

Born Into an Unaccustomed Earth: Home, Nationality and Identity Crisis in Partition and Diasporic Literature

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Received: 24/07/2015

Revised: 04/08/2015

Accepted: 21/08/2015

ABSTRACT

In the jet-propelled modern world of today, the concepts of home, nationality and identity has suffered a setback. The concepts of multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multi-racial affiliation has created new tropes of existence beyond the 'national', 'immigrant' or borderland conception. The writers, who have the experience of living in a land where he or she finds himself or herself different from the majority, suffer identity crisis and consider their rootless existence as a kind of exile. Such kind of fragmented existences are quite common in diasporic works and partition novels. But what is to be noted is that such kinds of existences have endowed the writers dynamicism, fluidity and rare creativity.

Keywords: 'home', 'hybridity', 'identity', 'diaspora', 'partition'.

1. INTRODUCTION

A. Home, Nationality and Identity Crisis in Diasporic Literature:

(i) Home and Nationality:

The imagination of a homeland, the loss or recovery of it, various disruptions and political positions within the post colonial nation states have been formidable diasporic conditions and Salman Rushdie's works can be taken as one site where the imagination of homelands are expressed and critiqued. His "Midnight's Children" offers a critique of the 'nation as integrated' concept through its metaphors of fragmentation. It is in a sense an interstitial text standing between the political and cultural, between the desired and the feared, questioning the choice of the imaginary national home and the centrifugal impulses.

As the members of the diasporic community live in an 'imaginary homeland' away from their native country, they encounter multifarious problems related to language, culture, and ethnicity and so on. An expatriate Bengali living in New York, Jhumpa Laheri has a sense of divided loyalty as she has to act out as an American, Greek and an Indian. Talking about her own country, Jhumpa Laheri once remarked:

"No country is my motherland. I always find myself in exile whichever country I travelled to, that is why I was tempted to write on something about this that is living their lives in exile"

(Nityanandam, 2005)

The Caribbean writer V. S. Naipaul expressed the same feeling when questioned about his homeland. Artist's quest for a

rooted existence is perhaps nowhere better expressed than in Naipaul's "A House for Mr. Biswas". In the novel Naipaul has presented the story of a failed scholar and an accidental journalist. The saga of the protagonist's struggle to carve out a niche for himself in society as well as in the literary world is expressed with the help of the metaphor of the 'house'- the right kind of which has always eluded Mr. Mohun Biswas. The house stands for individual freedom, independence and success which redeems all past trials and perhaps the very past itself.

However, emigrating from homeland to settle in the imagined homeland or the concerned diaspora is not always a humbling experience. There is always an opportunity to learn something new. Rushdie observes:

"Having been across the world, we are translated men. It is normally supposed that something always gets lost in translation. I cling, obstinately to the notion that something can also be gained."

(Rushdie. "Imaginary Homeland")

It is right that the migrants lose their sense of wholeness and get stripped of their sense of 'belonging' and 'continuity'. But they also get an opportunity to assert their individual city, to see things in a new perspective and adapt to new challenges.

(ii) Identity- The Looking Glass:

No wonder one finds in the prose works 'transitional beings' who find it hard to assimilate into a new culture. Most of Laheri's protagonists have Bengali root and Boston, New York or Calcutta as their setting. Naturally the value system of their country of origin has an impact upon them which is reflected in their timidity and submissiveness. At the same time, they have the bold self-assertive independent Western consciousness. So the identity of her characters is always in a state of fluidity, changing and shaping up for something new. They have longing to return to their

ancestral homeland but soon they realise the non feasibility or utter impossibility of the project. The desire is then compensated by the following of the traditions, cultures, food habits etc. Yet the acculturation is not complete and the characters discover themselves in an alien land, uprooted and left alone to survive. This isolation is common to all the first generation or second generation expatriates in diasporic literature.

If the characters in Jhumpa Laheri's fiction tried to return to their root, they are shattered now when they find themselves pitted against oddities. Both Mrs. Das in "The Interpreter of Maladies" and Moushumi in "The Namesake" break up with their husbands leaving the family in the lurch. Life teaches us great lessons. In "The Namesake" the weak, diffident Ashima emerges stronger after her husband Ashoke's death. Her Bengali identity is shattered as she rediscovers herself in the American milieu and shuttles in and out of Calcutta and America confidently. In "The Namesake" the most irritating knot that jolts one's individual self is that of Gogol. In Gogol the East and the West meet together, but it also creates conflicts in her. He is shocked to discover that his beloved Maxine has a totally different way of living in her family that forbids the mingling of the two. Ultimately, Gogol becomes a victim of the prejudices of her mother. He sacrifices his love and individuality by marrying Moushumi to please her mother. He acts fatalistically as he allows Moushumi go her own way and is betrayed by her. The only consolation that Gogol has is that Sonia is getting married to Ben- the boy of her own choice.

The theme of rootless existence is handled very carefully in Naipaul's "The Mimic Man". It presents the struggle of Ralph Singh, an immigrant student in the impersonal megapolis of London.

B. Home, Nationality and Identity Crisis in Partition Fiction:

(i) Home and Nationality:

Home, nationality, identity undergoes a sudden metamorphosis; neighbours become enemies when nations break. The single political decision changes not only the geography of the motherland, but also the mindscape of the people. Goodwill evaporates and hatred ensues. Murder, loots, rapes become daily activities. These are most vividly represented in the Partition Fictions. In Sawna Sing Baldwin's "What the Body Remembers" and Khuswant Singh's "Train to Pakistan" give us a graphic description of the state of affairs in the Punjab province. In almost all the novels of Amitav Ghosh we see the pangs of lost home, pangs of separation.

The search for a permanent home of a group of refugee away from their homeland and a tragic end in the imaginary homeland finds expression in Amitav Ghosh's "The Hungry Tide". The setting of the story is the impenetrable jungles of Sundarbans-a vast Archipelago of islands. Kanai Dutta, an interpreter and Priya Roy, a bio-scientist come on a short trip to Lucibaree, one of the islands of Sundarban. Kanai's uncle Nirmal and aunt Nilima live there to uplift the living standard of the people there. With the help of their daughter Kusum and their son Fokir, Ghosh has brilliantly portrayed the violent struggle of the dispossessed who wanted to create a new living, a new society. But the dream is short-lived as they fall victim to the divisive border politics and state-regulated violence.

(ii) Broken Self, Lost Identity:

The craving for recognition and identity finds its utmost expression in Amitav Ghosh's "The Hungry Tide". The settler's craving to identity finds expression in their defiance and stubborn resistance. In this novel it is Fokir who she self-sacrifice brings hope to the grim tale of exploitation

and butchery. His voice is the voice of humanity waging war against the authoritative rigidity of the government. In "The Shadow Lines" Ghosh presents characters like Jethamosai who refuses to change his country following the fellow members of his community. His is the ethics of humanism which persistently seeks to transcend the unreal barrier.

Much partition fiction resulted during the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947. Sadat Hodsaoon Manto's "Mottled Dawn: Fifty Sketches and Stories of Partition", Bhisam Sahani's "Tamas", Chaman Nahal's "Azadi" all are narratives of identity crisis among the other things. A witness to the Rawalpindi riot, Bhisam Sahni in "Tamas" ("Darkness") shows how identity changes with the change in affiliation. "Tamas" is a story of a mass massacre, a crisis in humanity resultant upon narrow border-politics that raged two countries India and Pakistan.

Perhaps nowhere in the diasporic fiction is the identity of a person so much altered, mutilated, fractured than in the magic real fiction of Salman Rushdie "Midnight's Children". The protagonist of the fiction "Midnight's Children", Saleem Sinai is born at midnight of 14th August exactly at the same time India got her independence. The life of Saleem thus becomes handcuffed with history. He becomes a sort of a myth and he has to perform numerous duties whether he likes or not. Right from the beginning of his life Saleem suffers a number of mutilations. His father gives him a blow in the face which makes him permanently deaf in one ear. During the Indo-Pak year of 1965, he is hit by a spittoon which makes him lose his memory. Later he becomes a member of the CUTIA unit of the army. He is called Buddha as they feel an air of antiquity about him. During the Emergency his fragmented identity completes its full circle when he is

castrated. To add to his woes he has to bring up Adam Sinai, the illegitimate son of Shiva and Parvati.

2. CONCLUSION

Both in the partition fiction and the literature of the diaspora, homeland serve as the site for emotional and mental equilibrium. Home is the anchor that keeps us rooted to our individual selves. But as fate would have the other way, many important characters in partition and diasporic fictions lose the protection of the homeland and are hurled onto a dizzy and alien world. Certainly, the result is tragic and the concerned characters find themselves in a crisis - interpersonal as well as intrapersonal.

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Bionote

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How to cite this article: Saha M. Born into an unaccustomed earth: home, nationality and identity crisis in partition and diasporic literature. Int J Res Rev. 2015; 2(8):504-507.

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