



REPRESENTING HOME AS A SOCIO-POLITICAL METAPHOR IN SELECT NOVELS

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ABSTRACT

Home is probably one of the most recurring literary metaphors in novels. It is variously described in literature as conflated with or related to house, family, haven, self, gender and journeying and therefore, the ideas of home are multilayered. Naturally, one finds today a proliferation of writing on the meanings of home within the disciplines of sociology, anthropology, psychology, geography, history, architecture and philosophy. The images of home seem to be intrinsically 'chronotope' in the sense that they symbolize the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature. Home is thus no longer just a dwelling place; it subsumes the socio-political developments of the time and space when it is created in literature, as also the psychological, anthropological, sociological and other issues of humanity. The present paper is prompted by the premise that in the light of new cultural studies, home is portrayed in certain novels as an ideological construct reflecting the social, political, intellectual, moral and psychological climate of the time and place of the respective works. I have selected for my study five novels by writers of different ages, languages, cultures and worldviews: Charles Dickens's Bleak House, V.S. Naipaul's A House for Mr. Biswas, Toni Morrison's Home, Rabindranath Tagore's Home and the World and M.T.Vasudevan Nair's Naalukettu.

Keywords: Home, Ideology, Icon, World literature, Socio-political

Introduction

Home clearly serves as a repository for complex, inter-related and at times, contradictory socio-cultural ideas about people's relationship with one another, especially family, and with places, spaces and things. Many scholars have now recognized home as a multidimensional concept or a multi-layered phenomenon, and acknowledge the need for multidisciplinary research in the field. P. Saunders and P. Williams, the joint authors of "The Constitution of the Home: Towards a Research Agenda," observe that home is a major political background. They add that the feminists view it as a crucible of gender domination, while the liberals identify it with personal autonomy and challenge to state power. The socialists, on the other hand, approach home as a challenge to collective life and the ideal of a planned and egalitarian social order (91).

Craig Gurney, a sociologist, who believes that the worlds people inhabit are socially constructed, argues that home is an ideological construct that emerges through and is created from people's lived experience (375). Like Gurney, Somerville maintains that home is an ideological construct, but rejects the view that the meaning of home is only established



experientially. He writes that home is not just a matter of feelings and lived experience but also of cognition and intellectual construction. He continues that we cannot know what home 'really' is outside of these ideological structures (530). Wardhaugh, a phenomenologist, notes that while home may be located in space as a particular place, it is always more than this; it is physical space that is lived – a space that is an “expression of social meanings and identities” (95).

Saunders and Williams define home as “simultaneously and indivisibly a spatial and social unit of interaction.” It is the physical “setting through which basic forms of social relations and social institutions are constituted and reproduced” (82). As such, home is a ‘socio-spatial system’ that represents the fusion of the physical and social units. In this social constructionist formulation, home is “the crucible of the social system” (ibid 85) representing the vital interface between the society and individual.

Victorian home in Dickens' *Bleak House*

Home in Dickens's *Bleak House* seems to exemplify this concept. The novel indicts the inequities in Victorian society; it exposes the abuses of the court of Chancery and administrative incompetence. Also, Dickens criticizes slum housing, overcrowded urban graveyards, neglect of contagious diseases, election corruption, class divisions, and neglect of the educational needs of the poor. In short, one gets a picture of the Condition of England from the novel, and it is well represented by Bleak house, the house of Mr. Jarndyce, the elderly relative of Richard Carstone and Ada Clare – the central characters in the novel. In Chapter 6 titled ‘Quite at Home,’ Dickens gives a vivid picture of Bleak house. When Esther, Richard and Ada arrive at Bleak house, they have many chances to form first impressions of places and people. They first see Bleak House in a distance. It is an old-fashioned house with three peaks in the roof in front and a circular sweep leading to the porch. It is a delightfully irregular house with illuminated windows, softened here and there by shadows of curtains, shining out upon the straight night. However, it is pictured as a gloomy edifice, and like the fog in the novel, it symbolizes the institutional oppression which penetrates into the segment of Victorian society.

Postcolonial home in Naipaul's *a House for Mr. Biswas*

Wardhaugh asserts that the concept of home cannot exist without the concept of homelessness. Home and homelessness exist in a dynamic, dialectical relationship. They refer to “complex and shifting experiences and identities” (93) that emerge and unfold in and through time.

It is clear that in Postcolonial theory, home and homelessness are often linked with human identity crisis. The idea of home among diaspora communities is elaborated by Salman Rushdie in his essay “Imaginary Homelands.” In his view, the sense of loss for leaving home “is more concrete for him (a diaspora) by the physical fact of discontinuity, of his present being in a different place from his past, of his being ‘elsewhere’ (12). Home for a diaspora thus becomes primarily a mental construct built from the incomplete odds and ends of memory that survive from the past. It exists in a fractured, discontinuous relationship with



the present. Imagining home therefore brings fragmentation, discontinuity and displacement for the migrant.

Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas* perhaps subsumes all these postcolonial ideas of home. The primary theme of the novel is a search for a stable sense of personal identity, symbolized by the house for which Mr. Biswas is continually searching. Until he attains his own house, a firm structure with which he can work out his own destiny, he is a faceless man, adrift on the tides of life. Mr. Biswas worries frequently about falling into a void, an abyss where there is no form, no support for living. Throughout the novel, inner and outer realities reflect each other. His startling realization that he is not whole, for example, shortly precedes the destruction of his house. This is because of the metaphorical value that the house possesses, as the external embodiment of an internal problem. This again explains why the houses in which Mr. Biswas lives are described in intricate detail throughout the novel.

Memory home in Morrison's *Home*

Home as a thematic concern is visible across Morrison's novels including *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula*, and *Song of Solomon* and also *Beloved*, where the Kentucky plantation is paradoxically named 'Sweet Home.' In her 2012 novel *Home* too, Morrison unearths another layer to what a home means. Here, it is represented by a war veteran's struggle to search for a sense of belonging he can reconcile with. Frank Money, the protagonist, sets for a journey to another battlefield back in America, his home country he has been fighting for. Home does not end on a positive note as Cee, Frank's sister, touches her brother's shoulder and tells: "Come on, brother. Let's go home." Despite all odds and differences, there is indeed a home that is waiting for this pair of siblings to return to. Whatever home might be for Frank, it is not a place where war is absent, as he brings Korea along with him as he travels. If peace is thought of as an absence of war, it is a state that Morrison's character is unable to experience. War memories, psychological injury and loss have become a part of him that his wartime and peacetime selves have united. Home for him cannot be a place apart. It is better seen as an exploration of the limits of understanding and neither a place of restoration nor the place of broken dreams. Also, it is the place we look for understanding but can never find.

Home in *Home* is not a land (as in homeland), or a front (as in home front). It is tied to concrete physical spaces and to memories of their past meanings. At the same time, home is not a space of reunion. Instead, it is a place where individuals remain disconnected, able to see only the exterior of their most intimate human contacts. The siblings provide support for each other, but even at home, individuals do not fully know each other.

Morrison's concept of home in this novel can be connected to the idea of the birth family house which holds a symbolic power as a formative dwelling place, a place of origin and return, a place from which to embark upon a journey. This house or dwelling accommodates home, but home is not necessarily confined to this place. The boundaries of home seemingly extend beyond its walls to the neighborhood. Home is indeed a virtual place, a repository for memories of the lived spaces. It locates lived time and space, particularly intimate familial time and space. While memories of home are often nostalgic and



sentimental, home is not simply recalled or experienced in positive ways. Morrison's novel displays the symbolic potency of the ideal or idealized home. Tucker suggests that most people spend their lives in search of home, at the gap between the natural home and the particular ideal home where they would be fully fulfilled. This may be a confused search, a sentimental and nostalgic journey for a lost time and space. Tucker adds that it may also be a religious pilgrimage or a search for a Promised Land (184). Writing from a phenomenological perspective, Jackson observes that home is always lived as a relationship, a tension. Like any word we use to cover a particular field of experience, home always begets its own negation. It may evoke security in one context and seem confining in another (122-3).

Female home in Tagore's *Home and the World*

Tagore's novella *The Home and the World* deals with the experiences of three characters during the *Swadeshi* movement in India – Nikhilesh, a benevolent and progressive landlord, his childhood friend and a voluble, selfish but charismatic nationalist leader, Sandip, and Nikhilesh's wife Bimala. If the novella shows Tagore's disappointment with the *Swadeshi* movement, one of its most remarkable characteristics is his treatment of the feminine character, Bimala. She is happy at the outset in her traditional role as a zamindar's wife, but later encouraged by her husband she steps out of home to better acquaint herself with the world and thus to find a new identity for woman. At the sight of Sandip, she emotionally trips, vacillates between him and her husband, until she returns home bruised and humiliated, but with a more mature understanding of both the home/self and the world.

One can safely assume that in Tagore's novella home is a symbol of self, especially of Bimala, the heroine. In her article, "House, as a Symbol of the Self" Clare Cooper refers to the relation between home and identity and/or the concept of the self. She draws on the Jungian concept of the collective unconscious which link people to their primitive past. Accordingly she speculates that one of the most fundamental archetypes, the free-standing house on the ground, is a frequent symbol of the self (56). Tucker also suggests that home may be an expression of a person's subjectivity in the world. He states that home is a space where people feel at ease and also where they express and fulfill their unique selves or identities (184).

Bimala in *Home and the World* leaves home and returns with broader experiences of the world. To her, home is thus both origin and final destination. This concept of home in the novella can also be explained in the light of modern cultural studies and anthropological literature as well as sociological and psychological research on family formation and home-leaving which claim that ideas about staying, leaving and journeying are integrally associated with notions of home. 'Home,' which is defined as a dwelling, a homeland, or even a constellation of relationships, is represented as a spatial relational realm from which people venture into the world and to which they generally hope to return. It is a place of origin as well as a point of destination. For Ginsberg, home is less about "where you are from" and "more about where you are going" (35). This sentiment is also expressed by Tucker, who stresses that "home searching is a basic trait of human nature", one which arises out of the propensity of humans to migrate as a means of ensuring their survival (186).

**Transitional home in M.T.'s *Naalukettu***

The dissolution of *Naalukettu* the *taravadu*, the residential homes of prosperous Nair families which started in the middle of the 20th century in Kerala is the theme around which MT's *Naalukettu* revolves. MT admits that he witnessed the last stages of the crumbling of the matrilineal system of inheritance. The background of *Naalukettu* is, however, not solely that of his own family. There are characters from his neighborhood in it as well (Kakkattil 288). Properties in the matrilineal system of inheritance passed down through the women. However, the lands and the income from them were administered by the eldest male member of the joint family, the *karanavar*. Ideally, the *karanavar* was selfless, devoted to the welfare of the family. But in reality, he could be greedy and self-seeking, more interested in amassing wealth for himself than in looking after his sisters and their children. Since he wielded considerable authority, he could impose his will on the younger members of the household – as it happens in the *Vadakkeppattutaravadu* in MT's *Naalukettu*.

Naalukettu, the home in MT's novel, is a witness to the period of drastic changes during the transition from feudalism to modernism in Kerala. The novel sensitively captures the traumas and psychological graph of Appunni, the protagonist, caught as he is in the throes of this transitional period in Malabar. Growing up without a father and away from the prestige and protection of the matrilineal home to which he belongs, Appunni spends his childhood in extreme social misery. Fascinated by accounts of the grand *Naalukettutaravadu* of which he would have been a part, Appunni visits the house only to be rejected by the *karanavar* of the household. With vengeance boiling in his heart, Appunni claws his way up in life to finally buy *Naalukettu*, the symbol of his youthful aspiration and anguish. But he realizes to his dismay that *Naalukettu*, which has been a symbol of social status and personal prestige, has ceased to be so with the emergence of a new modern society. Home in M.T.'s novel appears to represent more the changing socio-political scenario in Kerala in the middle of the 20th century than the personal pangs and agonies of the protagonist.

Conclusion

A re-appraisal of these novels from a cultural perspective seems to reveal that the treatment of home in them varies depending on the time and space in which they were written and also in accordance with the ideology of the authors. In Dickens's *Bleak House*, for instance, home represents the injustices and inequalities of Victorian England, while in Naipaul's *A House for Mr Biswas*; home is a metaphor of postcolonial search for identity. Similarly, in Toni Morrison's *Home*, home is a repository of memories while in Tagore's *Home and the World*; home is a symbol of the journey to the self. Home in M.T.'s *Naalukettu* (The House around the Courtyard) stands for the traumas of the transition from the Feudal setup to modern Renaissance in Kerala. This perhaps supports my argument that home in novels is not just a dwelling place for family, but a multi-dimensional concept, representing the time and space of the respective works and the ideology of the authors. The five novels under study have, of course, different backgrounds, themes, characters etc., but all these novels seem to have apparently a common link that in all of them the description of home has a functional result. Home here 'acts.' Home acts most probably as an ideology.

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