



The Location and Negotiation of Home in Siddharta Deb's *The Point of Return*

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ABSTRACT

Since the dawn of partition in the Indian subcontinent, the east Bengal immigrants had lived a beleaguered identity for whom the concept of home is a nonexistent phenomenon. A borrowed phrase from Amitav Ghosh "with no home but in memory" amply justifies their situation. Hence their reference of home itself is ambiguous as they locate themselves in a dislocating culture that externalizes the festering symptom of homelessness which they can adapt but the culture won't adopt them. The novel *The Point of Return* narrates two parallel stories of two consecutive generations. The first represented by Dr. Dam who wishes to build a home amidst the life-long stigma of being an outsider. The second represented by Babu who inherits the memory of his parents and is constantly reminded of his ancestry of 'dhaka'. The paper attempts to locate how exactly the immigrant generations identify home in correspondence to their environment and memory.

Key Words: Home, immigrants, memory, identity, xenophobia

I. Introduction

The word 'home' can be a highly metaphorical multidimensional concept than concrete construction in the physical space. In a more literal term, it associates with our ontological security and safe abode of comfort that can be absolutely claimed as own. But it is not just restricted within the locus of the domestic domain of wall built structures but also encompasses everything technically surrounding it and the correlative outside world transgressing notions of fixity and stability. Like the colony we live in, the district, town, state and finally the country. It also incorporates the relationship we built around these entities and its relevance in shaping us to provide the identity and familiarity we live with. It is this identity that constantly defines us and we develop and grow around to transgress to the preceding generations. Thus 'home' exists not only in the physical space but also in the mental space and empirically plays a poignant role in the psychology of human mind and its foundations. The meaning of home can be a complete embodiment of several disciplines amalgamated thorough content of exploration like processual sociology, anthropology, psychology, ethnography etc in a singular conflation. "*The potential insights to be gained from studying homes with an exploratory study that maps the psychological ambiances (e.g., romance, comfort, togetherness) that people desire in their homes; we identify six broad ambiance dimensions (restoration, kinship, storage, stimulation, intimacy, productivity) that show mean differences across rooms. We connect these findings to existing work on situation selection in emotion regulation. These ideas provide only an initial foray into the domain of residential space, but they hint at the productive roles that homes and other spaces could play in psychological theorizing and research.*" Other human experiences represented by affect are feelings, mood, emotions, etc. also percolate to build the entity. This paper attempts to locate how the dislocation of home can affect the mental space of home and to what extent we can negotiate in the dislocation.

The 1947 vivisection of the two states of India during India's independence has its prolonged aftermath sufferers even today. An estimated 2 million people died during its course and 14 million displaced resulting in the largest transnational migration in the world history. The immigrants who migrated from East and West Pakistan to India settled in the bordering areas of Amritsar, Delhi, several areas in Assam and Bengal. The immigrants were instantly reduced to refugees who never found their lost identity again. Focusing on the Bengal partition and its survivors, their narratives exists in several layers of fluid space where they try to recollect their memories of belongingness to the once existing territory. Thus, home for them is lost in the past and their identity is hybrid and hyphenated. The present habitat and habitus may not be welcoming to the immigrants. The narratives however are different according to the generations based on their perception of the past and their relation to the environment surrounding. "The constant quest for home lies within the 'emotional habitus' where the individual body is engaged in the process of relational becoming, constituted and re-constituted via ongoing and iterative 'affective transactions' with the (social, cultural, and natural) environment. Such transactions give rise to patterns in emotional practice, which relate to power in a variety of ways, and are historically, structurally, and culturally variable; that the socially-embedded, embodied individual's affective transactions are mediated via a specific, normative and transformable affective or emotional regimes." 1

II. The Point of Return.

Siddhartha Deb's debut novel 'The Point of Return' is a political angst set in the undivided state of Assam in the north-eastern hills of India that delineates the manifold ethnic conflicts between the indigenous tribal people and the Bengali immigrants conjoined in the complex manifold political organisations. Unfolding in a convoluted chronology the narrative centres on a father-son relationship, the latter being a second generation partition immigrant while his father had witnessed the holocaust. Dr. Dam is a veterinary doctor who had taken "a plunge away from the world he had always known", emigrated to the redrawn borders leaving behind his village in east Bengal. His son Babu, 'an inept archaeologist of memories' is born and raised in Shillong where he has most of his memories like Dr. Dam has of East Bengal. Thus for Babu the hills become his home which Dr. Dam can never accept. Babu's friends are khasis and other Bengalis in his school. But what the natives constantly remind them is of their non-khasi ethnicity and ancestral past. Dr. Dam decides to put an end to this life-long stigma of being a 'foriegner' and build a house in a plot of land he bought in Silchar, 'a last ditch attempt to find a resting place.' But once he shifts to the house, he is no longer in a state to rejoice this achievement as he suffers a stroke. Babu's version of home remains different as he finds the same alienation in Silchar that Dr. Dam found in Shillong. But he also has dark memories of that place when once they were attacked by the local protesters who wished to demarcate their own land and cleanse off the 'foreigners' they considered as a contamination to their isolationist purity. On another instance, he along with some non-tribal boys were denied access to the cricket club by a local leader.

"Tell him about it. Tell him about the past. How can you forget about your land?"

A person of colonial India and British trained, Dr. Dam thought of himself as a public servant above all else, and he soon became a significant figure in local government, organizing farmers' cooperatives and working out programs for the efficient harvesting and distribution of milk and crops. His innate sense of propriety and his unwillingness to abuse his position for personal gain, however, made him something of an anomaly in the new regime—which was rife with nepotism and corruption—and even created tensions between Dam and his son Babu, who considered his father's notions of duty excessively "British." Babu narrates the tale in reverse chronological order, beginning with his father as an old man struggling to secure his pension and following him back through the turmoil of the nearby Bangladeshi war in the 1970s. Although primarily about one man's life, the tale mirrors larger struggles (poverty, religious conflict, official neglect) that faced India, as well as the archetypal generation gap that fathers and sons struggle with everywhere.

Dr. Dam's every attempt to build a home gets washed away as the physical constructions succumb to the same fate as his mental conception of home in the vicissitudes of ill luck or bureaucracy. Dr. Chatterjee, one of his friend sums up the minority reduced Bengali communities in the north east:

"We are a dispersed people, wandering, but unlike the Jews we have no mythical homeland. Nor do we have their achievements that would make the world recognize and fear us one day. My two brothers have not been here for years. They left as soon as they could, but they found Calcutta too narrow, too alien, after their childhoods here. No doubt you face the same problem. One of them lives in England now, the other in Belgium. They send photographs of their houses, their cars, and their fair children with red cheeks who write Shubho Bijoya in english every year until the time comes for them to grow up and leave their homes."

III. Home in association with memory, geography and relation.

The novel introduces to us the characters like Dr. Dam and his friends who continue to live in the past. Therefore the ideal image of home becomes the standpoint from which the past reinterprets the present in order to create the illusory experience of perfection in nostalgia. Home thus constitutes in its relation to the past in collaboration with place, space, feelings, culture. The counter memories of the immigrants are no different from the collective memory of the individual as well as their experiences. *"Since history is an incomplete reconstruction of past, it ends up in conflict with memory which seeks to create a system of signs, symbols and practices for an easier identification with the past: selectively remembered past, like the restored and invented tradition, usually has political motivation and character."*² In an attempt to recreate the past, Dr. Dam decides to build his home in Silchar where he finds the people of his kind, thereby the future home is modelled after the one he has already lost. While Babu lives and rejoices in the present amidst the constant turmoil, Dr. Dam is a man to conjoin the past and the future home in memories of the self fulfilling power of recollected imagination. Babu doesn't inherit the memory of his father but rather his memory surrounds around Shillong. Both the father and the son have something in common that they have lost their childhood home, thus the reconstructed home within the physical space could never fulfil the void within their mental imagery of home.

Dr. Dam's relationship with his son dwindles on their contrasting ideology. A staunch Nehruvian, Dr. Dam still holds the colonial protocols of perfection in subjugation and stands against defying it. His son on the contrary is the child born in free India, who finds his father's ideologies clashing with his own. Although their interest is mainly circumscribed to the emotions or to that ambiguous space between cognition and emotions represented by preferences, the position of their constituent dwelling diverges. One primary reason that can affect the sense of belongingness also has to do with relationships in and around one builds.

"The study of affect in close relationships is simultaneously a fascinating, yet exasperating experience. On the one hand, because most human beings describe their close relationships in terms of their feelings and emotions (love, hate, fear, anger, contempt, gratitude, and so on), one has a sense that, of all possible theoretical and empirical approaches to close relationships, the affective is possibly the most basic and the most meaningful. On the other hand, the affective approach is also, without doubt, one of the most difficult areas in psychology to conceptualize, analyze, and theorize about in a meaningful way (p. 175)."

The notion of spatial attachment is more substantially related to the phenomenological human geography which was expressed in Topophilia by Yi-Fu Tuan (1974), where its title grasped the interest in the affective aspects in terms of binding relationship with the geographical space. Tuan also speaks about the distinction of roots and sense of place which gives rise to a radical space radical space. Roots, Tuan explains is the unconscious state of deep familiarity with a certain geographical location, while 'sense of place' is the awareness of sensory experiences through residence such as our sight,

objects, actions etc. (Tuan, 1980). We see Dr. Dam's rooted attachment to east Bengal is constantly reminded through the words of his companions, all of them sharing the common ground of losing the roots. Heidegger's concept of Dasein (Being-there) elaborates man's existence as "Being-in-the-world", which contradicts Tuan. Dasein has to be understood in terms of the complex relationship between man and his environment where he builds his attachment and thus it becomes a state of the mind which cannot be shrugged off easily. This continues to haunt the human mind all throughout his existence. The east Bengal natives that the writer in the novel talks about have doubled their nostalgic memories over years as they yearn to return back to a fluid past. "It showed that the landscape of his past would forever be permanent and unchanging, not something that was historical and therefore open to perpetual revision but a place beyond the vagaries of time."

IV. Attachment and Identity

The suffering of the immigrants caused by their forced evacuation due to fragmented spatial and group identity had always been taken into psychological consideration albeit physical accommodation. When we talk about the loss of identity, it is not just their name and relation, but also the identity of space, time and environment. "It is a phenomenal or ideational integration of important experiences concerning environmental arrangements and contacts in relation to the individual's conception of his own body in space. It is based on spatial memories, spatial imagery, the spatial framework of current activity, and the implicit spatial components of ideals and assumptions." (pg 156). Identity as such can be classified in Erikson's 'ego identity' and Proshansky's 'place identity'. The clash in between the father and son is somewhat the clash between the 'ego identity' of the father and the 'space identity' of the son, where the former's self ideologies has no recognition, while the latter's idea of the space of attachment is pricked. Dr. Dam becomes the person as seen as involved in transactions with a changing world where he is constantly put before a new environment, thus challenging his personal space of 'ego identity'.

V. Conclusion

The fragmenting of the geographical entity through imaginary boundaries has not only turned into a national challenge to locate people but also dislocate the located. With Bengal, the partition had always been associated with nostalgia than brutality. Hence reminiscence of the past is constantly procured and passed on with ever blossoming essence. Dr. Dam and his kinds can never get back to it, thus their only solution lies in negotiating the new space achieved. This space can only be relatable to perfection when they are not constantly reminded to the losses of the past. Thus, to build the previous lost world that had existed once and stands as an epitome of perfection is to be built again. And Dr. Dam chooses the land which is most alike to the one lost. The idea of negotiation can probably apply in miniscule for the first generation immigrants. However when passed down to the preceding generation, the idea of a lost land becomes a reconstructive imagery existing in the past that can be negotiated.

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