

‘Home’ as a Motif in Select Poems by Writers of the Indian Diaspora

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ABSTRACT:

‘Home’ is a recurrent theme in many writings of the Indian diaspora. This paper intends to study how the theme of longing for one’s home is treated by the writers of the Indian diaspora, especially by those of the post-independent era. From nostalgic images of India, buttressed with idealization of homeland and experiences of the exile, we find these emigrant writers struggling to find a place for themselves in the foreign land. If in Sujata Bhatt, the dominant emotion is nostalgia, in Shanta Acharya, we find a realistic assessment of the exilic experience. In writers who migrated in the 1970s, we find ‘home’ being relegated to the secondary position as they begin to discuss themes like women’s rights, racism, homophobia and even superstitions.

Keywords: Indian Diaspora, Home, Sujata Bhatt, Shanta Acharya

INTRODUCTION

“[T]he diasporic space [is] the quintessential late 20th-century space, a space in which the terms of modern immigration, exile, loss, nation, subject and citizen are negotiated and reinvented for various uses “ (Enwezor 88).

Being part of the diaspora could be a daunting experience for most people. The initial exhilaration of travelling to a new land would give way, in the case of most expatriates, to feelings of nostalgia, homesickness, disillusionment and angst. These experiences often find expression in the fictional or non-fictional writings of the emigrants. When we delve deeper into these writings, we come across certain keywords like ‘home’, ‘exile’, ‘identity’ etc., and the some of these words are often open to numerous interpretations.

‘Home’ is a word that is often found in such writings, and it is used in very ambiguous terms. At times, it is used in the literal sense and more often in the figurative sense. The angst surrounding the concept of ‘home’ has been discussed by many theoreticians like Avtar Brah,

...the ‘referent’ of ‘home’... [is] qualitatively different... ‘home’ in the form of simultaneously floating and rooted signifier. It is an invocation of the narratives of ‘the nation’. In radicalised or nationalist discourses this signifier can become the basis of claims...that a group settled in a place is not necessarily ‘of’ it. (Brah 182)

To a first generation emigrant, ‘home’ is undeniably linked with India. For the succeeding generations, ‘home’ may connote India or it may be interpreted in accordance with their own perceptions or experiences.

Yet, almost every piece of fictional or non-fictional writing by an immigrant Indian explores the conflict between remaining Indian and turning ‘diasporic’ Indian.

For the members of the diaspora, the ‘home’ India which they or their forefathers left behind gains “hyperbolic proportions in their imagination, sans any flaws. The ‘imaginary homeland’ was much glorified and it had a profound impact on the succeeding generation....” (Karmakar 87).

One of the main issues associated with diasporic experience would be one of discomfort. We are speaking about a group of people who willingly or unwillingly dislocate from their homeland for economic or social reasons. The distancing from the ‘self’ is an automatic process and added to this would be the cultural differences the individual has to go through while living in an adopted homeland. After the initial euphoria of travel and migration, a sense of alienation and entrapment would set in and most of the writers discussed in this study go through it.

Unlike diasporic experiences elsewhere in the world which arises from a multitude of reasons like persecution, famine, drought or war, Indian diasporic experience is comparatively less belligerent. In most cases, it is essentially a process of “settling down, about putting ‘roots’ elsewhere” (Brah 182).

Another issue faced by the immigrant community would be that of ‘double consciousness’ and ‘unhomeliness’. ‘Double consciousness’ or unstable sense of self is the result of forced migration colonialism frequently caused. In the members of the diasporic community, this feeling of being caught between cultures, of belonging to neither, rather than

to both, of finding oneself arrested in a psychological limbo that results not merely from some individual psychological disorder but from the trauma of the cultural displacement within which one lives is referred to by Homi Bhabha and others as 'unhomeliness'.

To be 'unhomed' is not the same as being homeless. To be 'unhomed' is to feel not at home even in your own home because you are not at home in yourself. Your cultural identity crisis has made you a psychological refugee, so to speak. (Tyson 421)

As the immigrant attempts to dig deep into the foreign soil and thus get his/her roots deeply fixed, a combination of complex issues tend to weigh them down. Racial discrimination, cultural conflicts and fragmentation of self are just some of them. And as they deal with these traumatic issues, they are also drawn into the conflict,

Between curious accumulation of a homing desire and a state of homelessness; a state of belonging and the awareness of not being able to belong; the contradiction pulls of the nostalgic longing for the home left behind and the desire to feel at home in the new dwelling; and the discrepant centrifugal pull of staying at the margins of the centre to maintain cultural difference and the centripetal seductions of assimilation in the adopted culture. (Raj 17)

Torn between these two forces, an immigrant who has been through the complexities of a diasporic existence would experience a pattern while attempting to root him/ herself in the foreign land. The elevated sense of patriotism combined with admiration of the homeland they left behind, a belief that they have to invest all their might to restore their real homeland to its original glory etc., could be seen as an attempt to reconstruct their "present from a past that is lost to them" (Mahanta ii).

Some of the common trends found in emigrant response, according to William Safran are

...they regard their ancestral homeland as their true, ideal home and as the place to which they or their descendants would (or should) eventually return when conditions are appropriate.... They believe that they should collectively be committed to the maintenance or restoration of their original homeland and its safety and prosperity.... (88-89)

Robin Cohen in his book, *Global Diasporas: An Introduction* suggests a few further allied features found in diasporic communities, "...an idealisation of the real or imagined ancestral home ... a sense of empathy and co-responsibility with co-ethnic members in other countries of settlement" (16).

Very often, the Indian emigrant forgets the true reality of the Indian existence, and as Rushdie points out, The Indian writers who write from outside India...[are] obliged to deal with broken mirrors, some of whose fragments have been irretrievably lost...

create fiction, not actual cities or villages, but invisible, imaginary homelands, indias of the mind. (10-11)

Sujata Bhatt, born in Ahmedabad and brought up in Pune is an expatriate writer who first moved to the United States and later settled down in Germany. She is bicultural by birth and migration and tricultural by marriage as she is married to a German national. Unlike many other writers of the Indian diaspora, Sujata Bhatt uses her hybridity in the best possible way as she states, "It is also a power to control and give shape to any given environment in order not to be intimidated or overwhelmed by its foreignness" ("Gujarat" 4). Her attitude towards her multicultural status is well propounded in her autobiographical essay, 'From Gujarat to Connecticut to Bremen', "In a way, exile brought me closer to India. I started reading everything I could find about Indian history, Indian mythology, Indian art, sculpture, Sociology etc...." (4). But this hybridity does not, in any way, overshadow her sense of alienation on being separated from her home country, West remains west and East remains east in her works.

Bhatt attempts to create her own version of homeland in her poetry, which is "built on the discontinuous fragments of memory and reconceived in the imagination" (Nasta 11).

In the poem, "Whenever I Return", Bhatt gives expression to the challenges she faced while dealing with an alien culture:

Don't speak to me of exile.
Don't question my memory.
How can you understand
the souls of brain cells?
How can you understand coefficients
You have never even lived? (62-8).

Her impatience and irritation towards those who question her status as an 'exile' is foregrounded here. Caught between two worlds, and the realization that she wholly belongs to neither is an unsettling feeling for the poet. Her near- nomadic life style does not interfere with her craving for an anchorage in life. In the poem, "The One who goes Away", she writes,

Sometimes I'm asked if
I were searching for a place
Than can keep my soul
from wandering
a place where I can stay
without wanting to leave. (22-7)

The outward show of confidence and comfort that the poet attempts to exhibit is undermined to a small extent in these lines. The juxtaposing of the West and the East which is a very common feature of diasporic writing is found in Bhatt's poem "A Different History" where she states that the Greek god of nature has migrated to India. Along with this humorous comment

comes a lesson in Indian religious etiquette, which could be read as an attempt to reify Indian culture and tradition.

Every tree is sacred
And it is a sin
to be rude to a book.
It is a sin to shove a book aside
With your foot,
A sin to slam books down
Hard on a table
A sin to toss one carelessly
Across a room.
You must learn how to turn the pages gently
Without disturbing Sarasvati. (6-16)

The fascination with Indian Gods and their powers which is common in Indian emigrant writing is seen here. The poem is one that expresses true diasporic sensibility as, in addition to the above mentioned features, the question of language is also introduced,

And how does it happen
That after the torture,
After the soul has been cropped
With a long scythe swooping out
Of the conqueror's face,-
The unborn grandchildren
Grow to love that strange language. (23-9)

The grandmotherly tone of a first generation emigrant writer with doubts regarding the assimilationist tendencies of the future generations is quite visible in the poem. The didacticism of the first stanza and the cautioning worries of the last few lines make it a typical creation of a first generation expatriate.

In "The One who goes Away", the poet speaks about the confusion and inferiority complex she experiences after reaching the host country. Here, she even attempts a humorous portrayal of the rituals performed in her hometown for the safe journey of the family to the United States,

To help the journey
Coconuts were flung
From Juhu beach
Into the Arabian Sea
But I saw beggars jump in
After these coconuts. (11-16)

An emigrant even if he/she harbours eternal hope of returning to the homeland, seldom does so. Even a casual visit would be a source of disillusionment. This fact is reiterated by Bhatt when she states,

If I go back, retrace my steps
I will not find
That first home anywhere outside
In that mother-land place. (34-8)

The exile's obsession with mother-tongue and the paralysis that affects the tongue while attempting to use another language. This is the central theme of the poem, "Search for my Tongue" where the poet writes

about the inability to remain sincere to one's native tongue,

...what would you do
If you had two tongues in your mouth
And lost the first one, the mother tongue? (3-

5)

The idea is taken up again while attempting to express the problem of being bilingual,

And if you lived in a place you had to
Speak a foreign tongue
Your mother tongue would rot
Rot and die in your mouth
Until you had to spit it out (10-14)

The poem reveals her desire to hold on to her mother tongue which she hopes would grow back and also to tie and arrest the language of her host country in 'knots'.

Shanta Acharya was born in Orissa and she moved to the west after winning a scholarship to Oxford. She writes about her experiences as an exile, but definitely noteworthy is the fact that her modern sensibility makes her write about various issues like the dangers of forced arranged marriages, infanticide and honour killings. In "Homecoming", she writes,

My loneliness has brought me back to where I had begun.

I have nowhere else to go; don't let me turn away again on

Another journey of self -discovery for I am already done.

The disillusionment she experiences is quite the same that any emigrant experiences on returning back to one's country. This idea is re-negotiated again in "The Return of the Exile",

After years of wandering, I return
To this strange place, the home I left,
Forgotten in the land of my birth.
Nourished under alien skies

I come looking for certainties. (1-5)

Here, we can see a development from the poems of Sujata Bhatt. The fascination for the homeland remains, yet, the reality is also presented without any attempt to blind our eyes. We also understand that her concept of 'home' is an evolved version in comparison with other writers of the first generation diaspora. In "Let me Go", she says,

Moving homes, continents, hearts,
Taking what is needed, leaving all else behind,
Slippers, well-wishers, memories.

The prioritization of slippers over well-wishers is a Freudian slip of sorts that helps us to gauge the rootedness of the poet in Indian tradition. In "Speechless", Shanta Acharya writes about the fusion of the Indian and the alien western culture inside her:

Life rushes past yesteryears.
My body an alien,
Is no longer my ally-

My words, foetus still born
My screams, children asleep
In a house on fire.

The metaphors used to communicate the trauma of being trapped in two cultures, is very poignantly revealed here. "Black Swans" offers an advice to the emigrant on how to evaluate personal histories,

Look into your own history-
Exile from family, friends, country,
Betrayed by those you placed your faith in,
Always living at the margins. (1-4)

These lines contain the sad reality of the emigrant who in his/her attempts to gain acceptance in an alien culture, is forced to let go of what is truly integral to him/herself.

Surjeet Kalsey is a Canadian poet, dramatist and short story writer, born in Amritsar but currently residing in British Columbia. Since she left the Indian shores only in 1974, her expressions of pain are different from other women expatriate poets. In "Migratory Birds". She attempts a comparison between emigrants like her and migratory birds. Unlike migratory birds which leave their original habitat only to return back in favourable weather, human migration is different. However, they retain fond memories of their homeland and cherish hopes of 'homecoming',

We
The migratory birds
Are here this season
Thinking
We'll fly back to our home
For sure. (1-6)

The disillusionment of the emigrant after the initial excitement is expressed in the lines,

No sun, no earth
Where to look at, what to look for?
How shall we reach the threshold
Of our home with crumbling self? (15-18)

The longing for one's home and the sense of loss that is evoked in the emigrant are all highlighted in these lines.

Writers who migrated in the 1970s show a change in attitudes and expressions about their emigrant status. They direct their attention to issues like women's rights, racism and homophobia, just to name a few. Sherazad Jamal, whose family moved to Canada in 1972, highlights the racist encounters with the dominant society in her poem "Making of a Cultural Schizophrenic". Young Jamal is asked to repeat a year in school in Canada,

They do not want to see past my face.
Are all coloured immigrants considered stupid
Until proven intelligent?

Canada, which was supposed to spread before her like a land of dreams, suddenly turns dystopian.

But her survival instincts are roused and she decides to adapt to her new home. She learns that "the first lesson

of survival" is "to stick with your own kind/ and run like hell". And the final outcome is not too attractive, "They become/ more religious, more traditional/ than ever back home".

Realizing that their country will no longer be their home, the poetic voice asks, "Will we ever feel at home here?"

Individual experience, community expectation and social standing – all contribute to the writing of women. Each poet discussed above reacts in her own specific modes to the status of exile. Some are unable to free themselves from the invisible chains that bind them to the homeland. There are others who are homesick, but who pursue a gradual rebirth and recovery in the host land. These poets have learnt to live their lives of multiple identities. Identifying an alien land with the concept of 'home' is a daunting task. It requires an "unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home" (Said 49).

It is, indeed, heartening to note that diasporic writing even by the poets featured earlier harbours change in attitude. Shanta Acharya's poem, "Going Home" gives us a much more open concept of home.

Having known many homes, many dreams

You learn finally to live with the freedom of a spirit,

Heart like a prairie field, open

The changing attitude towards the concept of home is pretty evident here and the same poet takes recourse to Indian superstitions while attempting to find comfort in the alien land,

Even Ganesha travels with me in my handbag

To help me overcome obstacles in my adopted home

The humour does not undermine the strategic changes that have occurred in the fields of diasporic literature. The earlier connotations have given way to new concepts and as Benzi Zhang suggests,

Home can no longer be formed with the ready-made names, concepts, paradigms or theories; but instead we have to perform home through re-imaging, re-describing, re-defining various splitting and overlapping cultural passages. (123)

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