



Reimagining Home: Reading Images of Homeland in Select Asian Diasporic Fiction



A.K. Mohamed Ali

Asst. Professor of English

*The New College (Autonomous),
Chennai – 14.*

Abstract

One of the most delineating aspects of diasporic fiction in general, and fictional works by Asian writers in Diaspora in places like United States and Australia in particular, is the recurrent images and recreation of the writer's homeland. The portrayals of homeland often appear as the writers imagined visitations to their own past, and thus imply nostalgia and sense of loss. Asian diasporic writers' recreation of home, particularly with a juxtaposing of the opposite situation in the host society, can also be looked at as attempts to define their identities. The images of homeland sometimes assume proactive as well as negative dimensions depending on the ethnicity and cultural identity of the writer or narrator. For instance, representations of homeland by writers from countries like Sri Lanka and Pakistan present the situations back home, like civil war, disruption of peace by terrorism and other issues, the treatment meted out to minorities in such countries, and so forth that promulgated people to leave their country, and that prevents them from repatriating themselves back home. These complex issues pertaining to images of homeland can be seen evocatively depicted in "We are not in Pakistan", the title story from *We are not in Pakistan* (2011) by Indo-American writer, Shauna Singh Baldwin, and two novels of Sri Lankan-Australian novelist Chandani Lokuge, *Turtle Nest* (2003) and *If the Moon Smiled* (2000). The images of homeland found in these works and many others, are seemingly representative of the centrality of home in diasporic fictional works.



Nostalgic recollection of home is one the most striking features of Asian diasporic fictional writings. The irresistible urge to reconstruct or recreate home in imagination in diasporic writings by Asian writers is often expressed in the form of angst of individuals missing their homes, the images stereotypes of the nation lingering in the minds of expatriate people, the political, cultural and ethnic issues disturbing their homeland, and so forth. The imaginary visitations of the past that the individuals in Diaspora experience are seemingly caused by their sense of displacement and loss. As Salman Rushdie explains elsewhere,

... 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, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind (76).

Rushdie's statement explains the significance of 'nostalgic looking back' for a diasporic writer. Thus diasporic recreations of home, particularly with a juxtaposing of the opposite situation in the host society, can also be looked at as attempts to define identities. The images of homeland sometimes assume proactive as well as negative dimensions depending on the ethnicity of the writer or narrator, cultural identity, and sense of belonging. While writers representing minority communities (in the homeland) weave the negativities revolving against their nation, others admittedly ask disturbing questions about their national consciousness. There are also instances in diasporic writings where comparison is made between home and the host country with emphasis on the treatment meted out to diasporic communities in the host cultures. This paper attempts to bring out the images of homeland as delineated in select writers of South Asian Diaspora. It is also to be noted that the images of homeland that appear in diasporic fictional works are sometimes presented



as broken images, without any, apparently, indicating how fragmented the idea of home is in the mind of the diasporic subjectivities. As Rushdie has noted, “it may be that when the Indian writer who writes from outside India tries to reflect that world, he is obliged to deal in broken mirrors, some of whose fragments have been irretrievably lost” (76). The works under scrutiny in this paper include title story in the collection “We are not in Pakistan” by Shauna Singh Baldwin, *Turtle Nest* and *If the Moon Smiled* by Chandani Lokuge.

In the story, “We are not in Pakistan” the protagonist, Miriam, belonging to a minority Christian immigrant community from Pakistan in the United States in the USA, is obsessed with the people who are sent back home as they have entered the country illegally. This almost gives the impression that Miriam has also entered the country in this manner. While emphasising the turning away of some individuals from their homelands, the author here is arguably trying to understand how such people are linked to their homelands. Miriam, who mysteriously disappears in the end of the story, can be looked at an emblematic figure who is nostalgically longing for her native land, despite leaving a country in which her tribe was a minority under the threat of assimilation. In one of her nostalgic remembering of her homeland, remarks to Kathleen, her granddaughter: “If this were Pakistan, Kathleen,” Grandma says, “whole families would be living under that bridge, would have been living there for years and years” (133). Merely crossing a flyover results in the grandmother thinking about her homeland. In another instance we are told:

Without Grandma’s world hanging its stinking sandals about her family’s necks, Kathleen’s mom wouldn’t have been born in Pakistan or have a name like Safia. And mom wouldn’t have jabbered in Urdu every Sunday on the phone with Grandma. Mom wouldn’t have “needed” Pakistani food all the time, so dad wouldn’t have complained endlessly about heartburn (135).

This shows the centrality of the homeland in the lives of these immigrants who are unable to shake off the images of their native home despite living in another country for quite a few years. Another character, Safia, is likewise disposed towards the homeland. But Kathleen,



the granddaughter of Miriam, is not disposed kindly regarding the birthplace of her kith and kin. Kathleen has a strong dislike for Pakistan. Ironically, in her physical appearance, Kathleen reminds one of her Pakistani roots as she resembles her grandmother: "Without Grandma Miriam, Kathleen wouldn't have long black hair and a too-prominent 'Pakistani nose'. And she wouldn't get so mocha-toned in summer that her skin got out of sync with her hazel eyes" (136).

Miriam and Kathleen would often have disputes about the place of the homeland in their lives. For the older woman, even the present is situated through the past that is Pakistan.

Our family, says Grandma Miriam so low Kathleen can't be sure she hears. We had to leave, Slowly, gradually, each of us realized we had no future there. I went first by marrying your grandpa, but then my brother and sister came away too. People in Pakistan didn't want us, Kathleen. We're Christians. (140-41).

The fact is that Miriam who loves Pakistan and constantly dreams of her homeland while living in her country of exile is actually a Christian. However, in every cultural aspect, she is like any Muslim. This postulates an important element in Diasporic writings that cultural identity is even more dominant than a religious one. For Miriam, Pakistan and its culture are more central than her fact that she is a Christian. She identifies herself more like a Pakistani Muslim than as a (now) Westernized Christian. The background of Miriam is disclosed when Kathleen reminiscences that:

Heard all about it. Grandma's mother was Catholic, born in Iran, Grandma's father was an Anglo, a mixed breed left behind when the British washed their hands off India and Pakistan. He saw Grandma's mother at the Lahore Gymkhana Club and converted from Anglican to Catholic so he could marry her, Grandma got born, grew up in Lahore, a city in India that somehow got itself moved to Pakistan. (146)



Kathleen, however, is more culturally at home in her country of migration. In one instance, she says: "If I need help, I'll call 911 when we get home," says Kathleen. "I can do that – we're not in Pakistan" (145). Grandma Miriam's obsession with her homeland is so keen that Kathleen imagines her boarding a plane to Pakistan: "Kathleen is imagining Grandma boarding a plane to Pakistan right now with her brother, both 'voluntary departures'.... Kathleen said, 'If you like Pakistan so much, why did you leave?'" (150). This is an apparently innocuous, may be, even a sarcastic comment but spectacularly captures the core of all diasporic movements of individuals: "if they are in so much love with their homelands, why leave in the first place?" (150).

The way both Grandpa and Grandma of Kathleen recreate their homeland is distinctively presented by the novelist. While Grandpa is completely cut off from his past, emotionally, Grandma often enlivens her memories of homeland. While Grandma blames the US for spoiling Pakistan by funding Taliban and by bringing a puppet of US as the President of the country, Grandpa is not ready to subscribe to such allegations: "The CIA's funding the Taliban ("didn't" said Dad, "did" said Mom), whether General Musharraf was President Bush's puppet ("is" said Mom, "is not" said Dad)" (135).

The image of Pakistan as presented in the story gives one the impression that it is easy for a Pakistani to be caught anytime by the law-enforcing agencies in the US. In fact, the novelist presents that the status of immigrants in the US depends on the country of their origin. This situation is presented in a way as it has become intense after the 9/11 incidents, that, in the post 9/11 scenario it has become more difficult for people from countries like Pakistan to survive peacefully in America. While exploring the possible reasons for Grandma, Miriam's sudden disappearance without any trace, Terry, her husband thinks that "...may be someone in the military thinks that she's a sleeper" and he explains that a sleeper "is someone who lives here a long time and gets activated by orders from somewhere overseas. A terrorist" (155-156). The sole reason for him to think so is the fact



that his wife's country of origin is Pakistan. Safia's fears are even worse: "She could be wearing an orange jumpsuit along with the 9/11 detainees and the Afghan POWs at Guantanamo, and we wouldn't know" (156). Safia thinks that even making a call to Grandma's Pakistani friends is dangerous as there is a possibility that FBI taps the call and may include her to the list of suspected immigrants. Thus the image of home as presented in this story relies on the popular notion of Pakistan as a breeding ground for terrorism and a place where lawlessness prevail.

Thoughts and recollections of home sometimes give some of the diasporic subjectivities nightmarish fears and apprehensions as well, particularly in cases where a civil war or other forms of unrest is the order of the day. Writers from Sri Lanka in general have expressed their angst on the devastations caused by the long-drawn civil war in their homeland and the possible damages that war brought to the institutions of their land. In *If the Moon Smiled*, for instance, Chandani Lokuge makes Mahendra, husband of the protagonist, Manthri, reflect on the haphazard state of education in their country:

Education has gone to the dogs in Sri Lanka. There is no discipline. Schools and universities are closed most of the time. Terrorists everywhere. Landmines in Jaffna. Suicide bombers in Colombo. People dying like flies. What's the use of talking about it? You must be getting all the news from there.....no? (56).

Mahendra and Manthri who belong to the Sri Lankan Buddhist community in Australia are not in a position to come back owing to the persistence of the civil war. It is apparent that their dream of coming back home is thwarted by the thoughts of the ongoing war. They thus feel that, even if the situation becomes better, it will take a long time for the normalcy to be reestablished and educational institutions to start functioning normally. They are also worried that it is not safe to repatriate their children to their homeland, as they may be forcefully inducted for army service, and may subsequently get killed in the civil war. Considering the option to return to Sri Lanka, Mantri details the risks involved in this plan:



Children as young as eighteen are enlisting in the army. Someone is showing around The Island newspaper. I look in on graphic photographs of the headless corpse of suicide bomber. Shredded limbs hang from trees. A village child stares wild-eyed at the severed head of her father. We are fortunate to be out of that bloody mess, Mahendra says loudly. Let us count our blessings. No one agrees or disagrees (68).

However, some of these individuals empathize with the predicament of their country, although they feel that they saved their lives by fleeing from the war, and are ready to do their part to alleviate the pain of those thrown in the war-torn country by giving away clothes, medical equipments and donations for the needy. According to Anway Mukhopadhyay,

The expatriates live in Australia, away from the violence and political madness of Sri Lanka, away from the terrorists and suicide bombers, secure in their diasporic existence. And yet, the news bombards them with images of violence – narratives of dismemberment (both literal and figurative) travel into their homes from abroad. (6)

The longing to come back home still recurs in the minds of the migrant people, despite the thoughts of devastations taking place, as they often are reminded of the beauty and charm of the lives they have left behind in their homeland. Thus, there are occasions when they become nostalgic of the vicissitudes of rural life and landscape, paddy fields, pristine purity of nature, family ties and so forth. In one of her reminiscences Mantri recreates her past thus: “At home the paddy would be ripe for harvest now, and my mother would be getting the loft cleaned for sacks and sacks of grain. There would be a smile on my father’s face. The smile warms my memory” (74). This indicates the desperate conditions that force the migrant community to stay away from their homelands, and draws one’s attention to the fact that people normally do not permanently leave their country for fun, that even if they go they aim to get back after some time. The forced stay in foreign lands, in the case of many, however, prolongs uncontrollably in spite of their longing to get back home, owing to



factors that are beyond the control of the individuals. Thus viewed, it is very late for many of them to return, as their stay away cut them almost completely off their roots, language and culture. Devake, son of Mahendra and Manthri, in *If the Moon Smiled* “tells Lal that he would like to return to Sri Lanka, but that it’s too late now. He doesn’t know the language, and what would he go back to anyway? All his friends are here. He looks around as if he can see them all, loitering here and there, waiting for him to join them (93). When they understand that it is difficult to return, they recreate homes in their memories, by engaging in activities that would remind of their national cultures. Mahendra in the novel often listens to Sinhalese songs in cassette player, and the music of his land makes him crave for home. In one occasion Mahendra asks his daughter Nelum to listen to the Sinhalese songs that he listens, knowing well that she would not understand the language clearly, to make her aware of their cultural identity. Songs in Sinhalese for him songs of home: ‘Listen; listen to the song, duwa, ‘he says to her in Sinhalese. ‘He is singing about Sri Lanka. Listen, Nelum. He is singing of home.’ (103).

Trapped between the thoughts and desires to be at home, and stark realities of the inability to go back because of the ongoing war, the Sri Lankan community in Australia presented in *If the Moon Smiled* lives their lives in the imagined nation that fades away slowly. As in an absurd play, they decide to go back home and realises that they are unable to go.

‘I’m going home, Mahendra. I can’t live in this country anymore,’ Mum would say. ‘This is your home, surely, Manthri. What are you talking about?’ Dad would sneer.

‘I’m leaving home, for a while, Mahendra,’ Mum would say. (131)

In another occasion Nelum asks her mother who expressed her desires to get back home: “Must you go now, Mum, when bombs are exploding all over the country?” (149). In spite of the dissuading words, Mantri comes back to Sri Lanka to visit, unable to miss home for long, though she did not receive the welcome she anticipated. Returners, she found, were looked at with suspicion. Mantri could understand this change in their approach to people flying into Sri Lanka on their way home. The taxi in which they travelled was checked



completely by the army personnel, and Mantri could clearly recognize the hostility and mocking manners displayed by the army officers, as if it is a crime to return to one's native land: "We stand back as the officer digs into the case, around the edges. He holds up a bottle of perfume and a bag of chocolates. He leers back at me, hostile and mocking, as if I had no business to return home for a holiday. I have not the courage to confront his accusations. I look down at the road" (154). The experience made her father mutter, "It is a good thing you went away with the children. The tigers are eating us alive" (155). Reaching home what disturbed Mantri is the change in attitude of her people, that, instead of giving attention to her presence, they are more concerned about war and their fate. The old images of her homeland that lurked in her mind, that made her come on visit thus faded away in the stark realities that witnessed. She realized that "[e]very family has sacrificed someone close. Then they remember to ask me about my life and family in Australia. Nothing I say seems to register. Everything I say sounds trivial and bland, even to me. So, they turn back to the war. And to fate (156). The reality that welcomed her at home and the images that kept coming to her mind of Sri Lanka thus has changed utterly. She presents this complex situation thus: "Nothing has changed, everything has changed. Soldiers swarm like flies. People go about their business, hurriedly, as if to meet a deadline. We are searched humiliatingly at the entrance. 'They are only doing their job,' my mother says" (157).

In Chandani Lokuge's *Turtle Nest Aarunai*, an expatriate Australian comes back to Sri Lanka in search of her home as she was not able to identify herself with the acquired Australian identity. She suffers from a kind of uneasiness, apparently owing to her skin colour and other ethnic features that she got from her Sri Lankan parents. Therefore, unable to come to terms with the paradox of living an Australian life while being ethnically attached to Sri Lanka, she longs to get repatriated in her homeland in search of her mother's roots. As in the case of all returners, she is exposed to the changed face of her land and the hostilities it can offer her. Standing on the beach, she presents her situation in an evocative manner:



These my people, she thinks, digging her feet into the sand as far as they will go, her arms closing around herself in embrace – this my land, my home. But the water rushes in. It sucks away the sand around her feet and withdraws, leaving them uprooted, defenceless. She kicks at the sand aimlessly. She looks back (9).

The water that rushes in sucking away the soil beneath her feet understandably represents the way she experiences rootlessness and isolation in her homeland, making her think that she can escape from this sense of loneliness only if she goes back to Australia.

Thus, the images of homeland as presented in the afore-mentioned novels reveal the centrality of home in the minds of the diasporic communities. While the negativity revolving around their nation makes them fear to return, the good times and greener pictures of their lands recurring in the minds make them aspire to go back, often to face the stark reality of the changed times and hostile approach of their people. Trapped in between these conditions these communities spend their lives, most often, without realising the dream of getting back home to live rest of their lives.

Works Cited

- Baldwin, Shauna Singh. "We are not in Pakistan." *We are not in Pakistan*. New Delhi: Penguin, 2011. Print.
- Lakuge, Chandani. *If the Moon Smiled*. New Delhi: Penguin, 2000. Print.
- Lakuge, Chandani. *The Turtle Nest*. New Delhi: Penguin, 2003. Print.
- Mukhopadhyay, Anway. "If the Moon Smiles on the Mappers of Madness: A Critique of the Cartographers of Insanity in Chandani Lokugé's *If the Moon Smiled*." *Transnational Literature*. 5.2 (May 2013). 1-12. Web. fhrc.flinders.edu. nd. 01 September 2015.
- Rushdie, Salman. *The Eye of the Beholder: Indian Writing in English* ed. Maggie Butcher. London: Commonwealth Institute, 1983. Print.