Volume : 2 | Issue : 1 | Jan 2013 • ISSN No 2277 - 8160

Research Paper | Literature

Immigration and Resettlement: Home as A Diasporic Trope in Amitav Ghosh's the Shadow Lines and the Hungry Tide

Arindam Ghosh Research Scholar of Visva-Bharati University

Mr. Sambhunath Maji Assistant Professor, Department of English, Sidho-Kanho-Birsha University

Dr. Birbal Saha Associate Professor, Department of Education, Sidho-Kanho-Birsha University

ABSTRACT

Diaspora has been the most discussed term during last three decades. Though as generic term it reminds us a different episode of uneasiness, the concept diasporic home deserves our parallel notice. The Shadow Lines and The Hungry Tide by Amitav Ghosh can be viewed as two exceptional texts, defining home from multitudinous perspectives. This research article will concentrate on the idea of diasporic home. The settlement of the refuges in the Sundarban area has complicated the issue more. Throughout this paper our vigilant eye will place Mr. Ghosh whether he has really suggested a remedy or left the whole debate in front of the readers.

KEYWORDS:

INTRODUCTION:

"Diaspora is simply the displacement of a community/culture into another geographical and cultural region" (Nayar 187). Migration, immigration, exile are the direct reasons behind the emanation of diasporic culture. Naturally diasporic literature presents both individual and cultural experience entangled between exile and homeland. 'Writing in search of homeland' [Meena Alexander's words (qtd. in 188)] embody 'dislocation' (189) and're-location' (ibid.) thus setting up home and foreign country as structured binaries. The features and experiences incorporated in diasporic writing are inclusive of: the memory and consciousness of the past country as an ideal homeland, childhood landscapes, historical events, relatives etc; a marked attempt to stick to certain forms of behavior, old rituals, language and other social practices; attempt of relocating native history and childhood spaces in the context of a new country; and the assertion of demographic identity even in the state of cultural confluence. The result is a hybrid culture based on volatile border, nostalgia and 'imaginary homelands'. In consequence the whole gamut of diasporic writing has its theme of – an original/native home. The initial spatial 'de-territorialization' is undoubtedly clear and painful; Atwood defamiliarizes Susana Moodie's world: "The moving water will not show me/ My reflection. / I am word/ In a foreign language" (qtd. in Nayar 191). The displaced individual identity precariously survives on nostalgic imagination and on a possible (but improbable) return to the homeland. In Meena Alexander's Manhattan Music Sandhya "kept returning to her childhood home, a house with a red-tiled roof and a sandy courtyard where the mulberry bloomed" (qtd. in Nayar 192). The analepsis (looking backward) and prolepsis (facing forward) introduce an uncertainty, a dilemma: the past country is falsely idealized; hence an imaginary location than a real geography. Commenting on the myth of home Rushdie speaks of 'imaginary homelands, India's of the mind' (ibid.). Retrieval or reaching up to the old country is only possible through memory and imagination.[1]

EXPERIENCING DIASPORA IN INDIAN SUB-CONTINENT:

In the Indian context diasporic experience is constituted in migration, partition, resettlement and socio-economic assimilations. Tinker puts it, "there is a combination of push and pull: the push of inadequate opportunity in South Asia and the pull of the better prospects in the West" (qtd. in "Indian Diaspora" Web.). In the colonial period enforced slavery formed the diaspora but in the post colonial era the issue is complicated with the inclusion of cultural, civilizational and developmental aspects. Indian diasporic communities are 'outside' their continental home but customs and traditions persist thereby more problematising the issue into the context of a multi-cultural society. Though they are physically and geographically de-localized, old memories still maintain the umbilical bonding with the old country. Amitav Ghosh's diasporic imagination into the contours of historical fiction promotes a novel globalism but at the same time there is a constant effort to create and craving for a 'space' that would be identified as ideal home. In an Antique Land is an individual's attempt to discover some euphoric moment in which he is metaphorically connected to his past histories. The Glass Palace is a lamentation over the diasporic condition which reintroduces 'the dialogic tension between de-territorialization and re-territorialization' (Bose 22). The Circle of Reason treats history as collective memory, thereby linking the past and the present and thus positing symbiotic relationships between all different phenomenons. Uma Hemmadi comments regarding Amitav Ghosh: his novels articulate that "cultural differences can be collectively contained to create not a fragmented self but one that belongs to many places" (qtd. in Kapadia 27). Our present attempt will be to explore the formulation of an ideal homeland through narratives and through reconnecting private memories, individual assertions of identity.

SHADOWS OF DESIRE AND HOME IN THE SHADOW LINES:

On The Shadow Lines Suvir Kaul observes: the narrator's sojourn is "for the recovery of lost information or repressed experiences for the details of great trauma or joy that have receded into the archives of public or private memory" (qtd. in 26). The Shadow Lines reintroduces us with the old theme of the desire for home and belonging and the pain associated with uprooting and disjunction. At the outset the novel is about two generations of migrant women – grandmother and Ila and their rendering of their experiences through nationality and cosmopolitanism and the conflict and animosity associated with globalism. The grandmother (known as Thamma) with her shifting consciousness [between Dhaka (her place of birth) and Kolkata (her present country)], her patriotic flavor, her acute sense of autonomous freedom exhorts an anti-colonial nationalism and dream of belonging to a particular place without limitations and constrictions. On the other hand Ila's privileged life style articulates global cosmopolitanism but her cravings for freedom comes in conflict with her rootedness to any specific place: "Do you see now why I've chosen to live in London? . . . It's only because I want to be free . . . free of your bloody culture and free of all of you" (SL 87). Through her the author tried to create a transnational, race-neutral, gender free global home.

WHERE POLITICAL BORDER MEETS THE NATIONAL LIBERTY:

The problematics of nationhood and indigenous community have been discursified through grandmother whose nationality and home are 'messily at odds' (152). Distorted from Dhaka she came to India after partition, but never to find her own space and left utterly helpless with 'no home but in memory' (190). Her alienation from her place of birth confuses her sense belonging to her childhood home: "How could you have 'come' home to Dhaka? You don't know the difference between coming and going!" (152). Psychological dejection, gender and class-biased oppression, communal violence debunk the one-dimensional myth of nationalism and globalization. The fundamental idea embedded here is that political borders and boundaries can transfer the national identity of people into 'the other' but historical memory can counter this fragmentation. In the context of partition displacement of people, bloodshed and refugee settlement have confronted us with certain uncouth divisive reality: "They had drawn their borders, upon the map, the two bits of land would sail away from each other" (228).

However, the author's contention is that continuity of fraternal relations and historical conscience have the power to transcend those ethno-religious and political limitations. Robi's ironical remark intuits us about the matter: "Why don't they draw thousands of little lines through the whole subcontinent and give every little place a new name? How can anyone divide a memory?" (251).

That one physically and geographically estranged can have the dreams of 'home' has been portrayed through the character of Thamma who despite her anxious refusal of – not being a refugee – is an 'exile'. Her nostalgic memories about her youth in Dhaka and her early hardships of life in Calcutta left her irreconcilable about the borders. Her childish and euphoric moments of joy in visiting Dhaka is nothing but a shattering experience which propels her to wonder: "Where is Dhaka?" (207). Initially she is incapable of accepting the categorization of 'us' and 'them'. But Tridib's murder results not only in the shift of her conscience about the border but also makes her realistic about her adopted home. We can, however, easily meditate grandmother's pragmatic dismissal of Ila's gaudy life style in the West: "She doesn't belong there. She has no right to be there" (82). In the course of the novel we find Ila's difficulties in coping with Western life. Rootless and lost, her situation is beautifully commented upon by Alpana Neogy: "Physical relocation is just not enough. A change of perspective, perhaps a shadow of a line, needs to be traversed in order to make 'home' out of a state of exile" (Kapadia 220). The narrator's mother clearly has no such dilemmas, angst or nostalgia: she is content with the life of a housewife and is perfectly at home in India.

Now, Tridib's character (like the Bartholomew's Atlas) is distinctly significant in the context of the novel for through him the author tries to dissolve all constricting boundaries and advocates cultural fraternity throughout the globe. The narrator confesses – "Tridib had given me worlds to travel in"; Tridib's world view liquidates all the semiotic significances associated with borders and boundaries: his desire towards May fuses with his longing for a truly free global home: "He wanted them (him and May) to meet . . . in a place without a past, without history, free, really free, two people coming together with the utter freedom of strangers" (144).

Meenakshi Mukherjee observes regarding the 'House metaphor' in the novel:

Houses have a synecdochical relationship with countries in this novel, reconfirming the parallel between the family and the nation . . . the Dhaka house in The Shadow Lines could also be read as a trope, without invalidating its material reality. The construction of a nation is a two-way process, entailing on the one hand a broad homogenization despite seeming differences of what lies within the boundaries and a projection of alienness upon what is situated outside. The grandmother illustrates both these imperatives literally and metaphorically. (262)

The same image is relentlessly repeated be it Ila's playing of houses, or Tridib's allegorical narration of the Tristan story or May's London house with Tridib's memorial presence; and these have been connected to the division of Bengal and the bisection of grandmother's ancestral home at Dhaka. Strong jingoism and communal violence and restless memory would have made the tale traumatic at personal and national level but Tridib's humanitarian approach 'across the seas' and the grandmother's idealistic sense of freedom and dream for a strong nation makes those shadowy lines insignificant. It would be proper to conclude with the grandmother's discourse on nationhood and country:

It took those people a long time to build that country . . . Everyone who lives there has earned his right to be there with blood . . . They know they are a nation because they have drawn their borders with blood . . . That's what it takes to make a country. Once that happens people forget they were born this or that, Muslim or Hindu, Bengali or Punjabi: they become a family born of the same pool of blood. That is what you have to achieve for India . . . . (78)

UNDERSTANDING SETTLEMENT IN THE CONTEXT OF SUNDARBAN:

The Hungry Tide is a sociological, anthropological and ecological study dealing with the themes of massacre and migration, partition and re-settlement, politics and eco-conservation. The basic story centers upon a group of refugees whose attempts of resettling in the Sundarban islands meet tragic end under the repressive strategies of Governmental authority. The novel captures the most pathetic conditions of the refugees who were sent to Dandakaranya in Madhyapradesh – a place which offered them not consolation of home but constricting home confinement. They return to the coastal areas of West Bengal only to be evicted again. Apparently political authorities foregrounded the contraction of 'animal space' through human encroachment into the land. Naturally the mangrove forests and entangling rivers are home to several species – 'the keystone species' being the Royal Bengal tigers, crocodiles and river dolphins. So in another way the novel presents the conflict between the possession of land among man and beasts. But keeping in mind heinous political interference the novel without providing any clear-cut resolution further complicates the issue when the female protagonist Kusum laments: "Who are these people, I wondered, who love animals so much that they are willing to kill us for them?" (HT 261-2).

In Ghosh's dramatization comes alive the refugee's search for ideal home ever since their forceful migration into the country; Dandakaranya which promises momentary relief turns out to be 'a land of banishment rather than the haven of hope' (qtd. in Roy web). Latter they attempted to build community life at Morichjhapi; Nirmal's diary ruminates: ". . . in this place where there had been no inhabitants before there were now thousands . . . within a matter of weeks they had cleared the mangroves, built badhs and put up huts" (HT 118). In the tidal land they had found a suitable habitat independent and above the mercy of the Government. The expectation of new life filled the islands with bubbles of acivities – 'as though an entire civilization had sprouted suddenly in the mud' (192). But for the fulfillment of their dreams, socio-political support was needed but here in also injustice was done to them. Their eviction had turned out to be sight of battle. Their struggle and their developing sense of bonding with the land are evident in their fierce resistance: "Amra kara? Bastuhara. Morichjhapi chharbona." – "Who are we? We are the dispossessed. We'll not leave Morichjhapi, do what you may" (254). Their protest and reluctance for uprooting add another dimension to the discourse of home and belonging: Nirmal could discover in it urge for self-identity and affinity to the soil – "I was struck by the beauty of this. Where else could you belong except in the place you refused to leave" (ibid.).

The rehabilitation debate is more problematized when we consider it side by side with the environmental issue. Man is politically poised against animals; and the structured binary makes cohabitation impossible. Beside the main discourse we can also consider Piya's father's adaptability: who was unsentimental about 'home' or 'roots': "where others sought to preserve their memories of the old country, he had always tried to expunge them" (87). Piya herself, though she totters around the globe, has emotional longings for the coziness and comfort of a home which her parents could hardly make out: "There was a time when those were the smells of home; she would sniff them on her mother . . . like domesticated animals . . . she had imagined the kitchen as cage . . . (97). In a sense Nirmal and Nilima's social services are also attempts of re-rooting themselves. Displaced from the city of Calcutta Nirmal's dreams get converted into material reality through his utopian socialism which promises classless civilization without discrimination. His idealism and the poet's dictum – 'To stay is to be no where' (qtd. in 144) takes us out of parochial politics and consequent violence. We can also mention about Piya's stream of thoughts regarding the Bengalese who settled in Burma, infamous for their home-sickness. Even Kanai's desire to meet Piya - 'on my (his) own ground, in the place where I (he) live' (335) – advocates attachment to land and sense of belonging. However, nowhere else is the discourse more suitably concluded than in the final conversation between Piya and Nilima: Piya exclaims – "for me, home is where the Orcaella are" (400); Nilima retorts – "That's the difference between us. For me home is wherever I can brew a pot of good tea" (ibid.).

CONCLUSION:

Finally The Hungry Tide takes a humanistic approach to the theme of dispossession of land in post-colonial India. The marginalized refugees occupy an 'unhomely' space in the context of Sundarbans; they are 'unhomely' not just because they are 'out of the place' but the land itself becomes hostile to human presence (Nayar web). It is impossible for human settlement to flourish in that land and that is why the island could never become 'home'; for associated with home is a sense of security, stability and freedom. Actually as P. Nayar observes that Ghosh's novel reveals that 'condition' of dispossession in which people lost their sense of home:

The dispossessed seek a new home that resembles – doubles – the search for familiarity is an uncanny doubling – their old home. When the refugees arrive from Bangladesh they encounter very different sort of land . . . All they want to do is to "plunge their hands once again in our soft, yielding tide country mud" to return to a place that recalls their homeland. (Nayar web.)

REFERENCES

1. Bose, Brinda (ed.). Amitav Ghosh: Critical Perspectives. Delhi: Pencraft International, 2005. Print. | 2. Ghosh, Amitav. The Hungry Tide. Delhi: Ravi Dayal Pub., 2004. Print. (Cited in the work as HT). | 3. - - - - - - - - -. The Shadow Lines. New Delhi: OUP, 1988. Print. (cited in the work as SL). | 4. Indian Diaspora. www.indiandiaspora.nic.in. Web. Accessed on 4.01.13. at 9 pm. | 5. Kapadia, Novy (ed.). Amitav Ghosh's The shadowlines. New Delhi: Asia Book Club, 2001. Print. | 6. Nayar, Pramod K. Postcolonial Literature: An Introduction. India: Dorling Kindersley, 2008. Print. | 7. - - - - - - - - - -. "The Postcolonial Uncanny: The Politics of Dispossession in Amitav | 8. Ghosh's The Hungry Tide". Project Muse. Web. Accessed on 02.01.13. at 9 pm. | 9. Roy, Rituparna. "The Hungry Tide: Bengali Hindu Rsefugees in the Subcontinent". The Newsletter. www.iias.nl/user/64. Web. Accessed on 3.11.12. at 9 pm. |