



TRANSLATING THE IDEA OF HOME IN ABHISHEK MAJUMDAR'S *HARLESDEN HIGH STREET*

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Abstract

Home acquires an important place in the life of every individual. More specifically, home has multiple meanings and interpretations based on the personal journey of an individual. Post-independence, both India and Pakistan, were left to ponder over a new future and destiny which they had to carve on their own. The partition remained a gaping wound and economy was also a big concern. Amidst these situations people preferred turning towards the colonisers in search of an answer. Abhishek Majumdar's *Harlesden High Street*, presents the journey of two such displaced families. They decided to embrace England with different motives and aspirations. Every character goes through a unique understanding of home. And while reading the play it becomes evident that home cannot have a fixed definition. The play highlights the identity issues which the families face. The play is a commentary on the concept of multiple identity, quest for home and the common angst against the colonisers.

Keywords: *home, identity, displaced families, partition*

1. Introduction

Present literary discourse gives much attention to the concept of identity and home which are often interdependent on each other. Home has different definition and meaning to different people. Home is mixed with the identity of an individual. In the play, *Harlesden High Street*, Majumdar writes about home as perceived by two families coming from two colonised nations and settling amidst the colonizers. Harlesden hosts people from different nations. The play looks at the colonizers from the perspective of the colonized. While writing the play, Majumdar ensures that his characters talk about the subtle impact of imperialism on the subconscious self of the colonised and even goes to the extent of breaking away from that imperialism, even if it is only in dreams and not reality. He comments on the perception of the colonized but not directly, rather with the help of maps. The empire known as the one on which 'the sun never sets' turns smaller in the hands of a Pakistani map maker. Majumdar also presents the confusion and bewilderment of the young generation who have not witnessed the atrocities of the colonizers directly but have been informed about them every now and then by their parents. The two main characters Rehaan and Karim belong to the generation which associates itself as Londoners. They both are lost in a post-colonial maze and struggle to find their own identities. It is evident that this maze is a result of the colonial superiority exerted through not only the power but also culture and economy. Regarding imperialism, M. A. R. Habib (2005) writes:

Though imperialism is usually understood as a strategy whereby a state aims to extend its control forcibly beyond its own borders over other states and peoples, it should be remembered that such control is usually

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not just military but economic and cultural. A ruling state will often impose not only its own terms of trade, but also its own political ideals, its own cultural values, and often its own language, upon a subject state (737).

British Imperialism left India with two gaping wounds. The first being the economic collapse and the second a partition resulting in the formation of Pakistan. Majumdar puts forward various issues and day to day struggles of two displaced families through multiple voices, both from India and Pakistan. Reference to the partition horrors is also made but in a very subtle and quick way.

He learnt to drive sitting next to his father. The month-long drive from their old house in old Delhi, till they reached Karachi. Avoiding mobs, avoiding Hindu villages, avoiding sunsets ... when the sun sets, he is often scared. He tends to protect me ... protect Firoza (Majumdar, 24).

Harlesden High Street explores the emotional and psychological trauma of immigrants looking for a better future in the land of colonizers. The play brings forward some scathing issues related to partition horrors, the repercussions of the same and even the shared identity which unites two nations in a foreign land. Ammi resonates a kind of settlement between the past and present when she says, "Not that I dislike Indians. You can't do that when you're living so far away and they are the ones who look closest to you. One learns to forget the past and live together (Majumdar, 24)". Majumdar gives a new sense of unity to the otherwise partitioned India and Pakistan.

The play traces the journey of two generations and how they perceive the colonial past. Born and brought up in England, the stories of the colonizers appear as distant tales to Rehaan and Karim. The play presents post-colonial reverberations mixed with the discussion on identity. In the character of Rehaan's father, one finds hint of agitation against the cultural imperialism. The father while drawing maps keeps on giving Pakistan more space than England and he considers the idea of learning about England choking. Rehaan informs the audience about the same:

'enough', my father used to say. Why should only we keep learning about their land, its mad kings with alphanumeric names, their bloody wars and ridiculous campaigns. The promiscuous lot. (Majumdar, 19)

The play opens with Rehaan and Karim trying to sell the fruits and vegetables. While selling the fruits they engage in a philosophical discussion on the paradox of life. It gives an insight into the complexity of existence which these two characters are going through. They try to sell Indian and Pakistani products in a foreign land. While Rehaan and Karim struggle to find buyers, it is the big stores which have figured out how to sell products and how to attract the buyers. But towards the end of the play, it is the human connect of saving people from rain that makes Rehaan and Karim understand the power which lies in human relations. Rich and poor are dealt not in isolation but in contrast to each other. The characters deliberate upon the idea in terms of one person as compared to the other. In the consumer world, in which we are living in, the idea of money cannot stand in isolation. The vast middle class which happens to be the consumer class too has tertiary or different sub classes within itself. Thus, the comparative analysis of rich and poor makes sense. While doing this comparative analysis Majumdar ensures that the hierarchy is highlighted.

Karim: These people are rich. We are really poor by their standards.

Rehaan: We're really rich by our standards.

Karim: Everyone is rich by our standards.

Rehaan: Everyone is poor by someone else's standards (Majumdar, 9)

Furthermore, Karim and Rehaan are perplexed and have still not been able to figure out how to sell the fruits. The confusion is symbolic of the confusion which a non-native goes through in a foreign land. The idea of settling in, being accepted, knowing the natives and their preferences, is the quest of identifying themselves in a consumer world and being able to fit in the market. Majumdar shatters the imperialistic idea of colonizers with regards to the civilization and good moral governance by referring to a character, Mrs. Dmitri. She doesn't appear in the play but is referred to by Rehaan and Karim. The western world, as observed by the two men, gives more importance to the materialistic things. For the imperialists it was

worldly possessions followed by the human relations, while for an eastern person this is an idea to be abhorred. The sequencing of the objects is a kind of hint to the preferences in the life of an individual.

Karim: Mrs Dmitri, by the way, threw the piano out and then ran up and down the road looking for it.

Rehaan: She did the same with her dogs.

Karim: And her sons ... poor things ... those boys.

Rehaan: It happens, when your mother is on opium, and uzo, and grass.

Karim: Its pretty normal for them.

Rehaan: They are philosophers ... those Greeks. (Majumdar, 9-10)

This conversation breaks away from the western enlightenment saga and rejects the cultural superiority of the west. With reference to post-colonial studies this gets reflected as:

The final motive, propounded by figures such as Rudyard Kipling (in poems such as “The White Man’s Burden”) and questioned by writers such as Conrad, rests on moral grounds: imperialism is a means of bringing to a subject people the blessings of a superior civilization, and liberating them from their benighted ignorance. Clearly, much of this rationale rests on Western Enlightenment notions of civilization and progress (Habib, 738).

The way Majumdar trivializes the reason of suicide and associates the reason to the issues faced by the western world is a scathing comment on the idea of development and progress in the first world countries. While Karim and others are struggling to make ends meet Londoners have a different struggle. Rehaan informs about the suicide:

Nothing unusual. The usual angst. Wife sleeps with neighbour, meaninglessness of life ... one of those ... one of those First-World preoccupations. Full stomach, social security, twenty-four-hours-gas-electricity kind of angst. (Majumdar, 19-20)

Majumdar tries to refute the concept of superior or inferior civilization. This further strengthens the argument that home is one with which one is able to associate their true self. He presents the idea of need and requirements of an individual in making a place their home. Majumdar highlights the standards of beauty as perceived or rather forced to be perceived by the colonizer for whom white is beautiful and black is abhorrent. The anti-colonial struggles mixed with the racial superiority is reflected when Rehaan and Karim refer to the black girls. The pain of being subjugated to the racial discrimination in their own land gets a new perception. Rehaan’s attempt to set new standards of beauty is a way of decolonizing the standards of beauty.

Karim: I can’t stand it ... when you call these girls beautiful.

Rehaan: They are.

Karim: These ... black girls in a white land. An eyesore ...

Rehaan: You would never say that ... not in Karachi.

Karim: Where’s the white land in Karachi?

Rehaan: White women in a black land ... aren’t they eyesores?

Karim: What are you saying ... whites ... they are pretty ... no matter where... (Majumdar, 6)

The refusal towards colonial hierarchy gets further reflected when Rehaan talks about his father, Pakistan and the map. The idea of making Pakistan larger and England smaller is a kind of rebel against the cultural imperialism and colonialism which the Indians and Pakistanis were subjugated to. Rehaan and his father are the two generations, victims of the colonial past. It is evident that Rehaan’s father will be a rebel, and it is suggestive that the son will also show resistance. The notion that the colonizers went to flourishing nations and then left the nations devoid of their economic growth has to be taken into consideration. The Indian subcontinent was left economically devastated to such an extent that later, the people had to turn towards the colonizers for economic stability. Rehaan’s father hated Pakistan but he also hated the imperial Britain equally. He loathed the idea of learning about them and wanted to make them see the world his way. This was done through the map. He wanted to teach geography to the ‘Goras’ just to make them see the world ‘his way’.

Rehaan reflects the idea in the following words, “My father’s ghost went mad. England became smaller and smaller, America pushed to a corner, Japan non-existent ... the ghost just wouldn’t stop (Majumdar, 19).” It is worth mentioning here that even this rebellion is done by a ghost and not a real man. This ghost is none other than Rehaan who thinks that after his father’s death, his ghost has entered his body. Every time Rehaan does an act of rebellion, refusing to accept the new identity, he is overtaken by the ghost. The selling of world map was a fulfillment of his father’s wish. He wanted to make the Britishers see the world in a different way, as it appeared to him.

World maps. The first article I sold. The fulfilment of my father’s ghost. Sell the world maps to Gora children.

Make them see the world our way (Majumdar, 19)

2. Home

Majumdar highlights all possible traits associated with an individual’s identity; political, social, geographical so on and so forth. The image of home looms over the play. Throughout the play, different aspects of identities are explored and identified with the idea of home. Home gets translated into the acceptance of one’s identity or rather multiple facets of the identities. With the kind of recognition which is given to the families from India and Pakistan, the idea of calling a land as their home gets complex. It is mixed with colonial and imperialist sentiments. For Rehaan and Karim who were born and brought up in London it is economic, while for Ammi it is holding on to the culture of her native place. This holding on gets translated into physical, emotional, cultural, linguistic and other associations. When in India and Pakistan the identity is different, but when in a foreign land they often get along well and it is a kind of deliberate groupism in order to save themselves from the clutches of the identity issues in a foreign land. For Rehaan and Karim home gets mixed with the economic stability. While having a discussion regarding the operation of Hitesh’s mother Rehaan says:

They shouldn’t do the surgery here. Its cheaper back home.

Karim (laughs): Back home.

Rehan: Home ... home is where it’s cheaper.

Karim: Home is where one earns more.

Rehaan: Home is where one saves more.

Karim: Home is where one spends less.

Rehaan: Home is where one can send more home.

Karim: Home is a currency. A currency that’s eighty-ninety times one’s own. It’s a calling card, a money transfer (Majumdar, 11)

The characters keep exploring the idea of home throughout the play. Their idea is often contrasted with that of what Ammi associates home with. Ammi’s character strengthens the argument that home is not just a place to live but is much more and has a vast canopy with recognition, identity and dignity being the major components.

Ammi talks of basic components of calling a place a home. While in Indian subcontinent being involved with each other or being connected is warmth, the same is a social taboo in the western world. Definitely home is identified to a place where one is comfortable and is not forced to wear a different identity in order to fit in to the society. This idea is further strengthened by the discussion on the way people behave in the bus. While Ammi accepts that London gave life, job, education and children she still identifies home with a place where she has the recognition of her identity. The recognition of the talkative self and surrounding. Ammi’s words, “Home is where the buses are nice ... they say. Home is where people talk in buses ... I reply (Majumdar, 25)” reflect the cultural identity of establishing a home. The concept of a better life in terms of better commodities is rejected outright by the concept of human connect which Ammi finds missing in London. She laments on the thought that relation between people is cold and no one communicates or feels interested in the world around them or people around them. The difference in the people is brought about by the way they see the buses moving around them. Ammi informs that the

people in Harlesden don't talk to each other, they don't make faces at the buses and are not inquisitive of the world outside their windows. They are not like them. It is worth noting that here 'them' has no demarcation of geographical identity and Indian and Pakistani are similar while the other are the Britishers.

See.....you can hear the hum of the engines. No one's talking. This bus is full. Full of young and old. Sometimes you can listen to a loud iPod. But not people. These people. They aren't talking. They aren't looking out of the window. They aren't reading newspapers. They aren't making faces. They aren't smiling to themselves. They aren't crying.

Home ... home is where people make faces to the windows of buses. (Majumdar, 25)

The thought of being able to be recognized leads Ammi to the conclusion that Home is not London but a place beyond this geographical boundary. Fukuyama (2018) explains this with the help of concept of thymos. He writes:

More than two millennia before the advent, Socrates and Adeimantus understood something unrecognized by modern economics. Desire and reason are component parts of the human psyche (soul), but a third part, thymos, acts completely independently of the first two. Thymos is the seat of judgements of worth: ... those judgements can come from within, ... but they are most often made by other people in the society around them who recognize their worth (18).

For Rehaan and Karim, the desire part of soul is the governing one and for them money or the material aspect of life governs their idea of home. The continuous struggle of attracting buyers and selling things in order to make money is an example of the self which associates with the economic aspect of living. But as Plato presents in his work Republic, where Socrates and Adeimantus discuss about the soul and spirit of a human, we find that the characters do not have just one identity. Their personalities present different parts and therefore the idea of home gets more complex and the definition of home keeps varying from character to character. While Ammi talks of associating home with the trait of personality that craves recognition, Rehaan and Karim talk of home in terms of fulfillment of materialistic desires. For them the concept of home is simply in context of money. But the connection between home and money is inseparable. It would be pretty close to the statement that home is the financial stability. Majumdar explores this idea and puts it in the discussion through the people who have left home in search of home. It is very similar to the quest of identity in diasporic writings. The difference being that here the quest is not in terms of emotional need or the cultural milieu but rather based on financial issues which often compels people to leave their countries for better avenues. Trying to find a way to sell their products, Karim and Rehaan deliberate on the big stores and their approach:

Karim: These customers bhaijan ... there's no way of knowing. No way of finding out when they will appear ... what they will buy.

Rehaan: the big stores have figured it out.

Karim: no bhaijan, it's just their size and space. People go into them to seek shelter from rain. (Majumdar, 8)

By the end of the play, we find that the same shelter from rain provides the idea of connecting with the people and Karim and Rehaan reassure themselves that home is where one is protected.

Karim: let's cover the people ...

Rehaan: what!

Karim: let's make a roof ... yes, let's cover the people. (Majumdar, 39-40)

3. Identity

While reflecting on identity one cannot overlook the impact which language and literature have on the culture and identity of an individual. Ngugi Wa Thiong'o (1986) stresses upon the language and literature taking people away from themselves to the other self, to the other world (2). Rehaan and Karim are an example of this identity which is constructed through the language which they read in order to survive in

a foreign land. Francis Fukuyama (2018) in his work, *Identity*, writes about the tendency of getting recognized based on the collective identity. Talking about the various social movements aimed at providing rights to the marginalized groups, he writes:

These social movements emerged as they did out of the aspiration of liberal democracies to recognize equally the dignity of all citizens. But democracies never live up to this pretension: people are often judged not on their individual character and abilities, whatever the law says, but on assumptions about them as members of a group (106)

Majumdar cunningly knits the threads of difference and generalization together by writing about reasons of worry after a bomb scare. But Majumdar does not explore the idea of suspicion any further and rather leaves the abysmal past to be explored by the audience/reader. Ammi quickly summarizes the topic with lines, “Actually they can’t tell Pakistanis from Indians or Arabs in general. But I don’t think that matters. They don’t see too well either (Majumdar, 14).” Everyone is rounded up without any distinction. Immediately after this Ammi asks for the eye drops. It is a carefully planned conversation with the concept of the world turning blind and generalizing and mixing identities. She talks on the importance of eyes and having a vision which can be interpreted as a symbolic way of commenting on the world to look clearly and not be deceived.

Eyes... one must take care of one’s eyes in the world. Hands, legs, tongue ... these are all dispensable. But eyes ... critical. When you’re living on someone else’s land.

It’s all about spotting. Spotting opportunities, spotting danger, spotting people, friends, foe, children, lovers ... buses. (Majumdar, 14)

With multiculturalism being the precursor of identity politics, it is evident that even the physical appearance, shared by a particular group, shapes the identity of an individual. It is evident from the lines where Ammi talks of hair and emphasizes on the word ‘our kind of hair.’ She takes pride in identifying herself to her actual roots:

Who will say that I worked for a salon once. In Wembley. An Asian salon. Those days people wanted our kind of hair, long hair. I used to be the hair specialist (laughs). The specialist at tying and untying. That was when I worked in the salon (Majumdar, 12)

The play talks about the unnecessary conspiracy against the people. And this conspiracy, categorically is based on the identity of the people. Majumdar writes:

And that idiot happened to have this map on his wall.

Immediate link ... Pakistan ... Muslim printer, overnight had to shut that business. (20)

The idea of identity based on the physical appearance is also established when Ammi talks of the Irish and Asians. She informs that it is difficult to differentiate between the two till they speak. Karim, Rehaan and Firoza have identified themselves to those living in London. One of the probable reasons could be the childhood which they spent in London itself. But often this identity is questionable based on the colour of their skin and that is a point when they start reflecting upon their sense of belongingness. This concept of identifying with a certain set of social behaviour is one of the major factors of establishing an identity in a foreign land.

Majumdar also explores identity from the lens of clothes and precisely through the colour of clothes. He further highlights the identity crisis which one goes through that makes him or her a misfit. A misfit in London and also in Pakistan. The characters are the odd ones based on the colour and that makes them examine their belongingness to any particular geographical region. Karim says:

Firoza and I tried to look colourful as children. Our schools were grey. The sky, the shops, our house, Ammi’s eyes, Abbu’s hair, letters from Pakistan, tickets to Pakistan ... all grey.

There was a grey area between being an Asian and a European. That grey was us.

Children of Asians born in Britain.

The grey area between white and brown. Firoza and I.

Our grey accents, grey festivals, grey relatives, grey likes and dislikes ... we tried to be colourful.
To belong to a colour and not this greyness. Too brown in English, too white in Pakistan (Majumdar, 27)

Karim also highlights the nature of this physical appearance and the recognition which it receives through Ammi's perspective. He informs that for his mother appearance is an integral part of recognition. One can argue that this is probably the result of a kind of recognition which her soul yearns for her own self and provides to the others around her. Karim says, "Ammi is impressed with any Muslim boy with half a beard and a quarter of a Pathani accent (Majumdar, 17)." As Fukuyama points out that the strong desire to get recognition drives us in search of identity it can be further elaborated that this search is what drives us to identify a home. The recognition and acceptance of their dignity is precisely what Ammi and Karim discuss when they talk about the inheritance. Identity is the sum of what one inherits from the social set up and the cultural connotations of the place to which one belongs. The place where one is able to get recognized for what she/he actually is, i.e., the inherited self, that truly is the desired home. In scene ten of the play, Majumdar pens down this idea of home through multiple examples like. 'The inheritance of glass', 'The inheritance of colour', 'the inheritance of tales', 'Inheritance of songs', 'The inheritance of laughter' so on and so forth. Throughout these examples one can easily identify the idea of home to the idea of recognition and sense of acceptance of one's own culture and practices. It is also to be observed that for Karim the examples arise out of the mother's life and he talks of 'the inheritance of our mother's hobbies, and making them our own', 'the inheritance of our mother's stories, and making them our own', 'the inheritance of our mother's history, and making it our own', 'Inheritance of picture' so on and so forth. This implies a very pertinent point that his identity is somewhere and somehow connected to that of his mother's identity. It is not only about him but also about what he inherits from his mother as a legacy. He concludes by saying that he inherited the brown eyes of his mother but not the vision:

We inherited her brown sight
But couldn't make it our own
We inherited her London
And made it our own (Majumdar, 39)

Ammi informs that Karim and Firoza are unaware of Indians and Pakistanis. They identify themselves with one identity of a city where they are i.e., the Londoners, "Firoza and Karim, our children ... the don't know Indians. They don't know Pakistanis either. They are Londoners. I wonder what home is to them (Majumdar, 26)." While, for Ammi the identity is only entwined with her past on the other hand for Karim the identity gets extended and his past and present both form an integral part in shaping his identity. This is precisely what the idea of having multiple identities is about. Towards the end of the play Ammi realizes that the past has to be left to grab what the present has to offer. From a rigid idea of getting recognized by clutching the past, she gradually proceeds to the idea of looking forward to future. She says:

Home is where hairstyles change
Where grownups find,
Their children old-fashioned
Home ...
Home is where Anwar sahab wears a blue hat
Where Firoza's scarf becomes a relic of our times ...
Home is where eyes don't see
But children grow up to show
All that there's left
Home ...
Home is where on a single street
One discovers the meaning of home
Home is where
We return everyday
To love, to crib, to sell. (Majumdar, 45)

The play also highlights the idea of co-existence without the distinction of superior or inferior. Somewhere Rehaan considers Pakistan not fit for survival yet that's not a license to the idea of accepting the superiority of Britain. The idea of nationalism is entwined in the play with instances where the characters, although not appearing to be nationalists, support the nationalist views of connecting with the identity of a nation. Francis Fukuyama (2018) writes:

Human beings are intensely social creatures whose emotional inclinations drive them to want to conform to the norms surrounding them. When a stable, shared moral horizon disappears and is replaced by a cacophony of competing value systems, the vast majority of people do not rejoice at their newfound freedom of choice. Rather, they feel an intense insecurity and alienation because they do not know who their true self is. This crisis of identity leads in an opposite direction from expressive individualism, to the search for a common identity that will rebind the individual to a social group and reestablish a clear moral horizon. This psychological fact lays the groundwork for nationalism (56)

It will be apt to sum up the play as one of the important texts to understand the identity crisis which a non-native goes through in a country which has been a colonizer. It will be difficult for the people to shrug off the sense of awe which they feel by looking at the opportunities which the alien land provides. At the same time the way they despise the country for being their colonizer once cannot be overlooked also. It is fascinating and despicable at the same time. History, colonialism, repercussions of colonialism, idea of post-modern identity, being free from the clutches of colonial past are some of the hues which Majumdar uses to paint a city life at Harlesden High Street and calling it a home. Habib (2005) quotes Young about the cultural impact of colonialism in the following words:

Postcolonial criticism has embraced a number of aims: most fundamentally, to reexamine the history of colonialism from the perspective of the colonized; to determine the economic, political, and cultural impact of colonialism on both the colonized peoples and the colonizing powers; to analyze the process of decolonization; and above all, to participate in the goals of political liberation, which includes equal access to material resources, the contestation of forms of domination, and the articulation of political and cultural identities (Young, 11, 739).

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