

## Locating Home in the Diasporic Imaginary: A Reading of Sethu's *Aliyah*

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### Abstract

The concept of 'home' plays a pivotal role in our lives. For the members of a diasporic community, this term evokes many sentimental and nostalgic feelings. Returning to one's own homeland is a dream cherished by many expatriates. However, under certain circumstances, hostland becomes homeland and the process of migrating back to the so-called homeland can become traumatic. The psychological struggles of such an uprooting is rendered in Sethu's Malayalam novel *Aliyah: The Last Jew in the Village*. The protagonist is a Jew; his quest for home is the major theme of the novel. When the endless longing of the Jews for 'home' materialized, they got enmeshed in a severe quandary. They recognise the inextricability of the ties they have formed with the hostland and hence are betwixt the pull of the native land and the push of the Promised Land. The paper explores how diasporic experiences influence one's concept of home and identity based on the novel.

**Keywords:** Belonging; Diaspora; Home; Identity; Migration.

Home is not simply the domicile where one resides. When viewed in an abstract manner, home embodies the idea of intimacy, affection, comfort, cosiness, attachment, privacy, togetherness etc. It is more of a psychological space or a state of mind than a physical structure. It renders us a sense of orientation and belongingness. The cherished old adage "Home is where the heart is" resonates how home becomes a locus of happiness and personal ease. However, home is a problematic concept. A person may feel at home in a place even if it is not his/ her native land, i.e., home away from home. Conversely, sometimes one may not feel at home in his/ her own homeland. Thus framing a single, fixed definition for the concept of home is impractical. The meanings of identity, home and belongingness are subject to change according to the context and one's subject po-

sition.

The concept of home or rather homeland is central to the understanding of diaspora. One of the characteristic features of diasporic experience is "a strong attachment to and desire for literal return to a well-preserved homeland" (Clifford 305). According to FemkeStock, "[at] the core of the concept of diaspora lies the image of a remembered home that stands at a distance both temporally and spatially" (24). Being displaced and rootless, the diaspora occupy a perilous intermediate or in-between position in the social edifice of the hostland. Though far removed in time and space, home evokes a plethora of memories in their minds at least in fragments and fissures. The nostalgic longing for lost homeland and the dream of returning to one's native land preoccupy the consciousness of diasporic populace, especially in the case of first generation immigrants. They preserve a collective memory of their ancestral home which is invariably a romantic picture.

However, over time, some of them, especially those who do not have any memory of the ancestral land, accept the diasporic space as their own thereby transforming the hostland into homeland. As Safran observes, "Whether that home is necessarily the original homeland is a matter of controversy. It may, in fact, not be the ancestral homeland at all but rather the place where one was born and raised but that was originally a hostland, that is, a diaspora" (13). This proves that homeland is an unstable or flexible concept. The coinage of the term 'de-diasporizing' by Safran points to this fact. Through this process, many immigrants become a crucial part of the so called hostland. In such situations, the dichotomy between homeland and hostland dissolves. After the re-rooting in the hostland, the new space becomes increasingly familiar and the process of being uprooted once again would be painful. AvtarBrah contends, "Homing desire is not the same as a desire for a 'homeland'" (180). HimadriLahiri also reiterates the same argument: "Since home is a psychic space, the question of actual return does not arise" (50).

Stuart Hall considers hybridity and heterogeneity as characteristic features of diasporic cultural identity. He contends, "Diasporic identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference..." (401). In the new global scenario, at times home ceases to be a single, bounded territory. Two or more geographical entities can function as homelands. "The monopoly of one homeland is broken and in the new situation there is interplay of two or more homelands" (Lahiri 48). For Avtar Brah, home is both a "mythic

space in the diasporic imagination” and “the lived experience of a locality” (192). With the emergence of multiple displaced, dislocated or deterritorialize migrant groups, a fluid idea of home has emerged. Hence the binary opposition between homeland and hostland collapses.

Sethumadhavan, popularly known as Sethu, is a renowned literary figure in Malayalam literature. Sethu’s novel *Aliyah* originally published in 2013 was translated into English by Catherine Thankamma in 2017. The Hebrew word *aliyah* means ascent. The translator points out that it is a word loaded with ethnic, religious, ideological and cultural significance as it refers to the return of the Jewish diaspora to Israel (Sethu 405). This novel is centred on the life of the Jews of Chendamangalam, who return to the Promised Land leaving the land of their birth. Sethu delineates the psychological conflicts and struggles of the migrants who are torn between two loyalties. His preoccupation with Kerala’s Jewish community can be traced right from his novel *Marupiravi* (translated as *The Saga of Muziris*) wherein he delves deep into Kerala’s rich historical past.

India proved to be a “generous mother” to the minuscule community of Jews and they never experienced anti-Semitism in India (Israel 49). Jewish identity formation in India differed sharply from the experiences of Jews elsewhere. Kerala’s Jewish community has been assimilated into the cultural matrix of the land for centuries, usually surmised as two millennia. Therefore their status as diaspora itself is perhaps arguable. In spite of being Indian citizens, they retain a diasporic status at heart. The complexity of their existence cannot be seen in the case of people belonging to any other religion. The return of Jews to their true home is also a unique case, they return to a land where they have never been to. The dichotomy between homeland and hostland becomes a defining feature of their existence.

The novel which is inevitably an amalgam of myth, history and fiction, raises many ontological questions. The protagonist Salamon’s quest for home is the prominent motif in the novel. His community is so well ensconced into the cultural fabric of Chendamangalam that when faced with the decision to return, they face severe dilemma. This conflict, whether to continue living in one’s own place of birth or go to the Promised Land for which they have been yearning to return is central to the understanding of the novel. The paper examines how this homing desire or the desire to identify a location as homeland becomes the major conundrum in the novel.

The Kottayil Kovilakam area in Chendamangalam is a distinctive place wherein a Hindu temple, mosque, church and synagogue are located so close to each other. This unique expression of unity is symbolic of the religious harmony and tolerance of the people of Kerala. The kings conferred a number of privileges on them and even offered the lands to build their synagogues. The Jews lived in close contact with the local society. They were so absorbed into the matrix of the land that their non-Jewish neighbours never felt that they had a foreign origin until they took up the *aliyah*. The contribution of Jews in the development of Kerala is also substantial.

Religion and ethnicity play a significant role in the case of diasporic subjects. The people who go through a mental state of homelessness may find home in religious practices. Usually the cultural life of the diasporic population becomes centred on religious institutions. Often people belonging to the same ethnic community gather together to partake in religious activities and they attempt to recreate the practices and codes of conduct followed in their homeland with an eagerness to maintain their cultural identities. The novel describes how weddings were conducted among the Jews of Cochin. Earlier such celebrations lasted almost fifteen days, but over time their grandeur lessened. These rituals and traditions serve to keep the collective memory alive.

The obsession with the homeland is perceptible right from the opening of the novel. When Salamon has a dream of sea-passage, his grandmother Eshumuthimma interprets it as a symbol of the crossing over, the return to Israel. Her deep desire of migrating to the Jewish homeland is all the more accentuated when she hears about the formation of the state of Israel. Every year when the Jews read the sacred Haggadah, they utter the prayer "The next year in Jerusalem" (Sethu 88). They firmly believe that God will surely call them back to their holy land and this prayer helped them endure all difficulties.

When everyone in his community eagerly awaited their turn to go across Israel, the land of milk and honey, Salamon remained unsure. Disturbed by the dream, he consults his Jewish and non-Jewish acquaintances asking for their opinions and advice. They help him to decipher the layers of meaning concealed in his dream. These characters look at the prospect of returning to the homeland from different perspectives. Ramanandan believes that replanting helps one to thrive better. According to him, one must leave the land of one's birth and go to the other shore to become successful. Moses Master is a staunch believer who deems

the mass exodus as important to keep up one's religious faith. Varuthuty Master believes that migrations are an unavoidable part of world history. He considers migrations as transformations (Sethu 141). For the ardent exponents of Zionism, this migration meant the reclaiming of a lost identity. Nevertheless some people fear whether the discrimination between Black Jews and White Jews would resurface on the other shore also.

When the members of his community decide to sell the possessions that had been acquired through generations at a throwaway price, Salamon weighs the pros and cons of the decisive departure. He is the "one destined to take the famous Ephraim family forward to the future" (Sethu 393). He recalls the things that anchor him to the land. "This soil. This hill. This river. These twilight hours. This breeze...then..." (Sethu 185). He cannot bear to think of the parched look of the coconut trees when the summer heat ripened and scorched the soil; no one would water them if he migrates. He wonders what is in store for the people in an alien land.

In an interview with the translator, Sethu speaks of the difficulty of severing the emotional ties, the "unsnappable umbilical cord" with one's place of birth (401). For the Jews of Kerala, India is not just a hostland, but a surrogate mother indeed. When their forefathers came to the land as desperate refugees who were in search of an asylum, the land embraced them with the tenderness of a mother and thence bestowed on them innumerable memories. "Thus a people who whose feet were constantly on the move found a firm hold on this land. Grew roots. And those roots, they grew deep into the soil, unknown to anyone" (Sethu 86).

Eshimuthimma's efforts in recreating the collective memory of the homeland are noteworthy. Though initially she is too high-spirited to move to Israel, later on she is disturbed. For the Jews, the soil of Jerusalem is sacred. However Eshimuthimma takes a little soil from the land of her birth before leaving to sprinkle over her face when she is dead. "For her the soil of the land of her birth was transforming itself into the sacred soil of Jerusalem" (Sethu 390). Now she feels the pangs of leaving the land where her ancestors are buried. She finds it difficult to pull out the ties that bind her firmly to the land. When the time for departure arrives, she weeps bitterly and says, "... I want to die here. This place where our ancestors are buried, isn't this our land?" (Sethu 389). This act exemplifies her earnest attempt to preserve the last vestiges of cultural affiliation with the hostland.

Salamon's uncle Elias decides to leave not on account of religious reason but because of the need to be together. He says, "Our survival lies in

numbers" (Sethu 256). However, unlike others, Binder Daveed takes an unwavering decision to remain in India: "I am a Jew through and through and I am proud to being one. But I cannot be just a Jew, can I? There is a world outside of being a Jew" (Sethu 270). Comrade Pavithran cannot approve of the idea of migration. In the defiant spirit of a communist, he tries to expose the futility of going away from the land which welcomed them as desperate refugees.

Varuthutty Master refers to the Jewish tradition of tying a tiny bundle of ash to the end of tunics of brides departing from Methala, a town in Canganore (Sethu 146). It is a symbolic act which has great connotations. It signifies the bride's connection to the land of her birth. The Jewish women wanted the soil from the land of her birth to be sprinkled on their faces when they died. This ritualistic act underscores the importance of birth-place in the lives of Kerala Jews; they were veritably the sons and daughters of the soil. Master believes that it is difficult to extricate the indelible bonding with the land and "as long as generations of ancestors sleep under this soil at least some will be forced to return" (Sethu 146).

The concept of home is highly contextual. Throughout the novel, Salamon is seen searching for his true home. There are many things that restrain Salamon from crossing over, his relationship with Elsie being one of them. For a long time, a question echoed in his mind- "Do I want to go to the other shore?" (Sethu199). With severe anguish, he grapples with the notion of deserting the land which hitherto fostered him. This confounding badgers him day after day. Towards the end he realizes that even if he migrates, he cannot obliterate the memories of his dear ones who would be left behind and hence ventures to take an audacious decision. Though his whole family and relatives move out and he is bereft of any possessions, he decides to stay back in the place where he is at home. On the day of departure, sunk in thought, he stares into the river with a mind surging with the turbulent waves of emotions. He realizes that "he had nowhere to go"; his homeland is the land of his birth, the land where his ancestors are buried, and not the Promised Land (Sethu 394). "To merge, melt into the soil of one's birth - could there be a greater blessing than that?" , he contemplates (Sethu 394). When he takes such a bold, independent decision, his character matures dynamically. Thus he forges a new identity by becoming "the last Jew in this land" (Sethu 393).

The host country exerts a lot of influence on the diasporic people. Salamon is a representative of those Kerala Jews who decided to stay back in the land of their birth. For them, the hostland was not just an interim home-

land, but a real home indeed. Here home transcends the traditional fixities and attains a wider meaning in its ambit. The seemingly binary opposite entities fuse together and quicken new orientations. Thus the analysis of the novel exemplifies how migrancy and diasporic experiences impact upon the ways 'home' is considered.

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