

Perplexing Homecoming in Robert Frost's "The Death of the Hired Man" and Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*

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Abstract

*Defining home is problematic as it is impossible to give a single statement about what it is. The recurring ideas of home are as a fixed place or a dwelling where the family members live, a place constituted of one's memories or somewhere/thing to go back to. Though closely related to our personal life the concept of home is deeply influenced by individual and social conditions. Because of different conditions the definition of home varies. This problem of definition is responsible for a strange confusion of homecoming. As it is difficult to say what it is, so going or coming there is the same thing or nothing. This paper focuses on this problem and it discusses the different handling of the meaning of 'home' in Robert Frost's "The Death of the Hired Man" and Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* to show that homecoming is perplexing in these two literary pieces.*

Keywords: House, family, memory, home, perplexing homecoming.

1. Introduction

Home is an unstable concept both in private and public sphere. The concept of home is a blurry one as different persons perceive it differently depending on different factors of their lives. To some it might be a place whereas to some it is a memory or memories which construct their concept of home. One thing which is common among all is the thirst to get back to that home and to have a claim over it and also it has a claim on one. In that sense, it is something that gets one and also one can get to. Then again this concept is related to one's love for freedom. Home is where one is free to do whatever s/he desires without any objection or obstruction and also being unjudged.

This study focuses on two literary works are from two different genres and also of two different time in history. "The Death of the Hired Man" by Robert Frost is a poem portraying a New England household and Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* is a postcolonial novel depicting two different major historical events World War II and Partition of Bengal. Both of these two works are similar at their portrayal of the search for home; a confusion of its meaning, intangibility of this concept resulting in a confusion of homecoming. Both include a search for home where people in them are questing a 'Home' for themselves to go/come back to.

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This paper begins by discussing the attempts to reach a definition of home in relation to these two literary pieces by relating it to the concepts of house and family as, these two are closely related to the ideas of home; and also make the concept of home confusing too. Next, it shows how one's idea of home is constructed by the memories of past and the sense of belonging in as found in the two aforementioned literary works. The last part, shows the perplexity created by the fluid concept of home in both *The Shadow Lines* and "The Death of the Hired Man" regarding "Homecoming".

The Shadow Lines is a novel of "search" (Mohan, 2013) for the lost time and space where lived the people who were very close to each other and related by blood. On the other hand, in "The Death of the Hired Man" by Robert Frost this quest is not for the people loved or related by blood or a place of birth. It is the quest for an acceptance into a place of duty where memories of activities give a sense of worth.

Coming or going is related to journeying and a journey requires a fixed point to reach. One starts a journey from "here" to reach "there" or returns back from "there" to "here". When the confusion is about what or which place is to be called as 'Home' the journey becomes "more [of] a one way affair rather than one full of possibilities of return to home (Mohapatra, 2006). The problem lies, as Mohapatra says, in the "peculiar interplay of 'here' and 'there' [that] makes the [concept of] "home" problematic and the narrative of home-coming questionable" (2006).

2. House, Family and Home

The words home and house are often used interchangeably in the sense that going home means going to a particular house which is the dwelling place of the goer. House gives concreteness to ones search of origin. House can be described as the physical presence of one's existence. In that sense home is the house or dwelling that a person lives after birth or their childhood family house. It is a specific place which creates an ordered relationship with its dweller (Dovey, 1985). The family might comprise extended family members and home might encompass the places where these extended family members reside. Home is a place but it is also a space inhabited by family, people, things and belongings – a familiar, if not comfortable space where particular activities and relationships are lived (Mallet, 2004).

This place carries the meaning and understanding of home, but a question remains about the location of this place. It exists not only between the walls of a house but also surpasses it. As Mallet says, "house and home are related but not conflated...The boundaries of home extend beyond [the] walls [of house] to the neighborhood... the suburb, town or city" (2004, p.63). People conduct their activities in all of these places and also build different relationships around these places. So, incorporating home with house as an inhabited place

of activities and lived experience thus becomes uncertain because house is not situated at any specific place.

House thus becomes an idea of a place that satisfies one's search of home. It is closely related to one's origin and existence. In that sense "Home" is the house or dwelling that a person lives and can control the behavior within it (Dovey, 1985). Home is a place or space of one's origin. But this house does not stay limited within a fixed territory rather it covers all the places one has inhabited or has been to. This proximity of space makes the conception of home problematic because this house is, as Dovey says, 'the combination of conceptual and lived space' (1985). So, home as 'where one usually lives' becomes theorized as the lived experience of locality (Ahmed, 1999).

Home as a dwelling place of one's family and the experience associated with the dwelling and the surroundings is very much evident in Tha'mma's story as she narrates her story to the narrator. Her life was spent in "a big joint family then, with everyone living and eating together: her grandparents, her parents, she and Mayadebi, her Jethamoshai—her father's elder brother—and his family, which included three cousins of roughly her own age, as well as a couple of spinster aunts. She remembered her grandfather..." (*Ghosh*, p134). She reminisces her house in Dhaka to the narrator and also, when she had to live in a one-room tenement in Bhowanipore. She would dream of "the old house, her parents, Jethamoshai [her uncle], her childhood" (*Ghosh*, p.138) in Dhaka.

Ancestral house and family might be synonymous with home (Bowlby et al, 1997) for some people, but to some the concept of family is also different. The very conception of family is elusive just like the meaning of home. Family as a group of people related by blood or marriage is a narrow definition. In "The Death of the Hired Man" a different disposition towards family is found when we see that, one can find the sense of family with people having no blood connection with him and also in a place where the relatives do not live in. In Robert Frost's "The Death of the Hired Man" the people whom Silas views as family more than any others are Mary and Warren, his employers. He attempts to find a sense of family fulfilling his duty and achieving satisfaction through hard work. He wants to "lay th[e]is farm as smooth!" (Frost, line 66) The farm becomes the embodiment of home and his employers become his family. He does not want to go to his brother for help even when he needs it most. He finds it shameful "claiming kin or anything" (Frost, line 142) from his brother though he doesn't feel any shame when he returned to the employers whom he deserted in their time of need. Home for Silas is somewhere which provides a place for an individual in society (Gilman, 1980 p.101) to be regarded worthy.

Mary also accepts him as a family member and also, she accepts him the way he is. Though, "Silas is what he is—we wouldn't mind him—" (Frost, line 147), Mary declares. But his relatives do not accept him the same way because he is "... just the kind that

kinsfolk can't abide.”(Frost, line 148) She considers that Silas “won't be made ashamed to please his brother, worthless though he is” (Frost, lines 151-152). She helps Silas not because he deserves it but because he needs it. In *The Shadow Lines* Jethamoshai, the only member left in Dhaka from Thamma's Family is looked after by a Muslim rickshaw-puller Khalil and his family. Together they also form a family whose basis is not their blood relation but love, care and compassion.

So, the incorporation of home with house and family is problematic. In Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* when the ancestral house that Tha'mma believes as her home is divided with a wooden wall it cannot separate the family members from each other. When Tha'mma learns about her Jethmoshai's whereabouts the sense of family pulls her back to Dhaka. She worries about her old uncle dying almost abandoned and alone in old age She says, “It doesn't matter we recognize each other or not. We're the same flesh, the same blood, the same bone, and now at last, after all these years, perhaps will be able to make amends for all that bitterness and hatred (Ghosh,p.142). It is clear that she cares for the ties of blood and is prepared to let go the bitter memories of family quarrels. The same conception of comes into conflict with her idea of country; home in a broader sense. She says, “to make a country... people forget they were born this or that, Muslim or Hindu, Bengali or Punjabi: They become a family born of the same pool of blood” (Ghosh, p.86). This very much reflects the fact that for some people the concept of home becomes a quarrel between where they come from and where the present condition places them and ‘thus [home] is not a particular place that one simply inhabits, but [becomes] more than one place. This multiplicity of a place makes it difficult identifying with home as there are too many homes to allow the place to secure the roots or routes of one's destination’ (Ahmed, 1999).

3. Memory and Home

Home is not merely a physical space because it also combines the concepts of feeling, attachment and imagination. Sentimental attachment and loyalty towards it play a vital role in constructing the definition of home. People's description of places is built on their memories and experience. Memory plays an important role in constructing the sense of home as it is a “confused search, a sentimental and nostalgic journey for a lost time and space” (Mallet, 2004) When thinking about home people do not just think about a place rather, they think about the things happening around that place. While thinking of home one does not think “merely of place or the physical aspect” rather they are realized “in terms of sites of lived experience and memory” (Roy, 2004). These memories of home are often nostalgic and sentimental, [but] home is not simply recalled or experienced (Mallet, 2004). It becomes something s/he has left and to which he must return to. These memories are their memories and also the collective memories of a community, a family or a nation. But those who have left or had to leave their places of birth to make homes elsewhere are familiar with the question, “Where do you come from?” Nostalgia, then, has little to do

with homesickness for a place; it's neither a longing for a lost place or a lost time, but is, rather, a homelessness in time [because] what we feel homesick for, that is, is not a place itself, but the unrecoverable moment of leaving that place (Hughes, 2006).

For a person who is away from home these memories are of the 'real' home, the very space from which one imagines oneself to have originated, and in which one projects the self as both homely and original, but at the same time this place is also 'the most unfamiliar [place] where one is a guest, relying on the hospitality of others'(Ahmed, 1999). This person recalls the memories associated with the lived space and when he tries to return to this home he tries to find familiarity with the things he remembers.

The Dhaka Tha'mma knew was made up of the localized surroundings of her ancestral home in Jindabhar Lane which had "long since vanished in the past" (Ghosh, p.215) When she lands in Dhaka airport she looks for the Dhaka she remembers. The first question she asks after seeing present surroundings is "Where's Dhaka? I can't see Dhaka" (Ghosh, p.215). This quest for pre-Partitioned Dhaka of her childhood is her nostalgic return home. The circumstances now make her realize that she has "no home but in memory" (Ghosh, p.216).

In "The Death of the Hired Man", Silas's home is also very much related to the memories he had in Mary and Warren's farm. When he returned to the farm, it was not just the place he returned to but to the memories of him doing chores around the farm. In Mary's word 'those days trouble Silas like a dream. /You wouldn't think they would. How some things linger' (Frost, lines 74-75). These lingering thoughts construct his definition of home. He came back to the 'home' to complete his unfulfilled duties because the memories torment him for not fulfilling his promise. In a demented condition he reminisces how he worked around the farm teamed up with Harold Wilson, a school boy who worked with him once. To him, this return to the farm is a way of making peace with the troubling memories which he believes is possible if "he could have another chance" (Frost, line 89).

4. Perplexing Homecoming

People desire to belong to home but being [at home] cannot be secured by any fixed notion of home or origin (Ahmed, 1999) and reaching a single definition of home is impossible. This ambiguity in definition of home gives rise to another perplexity. If the definition of home is uncertain then the concept of homecoming also becomes confusing. The word homecoming becomes questionable when the home is not understood as a certain place. In the narratives of leaving home there are too many homes and hence no home because in these narratives there exist too many places in which memories attach themselves and lose the possibility of finding any place in which memory can allow the past to reach the present (Ahmed, 1999)

Home is often described in the literature as a haven or refuge. The inside or enclosed

domain of the home represents a comfortable, secure and safe space the familiar place (Dovey, 1985) and to be at home this is important to feel that security and comfort. Home is that place of refuge which is very private, and familial and distinct from public space and removed from public exploration and watch (Mallet, 2004). But at the same time home involves encounters between those who stay in, those who arrive and those who leave from (Ahmed, 1999) from place because home is also made up of the interactions happening in the past. When the subject and the place leak into each other, then the sense of belonging is created.

Home as a comforting, familiar and safe place gives rise to another contrasting image of the places beyond home. When one is at home the places beyond the home becomes uncomfortable, unfamiliar and unsecured and one cannot belong there. The result is the peculiar interplay of “here” and “there” (Mohapatra, 2006). When someone comes from “there” and not from “here” or the “here” becomes “there” he belongs inside and outside the situation at the same time. The person is cut off from home but still connected to it through memories. This person becomes a stranger and is forced to engage in a never ending attempt to come in terms with “scattered historical inheritance and heterogeneous present” (Chambers, 2001). So, home as place of origin and home as the sensory world of everyday experience (Ahmed, 1999) both fail to answer the homecoming question.

In “The Death of the Hired Man” a major theme is that of this home and homecoming relationship. Mary and Warren argue over the definition of home and also whether Silas deserves to be accepted in the house. In Mary’s word Silas has returned ‘Home’ which when said by Warren sounds like a mockery. Both also argues over whether Silas should be taken in or not as they differ on the definition of home. Warren feels that home is the place ‘when you have to go there, / They have to take you in.’ (Frost, lines 122-123); however, Mary thinks that one should not have to deserve home. Mary wants to help Silas because he needs it, not because he deserves it. Warren does not believe that they owe anything to Silas and that they are not bound to help him. For Silas, he returned to the one place he had memories to attach with and also had some means of finding worth thinking it to be his home. He did not go to his brother because he didn’t find any attachment there. But, here also his worth is being debated. The definition of home as something “to deserve” is echoed in *The Shadow Lines* when Tha’mma questions Ila’s right to stay in England. She thinks, Ila has no right to live in there. In her words “Everyone who lives there has earned his right to be there with blood: with their brothers’ blood and their fathers’ blood and their sons’ blood.” (Ghosh, p.85).

Home as a place with boundaries that are fixed, such that homes become “pure, safe and comfortable” is impossible to find because home is “indeed elsewhere”; one never gets there, but is always getting there (Ahmed, 1999). In *The Shadow Lines* the two parts – “Going Away” (P.8-42) and “Coming Home” (p.115-252) – are used to refer to going and coming with

home as the central symbol, a place where one is born and brought up and is deeply attached to (Mohan,2013). This centrality helps to understand whether one is going or coming. But in the characters are constantly tormented by doubts as to whether the characters are going to Calcutta or coming to Calcutta or coming to Dhaka or going back to Dhaka because that place is elusive and so becomes the homecoming. In the narrator's words-

...in our family we don't know whether we are coming or going- it's all my grandmother's fault. But of course, the fault wasn't hers at all: it lay in language. Every language assumes a centrality, a fixed and settled point to go away from and come back to, and what my grandmother was looking for was a word for a journey which was not a coming or a going at all; a journey that was a search for precisely that fixed point which permits the proper use of verbs of movement. (Ghosh, p.169)

Home as a house also includes the movement of dwellers. One journeys away from a house and returns to it. So, home is the central point from where a journey begins or where one reaches after the journey ends. The meaning of home depends and varies from person to person depending on the situation under which this movement takes place.

When Tha'mma reaches post-partition Dhaka she faces this problem of definition. Dhaka once was her home as her house was there/ here. Tridib's teasing remark: "But you *are* a foreigner now, you're as foreign here as May – much more than May, for look at her, she doesn't even need a visa to come here" (Ghosh, p.227) points out this elusive nature of Tha'mma's homecoming, though she perceives her visit to Jindabahar Lane as her "homecoming". She emotionally declares that she has "come home at last" (Ghosh, p.230). But the purpose with which she reached Dhaka is quite contradictory with this nostalgic return and emotional remark as she is there to bring Jethamoshai back to "where he belonged, to her invented country" (Ghosh, p.151). So, she has come back to home to bring the remaining family back to home. Then, which one is the home for her and which coming can be called 'homecoming'. For her the difference between here and there gets blurred.

In both "The Death of the Hired Man" and *The Shadow Lines* the homecoming ends with death. Silas fails to fulfil his promise to not to leave 'this time' and work in the farm though Mary finally convinced Warren to accept him in their home. On the other hand Tha'mma's "home" turns unhomely with the killing of Jethamoshai and Tridib in an attack by some frenzied rioters. If home is incorporated into the memories of the place then Tha'mma's place of birth and the ancestral house also becomes the city of the fanatic rioters and place where two of her family members die. This journey which she saw as a homecoming turns into the grimmest memory of her life. If home is understood as the safest place of refuge or where the memories of lived times are related to, then neither Silas nor Tha'mma reaches that place or attain that refuge. In both the narratives, the journey to home ends with tragic deaths and home becomes the place where 'one never gets...but is always getting' (Ahmed, 1999).

5. Conclusion

Most of the literature of home focuses only on the house but home may not be a place of settlement but a set of ideas, practices and memories that accompany the dweller while [away] (Avery, 2014). This is not necessarily an ancestral home but it may embody the idea in any number of ways and localities. It may cover the life of a neighborhood or the history of a house. Home is an interconnected and porous territory that covers a wide range of locations, connections, imaginaries and social relations (Avery, 2014). As Dowling and Blunt argues, “home is multi-scalar”(2006). As a result it becomes impossible to find a common ground to decide a single definition of home.

Both Amitav Ghosh’s *The Shadow Lines* and Robert Frost’s “The Death of the Hired Man” discusses this problem of reaching to a single definition of home. Due to this problem the characters in both of the literary pieces get involved into a confusing journey of “homecoming” where the journey never actually reaches anywhere, rather the very concept of coming and going jumbles into the simultaneous process of coming/going.

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