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Homeland and Trauma: A Post-colonial Analysis of Trauma, Gendered Marginalisation, and Nation-building Discourses in Independent Bangladesh

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Abstract

This paper explores the complex relationship between homeland and trauma, emphasising the transformative impact of individual and collective traumas on our conceptualization of home. This study examines the impact of nation-building on individuals who have undergone trauma, as portrayed via the narratives of women and fictional characters. It sheds light on the complicity of the state in intensifying the distress experienced by those who have been traumatised. This study sheds light on the challenges and complexities surrounding the notion of homeland in the context of social trauma, with a particular focus on the critical role of gender and agency in shaping national identities. Primary sources such as "Ekattorer dinguli," "Nindito Nandan," "Chitra Nadir paarey," and the documentary "1971" are utilised to support this analysis.

The desire for a place to call one's own, also referred to as a homeland, is an inherent and essential element of human identity. This attitude is deeply rooted inside individuals and surpasses divisions based on politics, society, and culture. The persistent yearning for a place to call one's own persists as an unwavering and timeless ideal, symbolising the innate human craving for interpersonal bonds, communal ties, and a sense of affiliation. However, historical evidence has demonstrated that the fulfilment of this desire is frequently accompanied by difficulties and impediments. The impediments of political fragmentation, physical limitations, and social ostracism can collectively impede the establishment of a homeland, so compelling individuals and groups to confront an elusive notion of home.

Keywords- Homeland, partition, belonging, violence, 1971 Bangladesh war, *Birangana*.

Introduction

Is it lack of imagination that makes us come
to imagined places, not just stay at home?
Or could Pascal have been not entirely right
about just sitting quietly in one's room?

Continent, city, country, society:
the choice is never wide and never free.
And here, or there... No. Should we have stayed at home,
wherever that may be?

The questions of travel written by Elizabeth Bishop, albeit seated in a different context, with lesser urgency and unequitable unrest poses one of the fundamental questions that has

perpetually pandered the ethos of soul. Where, what and whom do we call our homes? Is it an entity that has secured within us a profound sense of safety, warmth and belonging or is it an attribute that is entirely discernible, defined and redefined by the paraphernalia of the state and the ever altering events of history. What exactly then constitutes our homelands? How do we define this perpetual longing for a land, shreds of which have left us tethered to the bits and for securing which we can agreeably die, over and over again?

This paper delves into the intricate interplay between homeland and trauma, highlighting how personal and communal traumas can reshape our understanding of what a home means. Through the narratives of women and characters who have experienced the trauma of nation-building, it reveals the state's role in exacerbating the suffering of those who have been traumatised. By drawing from primary sources, including “Ekattorer dinguli”, “Nindito Nandan”, “Chitra Nadir paarey and the documentary “1971” this study brings to light the challenges and complexities of the concept of homeland in the face of social trauma, emphasising the critical role of gender and agency in shaping national identities.

The yearning for a homeland is a fundamental aspect of human identity, a deeply ingrained sentiment that transcends political, social, and cultural boundaries. Longing for a homeland remains a constant, an enduring aspiration that reflects the deeply rooted human desire for connection, community, and belonging. Yet, as history has shown, the realisation of this longing is often fraught with challenges and obstacles. Political fragmentation, geographical barriers, and social ostracism can all conspire to thwart the creation of a homeland, leaving individuals and communities to grapple with an idea of home that is forever out of reach.

Moreover, the trauma of war, violence, and oppression can have a profound and lasting impact on the human psyche, eroding the very foundations of identity and belonging that a homeland is meant to provide. In the aftermath of such trauma, the very idea of a homeland can become distorted, a source of pain and alienation rather than comfort and familiarity. This is particularly evident in the case of the *biranganas*, refugees and people who could stay back in their countries but were alienated to the point that belonging was no longer a spatial concept for them.

“Jaader ghor nei, tara duniyar hotobhaga” (The ones without a home, are the most unfortunate ones) in the movie “Chitra nadir paarey” the poignant self expression, sense of one’s belonging to the root and an indomitable desire to stay back has been vividly etched by the protagonist lawyer Shashanka Sengupto. Statements that posed apparent queries and decisive conclusions marked the old Hindu settlers as people who would naturally be wanting to migrate to kolkata, “Torao toh kolkata chole jabi, torao toh Hindu.” The idea of homeland was therefore socially contested where there were predetermined markers for who can assert which one is his homeland.

This serenity and unity of the opening scene was soon countered by conversations from immigrating neighbours whose incessant departures and queries regarding Shashanka's immigration was leaving him unsettled. Although this fractional unsettlement was countered by a firm statement citing "Ei chitra nadir paar chhere sworgeo sukh nei amar " yet the fear of displacement and local unrest was looming tall on the agitated neighbourhood of Narail. The protagonist could sense an air of his non-Hindu neighbours wanting him to leave. Sense of alienation emerged and fortified as old neighbours made queries and demands on properties instead of people. People of different religions hitherto co-existing albeit differences certainly came to terms and even harboured the fact that coexistence was no longer inevitable.

Somewhere religious tensions and its impending dooms instilled people to uproot themselves before it all came falling. The alarming message stating "Jaader tarate chay, taader barite dheel pore" (tr. They pelt stones at the houses of the ones they want to evict) instil a sense of uncertainty, violence and horror in one's own homeland and bring in a sense of alienation, somewhere knowing that these pelters were perhaps once their neighbours. The movie ends with Minati, Shashanka's daughter heartbreakingly leaving with her aunt for Kolkata. Having lost her partner and father and perhaps also, the reason and sense of security to be at "home" she leaves to start off with a different set of promises altogether. Homeland therefore became a negotiable, transferable entity that no longer served the warmth and security it had once promised to.

Madelaine Hron in her work, "The trauma of displacement" cites that exile is no longer a singular phenomenon that it once was. Since the first world war, one in 120 people has been forced to migrate. However the trauma of displacement is a largely undiscerned area and the sufferings remain painfully difficult to communicate. The displacement of individuals and communities, particularly in the context of forced migration and refugee experiences, raises questions about the extent to which such disruptions can result in traumatic outcomes. As a result, home becomes a thing of perpetual longing and agony, an idea or construct that provides a sense of peace and nostalgia but one that can never be returned to.

In 1971 Bangladesh, the notion of homeland did not singularly stand on the premises of being minority or majority. As religion wasn't the singular marker for sparing or assassinating lives. It was an intersectional identity of race, religion, intellectual acclaim and gender that determined the extent to which one can be harrowed. Particularly reinforcing these intersections are the accounts of Jahanara Imam, in her work "Ekattorer Dinguli".

Despite coming from a religiously majoritarian background, Imam's association with the liberation movement in various capacities led her to experience unsettlement, trauma and loss. The uncertainties and looming trauma of mass killings, repeated bombing, curfew and a

war like situation overlapped with the musings of a lonely, worried and relentless mother who is eternally conflicted between choosing the life of her child and choosing the freedom of her homeland. This conflict is best versed when she uttered the lines by Jibananda Das favourite to her son “Abar ashibo phire, dhaan shiritir teerey ei banglay” that ricocheted with a sharp pang of wanting to see her son again “Photota stand e lagiye anek-khon dariye roilam, kotodin dekhini oi priyomukh, ei ki chilo bidhilipi? Rumi tumi ki keboli chhobi hoye roibe amar jibone.” These uncertainties were fortified by a tragic foreboding that insinuated that Rumi had been captured and later revealed to be persecuted by his capturers. On Rumi’s death, and acceptance of the fact that freedom comes with a mercilessly high yet indispensable price she sends Jami, her other son as a bodyguard to the major. It is worth contemplating what extent of attachment to the homeland could motivate a mother to willingly offer her son’s life for the sake of freedom. Better still what entails the notion of freedom in the face of loss and chaos.

Homeland could be discerned as an entity, the sense of belonging for which is so strong that even the dearest of lives appears to be dispensable. It is a source of both belonging and conflict. But what negotiations with the idea of a homeland do such deaths entail? The shift in paradigm from an entity of peace and belonging to the unit whose protection required steep sacrifices, homeland appeared as a space that grants uncertainties. It leaves one unsettled and often brings one at the threshold of negotiating between how much to partake and what is the worth of not partaking.

When dialogues between the state during a war and the female entity resurges, womens’ bodies have been historically used as battlegrounds. Rapes have been used as war weapons. Sometimes to assert dominance over a losing country, sometimes simply to gain vengeance from a defeat. Ferdaus Priyabhashini in her interview in the documentary 1971 reflects that

“ More than physical urge it was perhaps the grudge that prevailed. Their grudge against Bengalees raised especially as they were losing during the end. There was no mercy, only brutal killing and raping. (As if they wanted to assert that) You’ll never get Bangladesh. When we leave we’ll kill all and scorch the earth. We will build a new Pakistani land here.” What followed thereafter was a harrowing torture for nine months from barracks to cantonments. Unfortunately, such narratives have recurred through lands of Kushtiya and other targeted areas where ethnic cleansing was also an agenda. On being asked to account for rapes in certain cantonment areas, General Niazi boastfully replied “ I ask the soldiers what was you last night’s harvest?”

These attest to the fact that women were used as tools and impregnated to procreate war children whose religious and ethnic identities would be shared by the predators. Nation building narratives that were mostly scribed from the male perspectives determine them as warriors for the nation, however one could wonder how far such homogeneity is reductant to

the trauma they have faced, specifically in the south Asian context where rape victims are perpetually stigmatised.

Such intense, prolonged personal trauma, should necessitate a space where the survivors can choose to narrate their lives, in whichever way they want, thereby letting them to claim their agency.

The title *birangana* conferred by Sheikh Mujibar Rehman to commemorate their sacrifices and include them in mainstream society needs examination over how far has this been homogenised in the nation building process. National identities are constructed according to the narratives built by nations but intense experiences of individual trauma collectively inflicted, should not be undermined in the nation building process.

The term homeland therefore inflicts a whirlwind of experiences for the survivors who stand on the threshold of alienation and ostracization. They had considered this battle to be as much theirs as it had belonged to any other freedom fighter. In the documentary 1971, a survivor was recorded on camera saying “ I have never received a husband's love, never heard a son's “mother” call, The Razakars are becoming rich and we are as miserable as we were, yet we will not forget. As long as a single drop of blood is there in our body, we won't forget the flag of liberation.”

In such a context, the idea of a unified notion of homeland can seem far-fetched. How can we reconcile the conflicting claims of different experiences to the same land? How can we address the wounds of history and the scars of conflict without addressing its plurality? How can we create spaces of belonging and inclusion for those who have been marginalised and excluded in a land they had thought to be their own? The question of legitimacy arises when we confront the fact that homelands are not fixed, eternal, or natural entities. They are historical, social, and political constructs that emerge from complex processes of human interaction, imagination, and contestation. They are products of human agency and discourse, shaped by power relations, cultural norms, and ideological values. This requires us to move beyond the boundaries of our own identities and to build bridges of understanding and empathy across cultures and communities. It makes us ponder that perhaps, homelands are what we carry within ourselves and what we create from our experiences.

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