21)

As for the influence of Islam, what Bird calls Mohammedanism, she points to the Malays' pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca and the way Muslim women dress up:

The pilgrimage to Mecca is the great object of ambition. Many Malays, in spite of its expense and difficulties, make it twice, and even three times. We passed three women clothed in white from head to foot, their drapery veiling them closely, leaving holes for their eyes. These had just returned from Mecca. (1883, pp. 140-141)

In this kind of reading of the text we can realise that chronotopes are capable of entering into dialogue with specific extra-literary historical contexts. More specifically, it is in this sort of juxtaposition that the cautious reader can perceive the tension inherent in “historical Poetics”. One can say that chronotopes can be used to examine the relation between the text and its times, and thus act as a very helpful “fundamental tool” for a broader social and historical analysis even beyond the domain of literary texts. It is at this

level that the significant contribution of chronotopes to a historical poetics can best and most clearly be seen.

CONCLUSION

Chronotopes' valuable meaning for narrative is very obvious. Chronotopes are the organising centres for the fundamental narrative events of literary fiction. As indicated, chronotope is where the knots in a narrative are tied and untied and in this way, they help towards better understanding of time and space in narratives. Consequently, the chronotope brings narrative events together and makes them concrete. Three types of chronotopic units are examined in relation to the historical and cultural paths of the two points in time and space, Malaya and England of 1883. Bird's experiences and travels between/through/across the two chronotopes of 1883-Malaya and 1883-England made her, in this sense, become a "new" individual whose travels through various chronotopes taught her not only how to reconceive time and space but how to re-gender it. In the 1883 chronotopes, Bird generally travelled for quite specific reasons, but what she was seeking was as much empowerment and self-knowledge as "objective" knowledge. Denied an institutional context in the England of the nineteenth century, she was, in a sense, free in her travels and more explicitly aware of her subjective goals. As she implies in her individual account, we should be careful not to become trapped in a time-space in which we "chance" to be living through our inward lives; we have access to a different clock and

by our higher sense of time and place we can travel to different lands, and adopt the skins, personas and sexes of different people; in this regard, all times can be inhabited, all places visited.

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