

Finding Home in Children's Literature: Anita Desai's *The Village by the Sea*

Rizia Begum Laskar

Abstract

The concept of home in children's literature is very often examined through the pattern of home – away – home where the child protagonist returns after an adventure outside home with the knowledge that home is the best place. But what are the reasons for which a child desires to leave home and is the return always possible? How does the adult author configure the return home to bring in a happy ending? This paper looks into the concept of leaving home and coming back to it within the context of Anita Desai's *The Village by the Sea* to interrogate the reasons for the child leaving home and the possibility or impossibility of return to home.

Keywords: Adult Nostalgia; Children's literature; Home; Return to Home.

The necessity and desire for home is a universal one and an ideal home plays an important role in the development of the human psyche, especially that of the child. In literature too, the quest for home has been interrogated time and again to arrive at conclusive definitions of what constitutes home. In children's literature, the subject of home is a veritable ground to base the narrative where the child finds security, love and care in the process of its becoming an adult. It is also the place in children's literature where the child starts and ends its journey, returning with the knowledge that home is the best place in the world. But how do adult constructions of home in literature differ from that in children's literature? Virginia L. Wolf in "From the Myth to the Wake of Home: Literary Houses" makes a crucial distinction between home in adult's fiction and home in children's fiction. She says that children's literature can be differentiated from adult literature basically on the myth of home. In adult fiction, the knowledge of being stranded alone in the world is what the protagonist struggles with but children's fiction is a celebration of home and reaffirmation in the

myth of home (Wolf 54). However it would be naïve to assume that the celebration of home in children's fiction is without any ideological baggage because children's fiction by itself is an adult construction and therefore adult shaping of personal hopes and aspirations take place through it. In fact, the history of childhood, and knowledge and beliefs regarding the child and children's literature too, are all adult constructions where the child's performing agency is negated and it remains a site of power play where mainly the adult's reconstruction of an ideal self takes place. Home, thus, is also the lost phase of childhood where the adult author returns to celebrate the constructs of the innocence, joy and carefree world of childhood. This paper will interrogate the concept of home in children's literature with particular reference to Anita Desai's *The Village by the Sea* to understand the need of a child for the security and sanctity of home. The paper will make use of the pattern of home – away – home in children's literature to question the reasons for leaving home and whether return is possible or not? At the same time, it will also examine the adult author's nostalgia for the secured base of home in children's literature which is often not available for the adult author.

The Disruption of Home

Anita Desai's *The Village by the Sea* (1982) is set in a small fishing village called Thul in coastal Maharashtra. Hari, Lila, Bela and Kamal are four siblings who live at Thul with a drunkard father and a bedridden mother. The running of the dysfunctional home is on the young shoulders of the two eldest children, Hari and Lila. Their poverty compels Hari to leave his home in search for a job at Mumbai (Bombay). The security that home should have provided for the children is done away with at the very beginning of the novel with the children left to fend for themselves. Jon Stott and Christine Francis argue that the notion of being at home and not being at home forms the core of all children's stories. They therefore define home for the child as "not merely a dwelling place but also an attitude. For a real child or a fictional character, it is a place of comfort, security, and acceptance – a place which meets both physical and emotional needs. Conversely, "Not Home" is a place where needs are not met, for any of several reasons" (223). For the four children, "not home" is what characterises their existence. Anita Desai juxtaposes the idea of "not home" on the homeland also, the village of Thul. Not only is the home of Hari not able to provide him with the security needed for a child but also his homeland is fast disintegrating in the face of industrialisation. It is at "not home" therefore that Hari and Lila begin their journey and therefore the necessity to embark outside to find home. The journey does not necessari-

ly mean that the outside world will take over as home but rather it reflects on the capability of the protagonist to reconstruct "Home" from the vestiges of "Not Home". For Hari, this journey is a literal journey outside his home and village to Mumbai (Bombay) in search of employment and a possibility of securing a better life for his family members.

The village Thul represents in a miniature form the common picture of poverty in India which tears apart homes and families due to the daily struggle to just stay alive. The population of Thul basically depends upon fishing as a means of livelihood. In such a scenario, owning a boat is very much necessary for sustenance, Hari's father however does not own a boat as he has to sell his own to pay off his debts. The drunken nature of Hari's father and his lack of responsibility towards his household is symbolic of the absent father habitually portrayed in Victorian children's literature. Hari and for that matter all the children have been neglected both physically and psychologically by the father. Hari's resentment against his father is therefore justified. His sense of inadequacy is all the more exacerbated in an environment where affluence is measured by the number of boats owned. Neither does his father own a boat nor does he take responsibility for his family.

This same responsibility has been shifted to Hari who is deprived of his education in the process of doing so. The disruption of a proper family life is the primary reason behind the disintegration of home for Hari. An ideal home secures the family members through love and respect for each other. Such a scenario has been interrogated often in children's literature. Kimberley Reynolds thus remarks that in general "the family in question begins as a complete, loving, nuclear family with two happy parents and a happy comfortable life. The story usually charts what happens when family life is disrupted by, for example, the absence or death of one or both parents, a financial crisis. . . ." (85). The disruption of home and family life in children's fiction is addressed usually through the child leaving home. The child does so in order to rectify the wrongdoing that has led to disintegration of life at home. This attempt to regain home is a wish fulfillment by the child who desires to regain what has been lost. The return home on the completion of a successful venture outside home also signifies a return to a familiar signpost or milestone, from where disruption starts and ends too.

Alongside Hari is his sister Lila who is also worried about the situation at home. Both Hari and Lila try to make do with whatever resources they have in hand. They are however aware of the fact that it is not going to be

enough for them. Their mother is sick and lack of money has prevented her from getting medical help. On the other hand, the younger sisters cannot be sent to school next year as there is hardly any money to meet the expenses. Hari is also worried about the dowry that he needs to arrange for his sisters when they get married in the future. Lila's frustration regarding the circumstances makes her prod and nag Hari to do something. Hari thus eventually decides to find work outside his native place and go to Bombay. Lila is happy with Hari's decision but she knows that a definite change in the fortune of their household is a long way off.

Despite this, Lila believes that hard work will pay off. Hari is however filled with doubts and uncertainties regarding his own decision. Poverty thus forces many people all over the world to find employment elsewhere and leave their homes. Harriot Beazley in a survey of Malaysian boys who, like Hari, have not received proper education for any job says that the boys are aware of the restrictive nature of employment in their native place. A job overseas provides an opportunity to escape poverty as well as a change in their powerless status within their own community. The freedom they perceive to be made available in a job outside home also puts into stark reality the grim chances of succeeding within the locally available resources (116).

Hari is restless and very much desires for a change. He knows that the factory coming up at Thul can provide opportunities for employment but it also brings forth the problem of disintegration of his native place. The factory will exhort a heavy toll on the environment and Thul will never be the same again. His immersion in the place is also his cause of concern for the place. However, poverty forces him to find employment at the cost of environment. He knows that his limited education is his handicap but still hopes that the factory will need people like him to run machines. He will teach himself how to run machines and this will allow him to sustain his family. Hari's dilemma however lies in choosing between his own home and his homeland. Hari's difficulty in choosing between the two gives rise in him a desire to inhabit a third space where he feels a sense of belongingness. Hari's frustration and feeling of being squeezed out in a place where he does not belong is described thus: "Everything blended here, everything blended together-except for himself . . . he couldn't settle down to belonging" (59 - 60).

The Leaving of Home

Hari had hopes that he could somehow sustain himself and his family

through some work at Thul. However, his hopes of finding a job at Thul itself are dashed when he overhears a conversation between Biju, the smuggler of the village and the caretaker of the upcoming factory. The caretaker makes it clear that there will not be any jobs for the locals like Hari. Instead engineers and skilled men will be at the helm of affairs. Hari realizes that it is now time to find an alternate space which will accept him as its own. Bombay turns out to be the space where Hari ultimately goes to in search of a job. Hari does not inform anyone of his departure and leaves behind all the problems associated with his home. In children's literature, the theme of the child leaving home to embark in adventures outside the security of home is one which has been repeatedly explored. Children leaving home in a quest and then returning to the love and security of home has formed a staple plot of many children's literature texts. This has been termed by Lucy Waddey as the Odyssean pattern in "Home in Children's Fiction: Three Patterns" terms this pattern.¹ Perry Nodelman selected six novels for analysis in *The Hidden Adult: Defining Children's Literature*.

The analysis done from the perspective of an adult reader reveals the exit and return to home as a persistent theme in children's literature. Nodelman thus emphasizes that "the pattern can usefully operate as a cognitive tool" (223).² Prominent examples of this pattern include Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are* where the character of Max leaves home for fun and adventure and Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* where Alice leaves home in a dream sequence. A different sort of leaving home is depicted in Frank L. Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* where Dorothy is swept away in a cyclone and travels to the Land of Oz. As opposed to these romantic notions of leaving home is a novel like Kimberly Brubaker Bradley's *The War that Saved My Life* which bases itself on the basic premise that what happens when home itself is not secure or for that matter home does not exist at all? Bradley's work highlights the fact that the pattern of leaving home and coming back to it is not always justified primarily because home does not provide enough love and belongingness for the child to not desire leaving home.

For Hari, home like Bradley's protagonist, does not exist in the first place. His childhood has been taken away by his responsibilities and therefore he is determined to "get away...And never come back to this sad house, his frightened sisters, his ill mother, his drunken father. He would leave them and run, run as far away as he could go" (102). This willing abandonment of home is what characterises a departure in late twentieth century children's literature as opposed to earlier children's literature. Hari's

predicament is his hopelessness that perhaps even a job at Bombay will not be enough to change the fact that home can never be regained. Mavis Reimer therefore in “‘No place like home’: the facts and figures of homelessness in contemporary texts for young people” says that “[w]hile children on the move have been at the heart of children’s literature for a long time, what is different about these recent narratives is that the central child characters do not move inside or settle at the conclusion of their narratives. For them, it appears, there *is* no place to call home” (n.pag). Home therefore exists more in a disrupted state rather than a paradise of security and stability. Tony Chapman says that despite the imaginative notion of home as a haven of security and privacy, in reality home is signified by change. In the process of changes in life we change various homes too. At the same time, certain factors like natural disasters, war, migration and similar things also affect our homes and therefore compelling us to leave homes. Chapman further says that the fact that there is no home to go back to give rise in people the understanding of home in its deepest sense. This understanding is not necessarily of home as a mere physical structure but home also as a security, as a right to be enjoyed but which has been violated now (136).

While home itself is non-existent at Thul, life in Bombay is also fraught with difficulties and therefore the possibility of finding roots there is also negated. Hari yearns for the familiarity of his village in the busy streets of Bombay. Having found a small job in an eatery which also serves as his dwelling place, Hari decides to save his earnings and take them to his mother. This, in a sense, obliquely refers to the possibility of Hari’s return home at some later period of time. The same home from which he was so anxious to run away now seems to be his destination. His life at Bombay brings forth a myriad of instances which constantly remind him of his life back at home. Hari longs to “remember the soft sounds of the sea or the wind in the coconut palms or the feel of the clean sand between his fingers and under his feet – it was all so long ago and far away.

He had only been away for one season, just the few months between winter and summer, but it seemed like a lifetime” (166). At the same time, Hari’s nostalgia is surprising as there were hardly any pleasant memories associated with home. Hari’s reminiscing of home is what Theano S. Terkenli refers as human beings understanding the value of home very often only in those circumstances when home is in a state of disappearance or when it has vanished (328). Roberta Rubenstein, on the other hand, argues that the home left behind exists only in memory and not in actuality and therefore this nostalgia for a return to home can never take place in the

exact terms (4).

Hari's realization that he has never been able to sever ties with his native place takes place when he overhears a Sikh driver say that search parties are being sent to Alibagh to search for the lost fishing boats during the monsoon season. Hari cries out, "Alibagh! . . . That's my home! That's my land!" (196). The desperate situation makes Hari understand his ties to his native place despite uprooting and dislocation from home. In a fishing village his father does not own a boat and thus there is no possibility of him being drowned. Despite this, Hari feels anxious for his fellow men from Thul. Hari revisits Thul in his mind's eye and realizes the intensity of his connection with the place and the understanding that despite having no land or boat, the place is his own, it is his home, the ties of which are yet not severed. This necessity to forge a sense of belonging despite the ties being very fragile echoes Maria Nikolajeva's argument in *From Mythic to Linear* that "(h)ome in idyllic fiction is the foremost security. Home is where the protagonists belong and where they return after exploration of the outside world" (24-25). Nikolajeva's concept buttresses the importance of happy endings which is the only way to justify home as a refuge of return.

The Return to Home

Hari eventually returns home on Diwali and his approach reveals to him the change that the place has seen in his absence. The only unalterable landscape is probably Thul itself and he sits under a casuarina tree to feel the static rootedness of his place. He wants to revive his memory of the place but his eyes fall on his house and its sorry condition. He desires to change it which is reflective of a new mentality where change is started from home itself. Home remains static, at least the physical nature of it, and this sameness is what he wants to change. However the passage of time during Hari's absence from Thul has also made him realize that it is difficult to exactly remember what has been left behind. Hari's one small utterance, "I forgot too much", encompasses within itself the migrant's pain and inability to connect on return.

Anita Desai's neat tying up of loose ends of the story where the family is reconciled through a recuperative mother, a sober father and just enough money for them to get through reinforces the necessity of happy endings in children's literature. Ann Alston thus states, "Happy endings in children's literature often consists of homecomings, and this is a disciplinary technique for it instills in children that home and the family it represents

is the only place in which to find solace and that ultimately, the successful character and family can be recognized by the return to a happy home" (73). The return to home for the child also embodies an understanding on the part of the child that home is a repository of families and family values. As such, home is not only a place which conserves but at the same time needs to be conserved. Anne Lundin says that "the adult author often reveals a deep nostalgic need for the stability of home that becomes woven into a utopian domestic drama. Womb-like homes with their fantasy of return offer adult-oriented nostalgia and a circular pattern of reinforcement: Home, Away, Home" (247).

The Impossibility of Return and Adult Nostalgia

The possibility of Hari's return to his home despite the adverse circumstances is a reality engineered through the adult author's desire for a happy ending. It is also the adult author's longing for a home which is in actuality only a *hiraeth* – a longing and yearning for a home forever lost in the labyrinths of time. Hari returns not necessarily as a child because childhood for him and his sister Lila is effectively over when they have taken on the onus of their home instead of their parents. The fractured structure of Lila and Hari's family life has already pushed them to the fringes of childhood and propelled them into an adult world where they are misfits. Hari's return home can be contextualized as not a return to the notion of a unified family eagerly waiting for him to be reintroduced to the folds of security and love that home signifies. Instead he returns with the understanding and knowledge that home is there with all its problems, dissatisfactions and grimness of poverty. Melissa Wilson and Kathy Short say in this regard that:

In a postmodern metaplot the child leaves from a place the child doesn't (or can't) consider home to go on a journey, psychological or literal, to a new home that the child has constructed. The children don't return to the same home, if they return home at all. The child protagonist constructs a new home because of an absence of home at the beginning or because the home is untenable. The postmodern metaplot signals that childhood is not an idyllic time. . . .Children in these stories can't go home again because their home isn't where they want to dwell. . . .Children must set out to make sense of the past in order to construct a better home, a place of their own creation. (134)

Hari returns and in doing so he actually returns to a memory of home

which has compelled people to return home across places, time and cultures. The dismal and poverty-ridden nature of home does not deter Hari and many others like him from returning because it is the one place with which they can associate a sense of belongingness and rootedness. This return home, essentially nostalgia, is to a memory of home where the perfect family life exists. For Hari, this of course does not happen although the narrative does emphasize that his father is on the mend and his mother is also recovering from her illness. Hari's return home is in reality a change from one dreary situation to another and the narrative emphasis that children like Hari can never find complete freedom and luxury of home highlights the impossibility of reclaiming home in its ideal state. The poverty which has driven his father into the vicious circle of drunkenness and irresponsibility and held his mother in the grip of illness and unable to receive proper cure is detrimental to construction of any proper home. The temporary succour is actually just that – brief repose in the endless cycle of poverty and its subsequent problems. Hari thus returns just to the concrete structure called home, albeit one which is in ramshackle. The adult author's imperativeness to construct a happy ending does signify a possibility of an ideal home for the child protagonist but a large number of postmodern texts actually are rife with broken homes instead of secured homes.³ The child is placed very often in a precarious position of indecision and uncertainty from where it embarks in search of a home within the vastness and emptiness of "not-home". Thus, while the return to home seems to be a very plausible ending, very often this return is not possible at all. The child does not return home and is therefore probably lost forever amongst the labyrinths of adult spaces or constructs a home for itself where it no longer performs the role of a child but that of an adult and like Hari even when it returns, it does so not as a child but as an adult.

End Notes

1. Lucy Waddey identifies three patterns where home functions as "a frame, home as a focus, and home as an evolving reflection of the protagonist" (13). The home as a frame is termed as Odyssean pattern and the home as focus is termed as Oedipal pattern. The home as a reflection of the protagonist is termed as Promethean pattern.
2. The six texts that Nodelman takes up include Maria Edgeworth's "The Purple Jar", Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, Hugh Lofting's *Dr. Dolittle*, Beverly Cleary's *Henry Higgins*, Ezra Jack Keats' picture book *The Snowy Dog*, and Virginia Hamilton's

Plain City.

3. See novels like *Ruby Holler* (Creech, 2002), *The Tale of Despereaux* (DiCamillo, 2006), *Millions* (Boyce, 2004), *Crispin: Cross of Lead* (Avi, 2004), *Helicopter Man* (Fensham, 2005), *The Higher Power of Lucky* (Patron, 2006), and *Dragon Keeper* (Wilkinson, 2003). Indian English novels like *The Village by the Sea* (Desai, 1992), *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (Rushdie, 1990) etc.

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