

Treatment of Memory and Nostalgia /

Partition and Displacement

in *Alam's own House*

In the introduction to the book *The Future of Nostalgia*, the author Svetlana Boym defines nostalgia as “a longing for a lost home that no longer exists or has ever existed. Nostalgia is a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one’s own fantasy.” The nostalgia for a lost space can be both romantic and painful and can be an anchor for the self as well.

Partition exhibits its ravages not just in terms of mass massacre and organic displacement but also in an estrangement of the human subject, creating numerous manifestations of homelessness and exile. Dibyendu Palit’s “Alam’s Own House” explores the dystopia that is often involved in possibilities of reconciliation with home and homeland. But it argues that the exiled subject can only return to the objective truth of a politically determined territory called homeland but not the subjective truth of home, which is founded on the personalized experiences of time and space.

In the context of Bengal Partition, nostalgia functions within the spatial-temporal constraints of refugee life and registers an imaginative utopia that is problematized in a series of Bengali short stories. Dibyendu Palit’s “Alam’s Own House” deal with the problematics of nostalgia. Here nostalgia gets a nuanced treatment in that the allure of a utopic lost home has nothing in common with the reality of the everyday. In this story dwelling on the theme of nostalgia and displacement, we encounter the problematics of memory leading to dehistoricization. They point out how the overwhelming kinetic push of nostalgia substitutes with its essentializing tactics the dynamic reality of post partition life resulting in a rupture between the protagonist’s static vision of past, one she continually juxtaposes next to the reality of the everyday, and the actual reality of the world that is.

In Dibyendu Palit’s “Alam’s Own House,” the protagonist cannot transplant his rootless cosmopolitanism, his estranged consciousness on his erstwhile home. ““Like everything else there, there’s also a time frame for returning. And once the point is past, there’s a feeling that it’s not going to happen” . Palit here ironically commemorates Alam’s homecoming to Kolkata which becomes a reverse mimesis of celebratory homecomings in popular culture. After a private exchange of property during the Partition, Alam’s father had left his family home to Anantashekhar and migrated to Dhaka. Alam stayed back with Anantashekhar’s family to finish his studies and during that time became particularly attached to his daughter Raka. Although Alam eventually migrated to Dhaka after his father’s death, he regularly exchanged letters with Raka. Raka gradually became the root of his longing for home, the nostos to his algia. Alam felt that if “her anatomy could have been analyzed, instead of her body, arms, legs and head, he would have seen graceful doors windows, stairs and attics!” .

To the romantic Alam, a journey back to Kolkata three years after he left it for Dhaka to attend a conference on friendship between divided nations therefore seemed incomplete without a visit to his natal home and a meeting with Raka. The journey back home is flooded with memories and saturated with nostalgia. Kolkata with its familiar localities of Park Circus, Maniktala, Narkeldanga, the Kathchampa (Plumria) tree at the gate of Alam's old house, the picture of Gandhiji in the old living room and the oil painting of the Battle of Plassey conspicuous by its absence all bear the imprints of Alam's nostalgia, only the spiritual foundation of his home has wandered.

As soon as Alam enters his old home and senses Raka's absence, he understands that his home has become an alternative space where he lives in an impersonal guest bedroom. Alam never meets Raka during his visit. A letter from her informs her of "a resistance" in her that prevents her from following her heart and has made her run away to Delhi during Alam's visit. The letter becomes a souvenir of the fragmented love life of Alam and Raka. He yearns for a precarious domesticity in Raka's home reminiscent of his pre-emigration pedestrian past and finds cynicism instead. "Certain lands are meant for certain roots only" . Alam realizes he has become deracinated. At the end of the story Alam recognizes that despite a shared culture and a memory of a shared home, he and Raka have become citizens of different nation-states whose difference instead of unity is reiterated in the organized seminar on amity between divided nations. The non-meeting of Raka and Alam symbolizes the intimacy of two nations chipped by estrangement.

Palit's story deals with the indecisive syntax of Alam's nostalgia. In the end, however, Alam finally outgrows the imagined domesticity of his home and realizes his own house has now become an estranged cultural space that resists absorption into an unremembered past when Alam assumed that he and Raka had no barriers between them because they had shared a home. In Alam's case, border crossing has unequivocally become a "transformative experience" that grafted his status as an exile.