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# A House in the Country: Interrogating the metaphor of 'Home'

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The concept of 'home' has been explored in literature in different contexts in different ages of human civilization. It is a known fact that 'the conceptualization of creating a home' and 'an act of forming it' are the two significant steps in human history. In its very inception, the concept of 'home' seems to incorporate the sense of protection. As can be seen from the history of primeval human beings, the idea of 'home' might have been generated with the necessity of protecting human beings from dangers outside. Having one's own roof must have acquired a special place in this history. As home came into being as a place of protection, there also emerged the sense of 'the world inside home' and 'the world outside home'. This inside - outside dichotomy has germinated many other notions, and in that process, the concept of 'home' has also acquired several associations. An act of 'homecoming' became a sign of coming into the safe and secure world. Naturally, 'making of home' further initiated and formulated new social structures like family, community etc. Each new structure contributed in redefining and reshaping the concept of 'home' by widening its scope and attributes. 'Home' in this process has not remained a simple concrete object to be indicated as a particular geographical site. In receiving multiple dimensions it came to be realized as a psychological space that provides warmth, comfort, coziness and





affinity to its dwellers. The process of perceiving the concept of 'home', has thus turned it into a metaphor that incorporates numerous associations. For instance, in religious and philosophical discourse, a 'human body' has been seen as a home for divine soul. In its biblical connotations 'paradise' has been considered as the 'first home' for man. One more way to imply the metaphoric sense of home is to perceive a country or a nation as one's home.

The metaphoric perception of nation as home inherently offers its citizens safety, identity and the sense of belonging. It provides to its residents a sense of rootedness. It does not stand as a mere cartographic entity, but turns out to be 'a reservoir of public myths and private memories' (Rath Sura, 94). Once the idea of nation as home is perceived extensively, the concept of 'creating home', 'the act of building it' and also 'returning to it' altogether turn into symbolic nature. It is more particular with those people who were and are compelled to leave their nation and move to other foreign lands or those who for certain socio-economic reasons migrated to distant places leaving their homelands behind. The literature that has emerged out of these experiences, has very specifically explored the metaphoric aspect of nation as home and has tried to reveal its intricacies in its altered perspective.

There is a rich body of literature where nation has been imagined and interpreted as home. For instance the Indian poet R. Parthasarathy (b.1934) in his long narrative poetic work *Rough Passage* (1977) depicts the complexities of living in another country and its culture and necessity of returning to one's own home. He mentions his status retrospectively as a migrant in a foreign land by stating: "He had spent his youth whoring/after English gods./ There is something to be said for exile:/ You learn roots are deep. /That language is a tree, leaves colour/ under

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another sky" (Parthasarathy 75). and announces, "My tongue in English chains, / I return after generation to you (80)". In this long narrative poem there is one whole section titled as 'Homecoming' where the poet elaborates his return to India, and an attempt to reconnect his Tamil past. If Parthasarathy depicts the need of relocating oneself to one's home, the poet Dom Moraes (1938 - 2004) who shifts from place to place and culture to culture, brings out the pathos of the person who has perceived himself fatally homeless. His poem "Sinbad" shares with readers his feelings: "Ashes and marred walls deface you./Where is this wind from, /Sinbad, defining its own course?/ Some of us never know home" (qtd. in Sarang 98). Apart from poets, there are many novelists too who have tried to explore the concept of nation in the metaphoric sense of home. V. S. Naipaul's (1932 - 2018) *A House for Mr Biswas* (1961) brings out the attempt of its protagonist to construct his own house in another country and depicts the problematics of 'assimilation and appropriation' in a given culture. He also paradoxically puts forth the intricacies of reconnecting with one's nation as a home through a travelogue *India: A wounded Civilization* (1976) in which Naipaul critically revisits his ancestral home, and questions the possibilities of relating to one's past. In other sense, these writers are generally called as diaspora writers who through their narratives pertinently manifest the conception of nation as home. Though originated from the event of Jewish exile from Jerusalem, the word 'Diaspora' is now attributed to the "globally displaced communities that have common ancestral homeland" (Ramraj, 214). The people from this diaspora, then inherently conceive the idea of "maintenance or restoration of ..homeland which is true ideal home ..the place to which they or their descendants would (or should) eventually return" (Ramrai. 214). In this





sense then imagining nation as home by the migrant writers is seen as an intrinsic wish, that they dream to fulfill by reconnecting themselves to their homelands at physical and mental level. However, with each 'Diaspora' maintaining or restoring a tie and to return to home is not the same. Several diaspora writers vary in articulating their concept of nation as home. For instance, one can see the works of a writer like Roy Heath (1926 - 2008) who tries to retrieve his home by recreating the version of home in the form of his creative literary works and through memoir, *Shadows Round the Moon: Caribbean Memoirs* published in 1990. Thus, imagining home by the migrant writers puts forth multiple possibilities. In considering the scope and limitations of this article, the attempt has been made to identify how a diaspora writer from a country like Sri Lanka articulates the problem of depicting nation as home.

In the South Asian Scenario, Sri Lanka as an independent nation has always remained a curious phenomenon. In spite of its independence from the British colonialism in 1948, the nation has undergone the detrimental event of civil war due to its ethnic, religious and linguistic issues. It has resulted into a consistent violence and agonies making Sri Lanka a problematic site for residence. Many of the intelligentsia, for one or the other socio-economic reasons have migrated to different nations, though such migrations have also caused in some cases, painful experiences in the host culture. Therefore in such a chaotic experience, when a migrant writer like Romesh Gunsekera tries to articulate the concept of nation as home, it becomes interesting to analyze his point of view to depict Sri Lanka in the metaphoric sense of Home.

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Romesh Gunsekara, a Sinhalese Christian, was born in Colombo in 1954 and left Sri Lanka with his family to Philippines in the 1950s. He further moved to England in 1971. He is the author of the Booker Prize shortlisted novel *Reef* (1994) that unfolds the story of a young man who sees two worlds within one nation. His other notable works include *Monkfish Moon* (1992), *The Sandglass* (1998), *Haven's Edge* (2000) and a recently published novel, *Suncatcher* (2019). He has received many prestigious awards for his literary works, and he currently stays in England. It is significant in case of Romesh Gunsekera that throughout his literary works he has persistently dealt with Sri Lankan ethos. His short story collection *Monkfish Moon* comprises of nine stories that communicate how the ethnic or religious issues from the homeland of Sri Lanka affect the migrants though living far away from their 'home'.

Among these nine narratives, "A House in the Country" epitomizes Gunsekera's distinct way of interrogating the metaphoric aspect of home perceived in the form of nation.

As has been pointed out by George Lukacs, in the short story as a form, the writer can "pinpoint the strangeness and ambiguity of life" and in it we normally find, "clear, uncommented, purely objective depiction ... It sees absurdity in all its undisguised and unadorned nakedness ..." (51). M. H. Abrahams states that the short story like the form of novel carries organization of the action, thought and interaction of its characters into the artful pattern

of a plot but differs from novel in the case of its magnitude. It results in the intact narration 'with higher level of visibility' (Glossary: 193-194). Romesh Gunsekera, internationally acclaimed as the master of art of storytelling, exploits these narrative features of short story as an art form and with the greatest economy invents the key events of

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the story in their balanced and clear form to communicate the ambivalent space of nation as home.

The story "A House in the Country" depicts the life of Mr. Ray, a migrant Sri Lankan middle aged man who returns to Colombo after living in London for years. In London he has managed to get a secure job, materialistic comforts and even a happy circle of acquaintances. But in spite of his content stay in London, Ray always wishes to return to his home, to Sri Lanka. He dreams to return to a typical tropical house of Sri Lanka he had seen in his childhood days. However, when he comes back and sees his house abandoned by his uncle, his 'blood turns to sand'. He compares his elegant flat of London to this concrete box and thinks of reconstructing his own home. In this attempt, he gets help from Siri, Sirisena, a young Sri Lankan that has come from a poor family from a countryside village. Siri renovates the house for Mr. Ray according to his wishes and there develops a sense of companionship between them, though Siri always considers Ray as his master. The home still incomplete in its structure begins to take form and Ray starts establishing his bond with the place and the people. Ray feels that now he can live here as life has become peaceful and there are no constraints of London life. But at the end of the story we find that the construction of home remains incomplete, as one morning Ray returning from his morning walk finds that a shop nearby his house has been set on fire and the shopkeeper is dead. The event threatens the seemingly quiet and stable life of Ray and Siri. Siri informs Ray of his brother's tragic death due to similar violent skirmishes and decides to leave the place in despair.

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Through the character of Mr. Ray, his desire of returning home, his attempt of recollecting the house of his childhood memories and his concept of living a peaceful life in his homeland, Gunesequera points out the migrant persons' peculiar tendency to envisage nation as his home. However, through the events and incidents that he delineates in the narrative, he brings forth a counter reality. In the parallel narration about Ray and Siri, Gunesequera exposes the lives of the migrant person and that of the native. Mr. Ray's 'conceptualization of creating his own home' and 'an act of making it' are the two major events elaborately described in the narrative. At one level, they metaphorically talk of migrant man's act of reclaiming and relocating to one's root. They also underline man's archetypal desire of belonging and possessing to any concrete, safe place that ensures him stability and security. At another level, underneath the narrative one can perceive the vague possibilities of reconstructing the nation by the unified attempts of the native (Siri) and the migrants (Ray).

Again the incomplete construction of the home due to the violence in the outer world brings forth another dimension to the perception of nation as home. While constructing the home, Ray tries to ignore the several references of violence and turmoil around. He tries to set up his routine, build the bond of affinity and even plans for a stable future for Siri. But all these attempts are destroyed by the reality of the land. The reality exposes the futility of imagining the nation as one's home. In its darker aspect Gunesequera explores further and reveals his true concern where in the present scenario the concept of 'home' itself has been disrupted. Throughout his life, Gunesequera has tried to discern the specificity of the place, a concrete locale that avows the person a life of security, devoid of any

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violence. As he states in one of his interviews, "It is not to do necessarily with the place. It's the violence of human life" (*outlook india*). The realization of haunting violence and the dubious nature of seeking safety in the assumed home (nation) is communicated at the end of the story through a conversation between Ray and Siri:

Sir, Siri said in a low voice, 'I want to go.'

'Where?'

'Away Sir.' ..

What's wrong? What is it?

This destruction. I want to go away. .. 'And you, Sir, have seen the world. Tell me where. Where is a good place?' (23 - 24)

The question asked by a native to the migrant person, dichotomizes the dialectics of nation as home. Gunesequera seems to challenge the very conception of 'home' in the modern world. He seems to reveal the fact that the very essential attribute of home for which the conceptualization of home was materialized in the history of human civilization has been disrupted in the contemporary human world. The concept of home that initiated several societal forms and structures has been overshadowed by these very institutions and social structures. Under the various identities perhaps the world has ignored the 'human identity' for which protection of life for the survival of human race is the foremost attribute of home.

In a peculiar form of the short story, thus Gunesequera encapsulates the paradox of imagining nation as home. With the limited number of characters, singularity of event and with the restricted space and time of action Gunesequera delineates the complexities of conceiving the

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concept of nation as home. The narrative of the 38  
story reveals a very distinct tone and point of view of the writer. If Naipaul reveals in his *A House for Mr. Biswas*, a satirical and critical ironic tone, Romesh Gunesequera's narration is devoid of any harsh, ironic and satirical tone. He does not even romanticize or view the nation in a nostalgic form. Instead, in a restrained, 'the matter of fact' tone, he focuses the Sri Lankan reality. He presents before us that in a violent and chaotic world of Sri Lanka, though one aspires to reconstruct and relocate the human world, it may turn out to be a futile endeavour.

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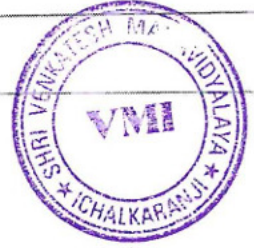
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*Shubhangi Nitin*

Head,

Dept. of Commerce

SHRI VENKATESH MAHAVIDYALAYA, ICHALKARANJI

*[Signature]*

PRINCIPAL,

Shri Venkatesh Mahavidyalaya,  
ICHALKARANJI - 416 115.