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WHEN HOME CEASES TO BE A 'HOME': A STUDY OF SELECTED TEXTS IN SOUTH ASIAN FICTION

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Abstract

Over the past few decades, there has been a great proliferation in the research pertaining to the concept and meaning of 'home' in the field of literature. A detailed study of the selected South Asian texts in this paper i.e. Taslima Nasrin's *Lajja* (1994) and Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006), reveals how 'home' for some individuals in their small world ceases to be a 'home' anymore in the very familiar place that they had been living in for a long time. It is also argued that the particular change in the living conditions in the home country itself obscures the articulations of 'home' of the people living there. The unfeasibility to call the country of origin--one's 'home' emerges when one is forced to live in exile but on the contrary, the paper tells that feeling of estrangement and unhomeliness may also grow even while living in one's own country.

Keywords: Home, Belongingness, Diaspora, Dislocation, Exile.

Over the past few decades, there has been a great proliferation in the research pertaining to the concept and meaning of 'home' in the field of literature. It is considered not only a place but also a social environment in which people feel accepted and loved for who they are and where they are. Defining 'home,' Robert Frost opines that "Home is the place, where when you go there; they have to take you in" (34). In the same manner, John Mcleod makes a very pertinent observation when he says:

The concept of 'home' often performs an important function in our lives. It can act as a valuable means of orientation by giving us a sense of our place in the world. It tells us where we originated from and where we belong. As an idea, it stands for shelter, stability, security and comfort. To be 'at home' is to occupy a location where we are

welcome, where we can be with people very much like ourselves. (210)

A scholar in the field of anthropology, Dorrine Kondo, also explores 'home' when she says that "it stands for a safe place, where there is no need to explain oneself to outsiders; it stands for community" (97). These definitions show that the word 'home' conventionally stands for a place to which one belongs and where one finds refuge, rest and satisfaction.

The concept of 'home' is connected to the concept of diaspora in a deep and profound manner. As diasporas struggle to create a place of their own in foreign lands, the longing for home and the memories of homeland always keep haunting their minds time and again. These feelings of homelessness and alienation are common among the people living in transnational lands. However,

the question arises as to whether a person can feel equally estranged and homeless in his place of origin too where he was born and brought up. Does a diaspora always feel safe and secure when he returns home after living for a long time in alien spaces abroad? Or else, does 'home' remain as "... a place of no return" and only "a mythic place of desire" (Brah 192) for diasporas? These questions eventually make us ponder over the notion that the association of home with familiarity and that of the migration with strangeness--is not always true. As in this globalised world, one does not need to be in the unfamiliar places to experience diasporic and exilic feelings rather "there is already strangeness and movement within the home itself" and with the change in specific circumstances "homes do not stay the same as the space which is simply the familiar. There is movement and dislocation within the very forming of homes as 'complex and contingent spaces of inhabitation'" (Ahmed 340). In other words, if the concept of 'home' is no more a fixed or a static space of belonging for refugees or migrants, it may also cease to be a 'home' in the real sense even for the people living in their homelands at some point of time.

In the light of the above discussion, the paper argues that the old paradigms of the word 'home' like "Home, the spot of earth supremely blest; A dearer, sweeter spot than all the rest" (Montgomery 35) and "the stable physical centre of one's universe--a safe and still place to leave and return to . . ." (Rapport and Dawson 6) need to be reconsidered with passage of time. As Nadjie Al-Ali and Khalid Koser, the scholars in Anthropology and in migration studies, assert that homogeneous, peaceful, safe and secure homes, whether imagined or real, belong to the past. According to them, the utterance of the word 'home' entails both meanings--'home' as a "physical place" and 'home' as a "symbolic and emotional space," (7) in the present-day world known as the 'world of movement.' It is not only a physical and geographical impression but it also needs to be charged with the emotions like protection and safety which make one feel 'at home' in the real sense. A detailed study of the selected South Asian texts in this paper i.e. Taslima Nasrin's *Lajja* (1994) and Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*

(2006), reveals how 'home' for some individuals in their small world ceases to be a 'home' anymore in the very familiar place that they had been living in for a long time. It is also argued that the particular change in the living conditions in the home country itself obscures the articulations of 'home' of the people living there. The unfeasibility to call the country of origin--one's 'home' emerges when one is forced to live in exile but on the contrary, the paper tells that feeling of estrangement and unhomeliness may also grow even while living in one's own country.

It is pertinent to expand the understanding of the concept of diaspora in order to explore the diasporic experiences of the people 'within the country' itself. As Satchidanandan remarks that, "the old concept of a unisonant nation with a single unified culture is being challenged . . . at least in relative and regional-cultural terms" (20) now a days. Many people are either forced to leave their country of origin or are forced to live like strangers in their homelands resulting in the state of diaspora 'within' which is explicit by going through numerous examples throughout the world. Throwing light on such examples and discussing their future diasporic paths, A. Appadurai, also asserts that "in the postnational world that we see emerging . . . many people find themselves exiles without really having moved very far--Croats in Bosnia, Hindus in Kashmir, Muslims in India" (qtd. in Brazier 14). In fact, this state of exile or to be unhomed can be experienced at any place and time with gradual or sudden change in circumstances as "the unhomey moment creeps up on you stealthily as your own shadow and suddenly you find . . . your dwelling in a state of 'incredulous terror'" (Bhabha 9). The ways, in which the natives or the indigenous people become the 'other' and shift from the subject position to the subaltern position during violence, ethnic cleansings and other painful experiences, reveal "how the same geographical space comes to articulate different histories and meanings, such that 'home' can simultaneously be a place of safety and terror" (Brah 207). Subsequently, there arises the situation of 'diaspora within' where occupying the in-between space, "the native is as much a diasporian as the diasporian is the native" (Brah 209).

In his essay "The Uncanny," Sigmund Freud has used the word 'uncanny' which is equivalent to the word 'unheimlich' in German meaning literally 'unhomely.' Elaborating this term, he says that, "the uncanny is that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar" (124). By citing some examples of a few persons, situations and experiences, he stresses the fact that it is not always necessarily true that "everything that is new and unfamiliar is frightening" rather it is very much possible in some circumstances that all that was once the familiar "can become uncanny and frightening" (220). In the same manner, Taslima Nasrin in her novel *Lajja* (1994) has portrayed how people of Hindu community, a religious minority in Bangladesh, start facing estrangement, alienation and unfamiliarity within their own homeland during the course of ethnic cleansings and communal violence in the hands of orthodox Muslims. All this takes place after the changed political circumstances in Bangladesh, due to demolition of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya, in December, 1992. Consequently, all the Muslim people who were closely associated with the minority class Hindus, turned against them, making the 'home' gradually unhomely or 'uncanny.'

An in-depth study of the novel *Lajja*, reveals that the question of what and where one's 'home' is, gets more complicated following the historic-political changes in the country of origin. The narrative revolves around four members of a Bengali Hindu family known as "Duttas" living in Bangladesh. Sudhamoy and Kironmoyee lived in Mymensingh all through their lives in a rich and ancestral home along with their two children Suranjan and Maya. Despite belonging to a minority Hindu community, Sudhamoy preferred to stay in Bangladesh after Freedom Movement of 1971 considering it his own 'homeland' unlike other Hindus who left it being afraid of religious persecution. Like his father, he believes in staying in his homeland and argues that, "If there is no security in your own country, where in this world can we go looking for it? I cannot run away from my homeland . . ." (Nasrin 6). Due to the continuous aggravation by the Muslims of Mymensingh so as to avenge upon the Hindus for demolishing the Babri Masjid in India

and following the kidnapping of his small daughter, Sudhamoy is forced to leave his ancestral home and shift to a cramped little house at Tanti Bazaar with his family. Feeling helpless like a refugee in his own country, he still keeps on asserting, "I will not go . . . yes, I have left our ancestral home, but it does not mean that we are also leaving our country" (23). The writer has poignantly described how the poise and dignity of Sudhamoy and all of his family members get shattered gradually with increasing atrocities inflicted upon them by the Muslims who were very close to them in the past. Now they felt unaccompanied and isolated in their own country.

These experiences of homelessness and rootlessness become very intricate to face for Sudhamoy and his son Suranjan when they are forced to live with the fear of being insulted and being charred by the flames of communalism frequently. Finding himself totally estranged and vulnerable in the hostile circumstances, Suranjan shuts his eyes and thinks, "This country, all said and done, was his and his father's as much as it was his grandfather's, and great-grandfather's! Why, in spite of that, did he feel so isolated? Why did he have the feeling that he could not exercise his rights in this, in his own country?" (75). The loss of familiarity and feeling of non-belonging make these Hindus feel like exiles and diasporas in their own boundaries because "exile is the unbearable rift between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home, its sadness can never be surmounted . . ." (Said 173).

Now, it can be pertinently argued that such places cannot be called home as the house of Dutta family has gradually lost its meaning to be a 'home,' in the sense of a place which offers safety and protection. In the end, after feeling very suffocated and sad, Sudhamoy, who had always been so adamant to live in his homeland Bangladesh forever, starts contemplating that "the strong mountain that he had built within himself was crumbling day by day" (216). There is no alternative left for him except to leave his place of origin and move to India for survival of his family. The thought of leaving Bangladesh is very excruciating for this family because of the strong "pull of the past" (Jha11). However, this 'exile' from motherland will be less

painful than the feelings of being a 'diaspora' and 'exile' while living in one's homeland. These are the people "who are diasporic in consciousness within the domains" (Singh viii) of their own country.

Thus the meaning of the place of origin becomes very complex for these diasporic people who after leaving it once, cannot even think of going back. Perhaps it is the most gloomy and miserable phase of the life of these individuals "away from family and familiar places but also meant being a sort of permanent outcast, someone who never felt at home, and was always at odds with the environment, inconsolable about the past, bitter about the present and the future" (Said 47). So, all the traditional meanings of home given by various scholars are subjected to social, historical and political changes. Redefining these perceptions, a scholar in the field of Anthropology, A. Bhattacharjee suggests that home is "not necessarily a cozy place, attached with positive feelings. It can also be a site of repression and violence" for some individuals (308). In the same manner, through *Lajja*, Taslima Nasrin has also depicted the predicaments of those human beings who belong where they cannot be and who are where they do not belong.

If *Lajja* deals with the narrative of 'leaving' home, Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* concerns both 'leaving' and 'returning' home. Reflecting upon her own experiences, both as a diaspora living in USA and as a writer, in this novel, Desai portrays how the knowledge of being unmoored and rootless not only in foreign lands but also within one's own homelands impacts upon the psychology of an individual which further enhances one's desire to belong to certain fixed roots. But in this rapidly changing world, can roots really prove to be an idea of stability and security or is it merely an illusion? What happens to a person who after living like an exile in foreign lands, has a continuous longing to return to his 'home' i.e. the country of his origin? How does he feel when he realizes that a return can never take place as he does not belong to that place anymore? What type of diasporic dilemmas such people have to undergo who are forced to leave their 'home' due to hostile environments? These are some of the major issues taken up in this paper

projected by Kiran Desai in this novel.

The novel *The Inheritance of Loss*, on the one side explores the diasporic life of some individuals who shift from third world countries to USA in search of economic opportunities while on the other side, the story revolves around the political upheaval in the North-Eastern Indian state of Kalimpong in 1980s where GNL (Gorkha National Liberation Front) demands separate land for Gorkhas. Although some immigrants living in America like Saeed-Saeed, Harish-Harry and Mr. Kakkar have been shown assimilated to this country up to some extent by the writer but in contrast to these characters, Biju's pathetic condition has been projected as representative of all the illegal immigrants who are forced to live like "fugitive on the run" due to the fear of deportation (Desai 3). However, most of the immigrants living in USA from third world countries, live there just to fulfill their 'American Dream' but their hearts always possess a feeling of 'myth of return' to their homelands at some point, though temporarily. Despite the fact whether one is a Hindu or a Muslim, one tries to remain connected to his homeland by keeping his cultural practices alive that become a way for survival in the hostland. The longing to return to the homeland depends upon the realisation of acceptance and rejection in the hostlands but for illegal migrants, this realisation always remains limited to the rejection, alienation and homelessness, in spite of trying their best to be part of that society. Biju lives a very deplorable life in America but the irony is that his father, Panna Lal, working as a cook in Jemu Bhai Patel's house, feels proud of him assuming that he is doing very well there. Having gone as a mechanic to USA, Biju ends up working as a waiter in a restaurant. His continuous longing for his home becomes very obvious when Desai says, "Biju was so restless sometimes; he could barely stand to stay in his skin . . . every now and then, Biju . . . felt a pang for village life" (81).

The overwhelming memories of the past and of the homeland left behind keep haunting the minds of the diasporic individuals and disturb their present. Thus it becomes difficult for them to adapt transition and assimilation in the foreign lands.

Discussing the dilemma of these immigrants, who 'straddle between two cultures,' Rushdie questions:

What are the consequences, both spiritual and practical, of refusing to make any concessions to Western ideas and practices? What are the consequences of embracing those ideas and practices and turning away from the ones that came here with us? These questions are all a single, existential question: How are we to live in this world? (17-18)

Like many other diasporas, Biju is also unable to find answers to these questions and feels inclined to the memories of his lonely father living in his homeland that is undergoing a lot of turmoil due to Nepali insurgency. He calls his father to get the updates but discovers that the phone networks are out of order. Finding himself incapable to talk to his father anyway and thus assuming that he is dead, he feels determined to 'return home.' Here, the writer has problematized the issue how 'returning home' and to be 'at home' are two separate things because "if home is where one feels most safe and at ease, instead of some point on the map, then it is far from clear that returning to where one fled from is the same thing as 'going home'" (Malkki 509). This act of returning 'home' never makes Biju realise to be 'at home,' as he gets robbed of his belongings that he had brought from America by none other than GNL men in his own village or so called 'homeland.'

Like Taslima Nasrin, Kiran Desai also portrays the pathetic condition of diasporas within 'home' itself when she says, "Darkness fell and he [Biju] sat in the middle of the path--without his baggage, without his savings, worst of all, without his pride. Back from America with far less than he'd ever had" (317). Pondering over his state of affairs Biju says to himself, "Why had he left? Why had he left? He'd been a fool. He . . . could not stop thinking of all that he'd bought and lost" (318). Thus, his 'homeland' that was so safe and familiar to him, suddenly turns out to be uncanny and unsafe. It is no less than the experience of 'exile at home' for these sorts of individuals who ultimately realise that, "when the place one feels to belong to confronts him or her with social exclusion, it forms a message

that he or she does not belong there any more" (Braakman 128).

Above and beyond delineating Biju's experience of exile at 'home,' Desai has portrayed very poignantly the example of those individuals who have been living for a long time in Kalimpong in India but due to their belonging to the minority communities, find themselves in diasporic state under the changing political conditions due to Nepali Insurgency. Father Booty, a Swiss man, is such a character who had been living in India for the last more than thirty years and had adopted it as a real home, both in physical and emotional sense. Naming his home as "Sukhtara-- Star of Happiness," (222) he enjoys a great business of running dairies and plays a significant role in the development of rural area of Kalimpong. Considering this place as his permanent home, he had never felt any need of applying for papers but his condition becomes like that of an 'exile' or 'diaspora at home,' as because of the dearth of papers he is ordered to leave the country forever within one week by the police working in favour of Nepalis. In the same manner, Lola and Noni, the two anglicised Bengali sisters, also get shocked when the Nepali Gorkhas enter into their house named "Mon Ami" forcedly which was constructed on a gigantic piece of land. Proclaiming that, "It is not your land. It is free land," (240) they start making a number of huts inside the campus to accommodate themselves. But belonging to the minority community, both sisters are not able to raise their voice and to bear everything silently was the only option left to them for survival. So, even without moving anywhere, one can be a diaspora within one's boundaries, is what Desai has shown in this work.

Furthermore, the diasporic and exilic feelings are also clearly shown in Biju's father too, who in spite of living in Kalimpong for more than half period of his life, thinks that in assuming this place as his 'home,' "he had been wrong. He wasn't wanted in Kalimpong and he didn't belong" (278). The judge (caught between East and West), his granddaughter Sai and her Nepalese Maths teacher, Gyan, have also been projected as secluded, alienated and non-belonging to their surroundings frequently due to their individual justifications. Thus

the novel is full of numerous instances of those individuals for whom their 'home' has ceased to be a 'home' in practical sense anymore. On the other hand, Desai has also problematized about those people of minority community who shift to foreign lands, make their homes there but internally remain inclined to their own homelands. They feel no liability towards these adopted lands nor assume it their actual home.

Both *Lajja* and *The Inheritance of Loss* discussed above talk about the concerns of safety and security of the people living not only in hostlands but also in their homelands. Safe and secured surroundings as well as 'home' play an indispensable role in the formation of identities of individuals. However, the contradictory and conflicting situations often result in "a loss of self-esteem . . . a loss of moorings. This is a greater loss because the characters feel displaced at home. This makes home a diaspora and loss of identity and self-esteem makes it a volatile space" (Radhakrishnan 313). This loss of individual's identity makes one ponder over the question where does one actually belong to. Thus, detached and distanced home-space becomes 'unheimlich' for the individuals in spite of living in their native lands. The writers also expose that the places that are generally approached for the formation of one's identity, may not be comfortable and preferable to live in reality. Arguing about this truth, Avtar Brah also avers, "It is quite possible to feel at home in a place and, yet, the experience of social exclusions may inhibit public proclamations of the place as home" (193) so as to call it one's 'own place.'

It had been discussed earlier in the paper that the word 'home' has not only the physical but also the symbolic and emotional meaning based on the realisation of some basic and practical needs of life. So, an analysis done on *Lajja* in this paper shows that Bangladesh has become only a physical home for Dutta family since it is a place of origin for them and belongs to their ancestors. Earlier this home had emotional meaning too for Sudhamoy and his family members, who always felt attached to this land and were surrounded by their relatives and friends. However, with the change in historic-political circumstances, it has ceased to be a symbolic and

emotional place of belonging, as it no more provides them with shelter, safety and security in the real sense of the word 'home.' Nikos Papastergiadis also says that "the ideal home is not just a house which offers shelter . . . apart from this physical protection and market value; a home is a place where personal and social meanings are grounded" (2). So, after leaving it once, there is no rationale to inhabit it again as going there means returning to the roots or the place of origin only, nothing more than that. The writer has problematized the pathetic situation of the members of the Hindu community who lost their homes without moving anywhere and became the victims of communal clashes.

On the other hand, the analysis of *The Inheritance of Loss* projects that by problematizing the questions like "whether thrice-displaced Biju should go back to America or he will have to . . . set up a new home . . . [in Kalimpong] in the prevailing scenario or . . . to return to the ancestral village-land in UP to start the life of struggle afresh . . ." (Kaur 138), Desai makes the readers ponder over the situation when home ceases to be a home both physically as well as symbolically and emotionally. For other characters too, in the novel, 'home' has converted into exile as during their displacement "the borders between home and world become confused; and, uncannily, the private and the public become part of each other, forcing upon a vision that is as divided as it is disorienting" (Bhabha 9). They are in constant state of 'diaspora within,' since the place where they always preferred to live, cannot be called 'home' anymore. Thus, by portraying the dilemmas, uncertainties, confusions and contradictions related to the concept of 'home' and identity, both the writers have presented that these are continuously varying and evolving concepts in their meanings in this present-day world and need to be considered with a broader understanding emphasising change and movement over routine and stability.

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