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RELOCATING HOME IN DIASPORIC IMAGINATION: TRANSLATING DIASPORIC DESIRE

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Abstract:

The idea of 'home' is an eluding concept in the history of human civilization which is imbued with meaning in the subjective imagination of the individual. It is intrinsically and inevitably associated with the practices of exclusion and inclusion operating in an individualistic space of psychic investment under given circumstances. The homeless dialectics of the postmodern diasporic world triggers a sense of 'homing desire' in the people displaced from their native land of identification in a range of differential and discursive possibilities. The diasporic subjects thus feel a constant urge to reconstruct their own image of the homeland creating an imaginative space for themselves reconfiguring the inner landscapes of their mind. The paper thus aims at exploring and relocating 'home' in diasporic imagination translating diasporic desire with its multiple and conflicting cultural identities that defies strict premise and connotation in the problematic dialectics of permeable patterns of cultural representation.

Key Words: home, diaspora, belonging, culture, identity, nationality, space

The notion of 'home' is as old as the history of human civilization which over the course of time has assumed new dimensions in fiction written in English by the new diasporas in the West. We live in a complex world of belonging and deprivation where millions of people do not live in their original place, where many other live a homeless life within their native lands and are many who have homes or homelands but are abandoned in the quest for better opportunities elsewhere across the world. The ease of movement and the promise of fulfilment thrust their lives over a constant flux in which the human subject rejects

the static dialectic of a traditional mode of life. These pluralities of dwelling resulting from an eternal shifting of locations add new intricacies to the idea of home and belonging.

To conceptualize the ethos of 'home' one has to attend to the social, economic and historical factors behind the creation and construction of these dwelling places regardless of where one attach one's homely feeling to and what does it really mean 'to feel at home' in a world where location and belonging fluctuate amidst an ever changing perspective of integration and rupture. Thus, the new shifting phenomena of location, dislocation and relocation proliferate into the oversimplified understanding of these dimensions and subjectivities in the emotional and imaginative construction of home in an all-inclusive cosmopolity.

A question we often encounter in our daily walks of life in relation to our places of identification is 'Where are you from' which relates to the whole networks of our belonging and evokes in us a sense of urgency to belong. Home becomes a site where one negotiates belonging and unbelonging in relation to the cultural identity which is firmly grounded in one's homeland. We, in the postmodern world live a semi-nomadic life where the term 'home' is no more reducible to a thing in itself but becomes an important emotional determinant in the construction of identity. People, now in a globalised world tend to move ceaselessly between borders creating new temporal homes which involve a growing mixture of cultures which they identify themselves with. Of course, the difference between a home and a house is readily obvious. The 'thing theory' proposed by Bill Brown suggests that house is an objectification of the thingness of the home (Brown 4). By thingness he seems to refer to an array of human sensibilities like meaning, memory, emotion etc. which are attached to the 'homing desire' of the individuals – its home qualities, energies and the inherent will to possess and belong. The present condition of the world is unmistakably one of the connections and movements and the "experience of space is always socially constructed"(Gupta and Ferguson 40). Anthropologists have accepted the view that the land which is being divided into nations is tied to culture, and people are being 'rooted' into these nations. The way people construct their notion of home is as much influenced by this concept of 'rootedness' as by the individual and collective imagination of the past, present and future (Pink 40). The idea of home both in its real shape as a place or homeland and in its imaginary semblance provides the various emotional determinants of identity. Thus home is both a real and symbolic place that becomes synonymous with intimacy, security, familiarly, identity

against the vast anonymity of unfamiliar categories and relations. Roger Silverstone argues in this connection:

> Home, of course, needs to be understood in both literal and metaphorical senses. The defense of home is a defense of both the private spaces and intimate social relations and domestic security- the household; as well as of the larger symbolic spaces of neighbourhood and nation- the collective and the community. (442)

Home is therefore, considered as several sites occupied by a person over the course of his/her life- some concurrently occupied and others connected through travel, time, memory, relation and transition. The notion may involve "an actual place of lived experiences and a metaphorical space of personal attachment and identification" (Armbruster 20). It can cogently be defined in terms of identity, memory, a sense of involvement and inclusion and above all, a "mythic place of desire" (Brah 192). Avtar Brah in *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* describes this homing desire in a different perspective of trans-geographical representation:

> ... 'home' is a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination. In this sense it is a place of no return, even if it is possible to visit the geographical territory that is seen as the place of 'origin'. On the other hand, home is also the lived experience of a locality. Its sounds, smells, its heat and dust, balmy summer evenings, or the excitement of the snowball, shivering winter evenings, sombre grey skies in the middle of the day...all this, as meditated by the historically specific everyday of social relations. (192)

For Brah the shifting memory of home juxtaposes the fantastic memory of the past when individuals of diaspora are confronted with the present in both its physical and temporal manifestation. As powerfully put by Sara Ahmed in her paper "Home and Away: Narratives of Migration and estrangement", "home is implicitly constructed as a purified space of belonging in which the subject is too comfortable to question the limits or borders of her or his experience" (339).

Home is a key concept in the diasporic signifying practices and the ensuing process of transnationality. An immense critical analysis has been devoted to analyse how diasporic transnational migration unsettles the notion of home in all its modality and multiple attachments in the different level of mobility, location and dislocation. As Blunt and Dowling believes, "transnational homes are...shaped by ideas and experiences of location and

dislocation, place and displacement, as people migrate for a variety of reasons and feel both at home and not at home in a wide range of circumstances"(154). Further, Brah highlights the ways wherein not all kinds of dislocation and displacement share the sense of return or reclamation (180) noting the difference between 'homing desire' and nostalgia for native land. Thus, the paper seeks to critically explore the relation between home, identity and memory in three ways. First, it analyses home as an emotional construct characterized by a 'homing desire' in the diasporic imagination which transcends the physicality of homeland and subverts the essentialist notion of home. Secondly, it attempts to demonstrate the connection between 'home' and memory and how reminiscence can be a virtual site for the recreation of a lyrical self to obliterate the distinction between 'home' and 'not home'. Lastly, the research would draw upon reflections on diasporic identity formation and the notion of belongingness in translating the diasporic desire for home in the dislocated individuals' subjective consciousness.

In diasporic engagements extended cultural boundaries enable the formation of new and pluralistic domestic and collective homes. As cultural boundaries expand, the idea of home admits instability into its assumed notion of purity and homogeneity. Home in any case of diasporic representation is always ambiguous and fluid. It is never fixed and permanent as the ideal notion of home assumed to be in its essentialist position having the quintessential quality of privacy, security and a habitual shelter to return to. This ideation of home is not similar to any kind of home anywhere in the late modernity where the boundaries of space and privacy between the real and the symbolic are infinitely blurred (Silverstone 442). Since 'home' ceased to be a real place, feeling at home is essentially a subjective and culturally determined link to the imaginary. We attach great importance and cherished the memory of the home when we are away from it. It becomes more emphatic and intense when there is a fear to lose it. The memory of home is recreative of the inner poetry of the private self which is evoked by emotion and not by factual recapitulation.

> Memories of the outside world will never have the same tonality as those of home and, by recalling these memories, we add to our store of dreams; we are never real historians, but always near poets, and our emotion is perhaps nothing but an expression of a poetry that was lost. (Bachelard 87)

Doreen Massey argues against the stable and introverted nature of home and opines that a sense of place doesn't concern its stability and purity, rather it is dependent on the

unique position it holds as a site for intersection in a wider contextual relations. Nostalgia, strangeness, incompatibility and a sense of loss and disruption intensify the endeavour to belong- to make a house home. When individuals are uprooted from their houses, they experience a strong sense of loss and long for the thingness of the home, its qualified ability to be a home. To be detached from one's home and belonging is a detachment from anything that is familiar and stable. This separation from home and homeland is one of the important parameters of diaspora and is clearly reflected in the diasporic consciousness of the diasporan living in the West as diaspora cannot exist without the loss of home or displacement from the homeland. As rightly pointed out by Anat Hecht, "to lose a home is to lose a private museum of memory, identity and creative appropriation" (123).

Thus, the individual's connection to an ancestral homeland is an inherent feature of diaspora . As Avtar Brah insightfully notes, the term diaspora "embodies a notion of centre, a locus, a 'home' from where dispersion occurs" (181). It evolves images and metaphors of multiple journeys and displacements. The idea of home is central to the notion of diaspora. Far from being just the point from where the scattering initiates, it becomes an idea which establishes an unbreakable link between the diasporic population and the point of scattering. It refers to a new place of abode, a virtual space to settle down or putting roots everywhere away from the homeland. Thinking through diaspora one can address and attend to the essential link between the place of origin and the new place one is relocated to and develops a sense to belong. Thus, the position of the diasporic representation is an ambivalent one and the members of the diaspora find themselves to be suspended to a space where they are torn between two contradictory forces- allegiance to the native land and affiliation with the new land of settlement.

> A fundamental ambivalence is embedded… a dual ontology in which the diasporic subject is seen to look in two directions- towards a historical cultural identity on one hand, and the society of relocation on the other. In a diasporic subject, then, we see in stark relief the hybrid and the dual characteristics that one most often associated with postcolonial discourse. (Ashcroft, Griffith and Tiffin 424)

Diasporic displacements in these ways controvert the supposedly mythical stature of a nation which has so far been held the centre stage in World History with its concept of nation, nationalism and national identity. This tendency of disruption is implicit in all diasporas- the establishment of a continued link to the homeland, the features which distinguishes diaspora

from other immigrant positions cannot fully be expressed by the homological concept of nation-state as essentialist and pure:

> The nation-state, as a common territory is questioned, time is traversed and to a varying degrees subverted by diasporic attachments. Diasporic populations do not come from elsewhere in the same way that 'immigrants' do. In assimilationist nationalist ideologies such as those of United States, immigrants may experience loss and nostalgia but only en route to a whole new home in a new place. Such ideologies are designed to integrate immigrants, not people in the diasporas. Whether the national narrative is one of common origins or of gathered populations, it cannot assimilate groups that maintain important allegiance and practical connections to a homeland or a dispersed community located elsewhere. People whose sense of identity is centrally defined by collective histories of displacement and violent loss cannot be "cured" by merging into a new national community. (Clifford, "Diasporas." 307)

This connection between two or more locations or more nation-states simultaneously doesn't allow the possibility of a singular structure or fixed sense of belonging. It moves beyond the firmly demarcated borders and boundaries which has long held to be an important quotient of national identity and formation of a nation-state as the diasporic individuals seek to maintain identifications outside his/her homeland in order to be incorporated with the foreign land and to live inside with a difference. Ashcroft, Griffith and Tiffin write in this connection that the transactive encounters across national boundaries, dispersion and diffusion through the space of many different national groups disrupt this process of homogenization, "of establishing metaphysical links with a particular geographic location with a particular community that lives within these border" (426) which is so important a phenomenon of nationalism. Uma Parameswaran in her paper "Contexualizing Diasporic Location" says "home is where your feet are, and may your heart too, and I would hope that we write about the world around us and not about the world we have left behind" (291).

Since the 1970s, the globalizing world experiences the fragmentary phenomenon of diasporic overlapping and intertwined identity formation mixed with a trauma of being uprooted, loss of home and the resulting identity crises have informed many writers of Asian diaspora in Britain and America who are haunted by a sense of loss and an urge to reclaim the displaced past with an afflicted wisdom of the incapability of reclaiming specifically the

thing that was misplaced. This is the reason why they filled their world with a fragmented vision of rebirth and lost memory where the individuals have to reinvent a lost home in their fictive consciousness of diasporic sensibility and reconfigure their recollected identity.

As said earlier, the connection to an ancestral homeland is an implicit but inevitable characteristic of diaspora. Edward Said seeks to define this position with the connotation of an insurmountable sense of loss which he claims to be "transformed into a potent even enriching motif of modern culture" (49) and the diasporic 'liminal space' between cultures which condition the displaced individual becomes a site of creativity which would ink them into eternity.

Salman Rushdie in "Imaginary Homeland" describes this diasporic self-refashioning from a fragmented past with the image of "broken mirrors" (suggestive of fragmentation) which ruled out the possibility of a complete and real return to the lost world and suggests the course of substitution and replacement in the process of acculturation aligning the mutated memory of the past with that of the present (429). The image of the broken mirrors projects a form of a disintegrated reality which symbolizes distorted memory and falsification of history in the negotiative experiences of diasporic subjects. The diasporic writers are thus faced with the problem of recollecting and reworking an irretrievable past in their psychological journey into the collusive caves of memory and re-memory highlighting the importance of the diversity of diasporic desire as creative as well as subversive impulses in the imaginative reconstruction of identity and home. Elucidating what he means by 'imaginary homelands' he contends that the incompleteness and ruptured memory serves as a dynamic urge to bridge the fragmented schemata of identification by imagining and restructuring the world around them. With reference to his seminal epic venture in the form of *Midnight Children* he reflects on this evocative motif of reinvention:

> …but the point I want to make is that of course I'm not gifted with total recall, it is precisely the partial nature of these memories, their fragmentation, that made them so evocative for me. The shards of memory acquired greater status, greater resonance, because they were remains; fragmentation made trivial things seem like symbols, and the mundane acquired numinous qualities. (429)

Rushdie aptly quoted the first line of Hartley's novel *The Go-Between*, "the past is a foreign country" when he refers to the ancient photograph as an evocation of the memories of the past only to invert the idea in a diasporic turn of impulse to say that "it's my present that

is foreign, and that the past is home, albeit a lost home in a lost city in the mists of lost time" (428).

Fragmentation and dislocation, then is a strength in disguise allowing the writer to present their fiction as transaction with past in a permeable politics of transhistorical reformulation. This condition opens up an immense world of novel possibilities "with the realization that new knowledge and ways of seeing can be constructed out of the myriad combinations of the 'scraps' which Rushdie describes- knowledge which challenge the authority of older ideas of rootedness and fixity" (McLeod 215). Thus, cultural displacement becomes a claim for a multi-perspective creative process. He extends his discussion on the complexity of diasporic reterritorialization in relation to the retrospective imaginary notion of an ancestral home:

> It may be that writers in my position, exiles or emigrants or expatriates, are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt. But, if we do look back, we must also do so in the knowledge- which gives rise to profound uncertainties- that our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will create fictions, not actual cities and villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the minds. (Rushdie 428)

The meaning of home for him lies in the interactive process of cultural translation- the multiple ways in which the displaced individual strive to relocate 'home' in diasporic imagination. Rushdie's idea of cultural negotiation is similar to the concept of 'routes' rather than 'roots' that James Clifford emphasizes in his work *Routes: Travel and Translation* which proclaims the fluid notion of home (Clifford, 78) signalizing the "multi-locationality across geographical, cultural and psychic boundaries" (Brah 194). The notion of 'routes' or 'translation' as home or homing desire allows for a plurality of perception and heterogeneity of identification because of its emphasis on multiple locations and journeys. It involves a fluctuating contextualization that Rushdie calls "ambiguous and shifting ground" (431) or Homi Bhabha's "liminal space" (5), which point out the inevitable non-essentialist conceptualization of diasporic space where cultural hybridity becomes the defining principle.

Apparently, and quite naturally the diasporic texts strive to uphold individual psychic accounts, imaginative projections of memories and weaves a fictional enchantment around private and collective histories and therefore, suggests alternative ideas of documenting

incidents and experiences of the past in the diasporic consciousness. Memories and experiences which are the prime indicators of identity serve as the raw materials of literary representation and the diasporic writers try to retrieve them imaginatively and stitch them coherently into a meaningful narrativized totality. It is the sense of separation which makes him write and empowers his world of imagination.

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