

‘HOME IS WHERE THE HEART IS’-A DIASPORIC UTTERANCE OF NEIL BISSOONDATH

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Small or big, tiny or towery, fix or floating everyone dreams a ‘home’. It is not restricted only to human beings but also right for birds, animals, creatures etc. Even it is not limited only on this planet because the wish to have a ‘home’, leads one to explore the universe. It is a ubiquitous desire that everyone craves for, from the very beginning of the birth where the womb of the mother is the ‘home’ upto the death when even a graveyard is also a kind of ‘home’. Generally it is accepted that ‘home’ is a place where someone lives or a place of shelter, but it is only a suffocating meaning, restricted within the walls of concrete structure of any building or area where someone can be physically set in but what about his/her emotional involvement. It means there is something missing in the concrete ‘house’ built for shelter which can be identified as ‘homeliness’ that comes with the feeling of attached. Besides, only the shelter does not guarantee any protection so there should be a sense of safety-a foundation of any ‘home’. However, the ‘safety’ shouldn’t attack on the freedom of the self or create a sense of uncertainty of life even in their so-called beautiful creation means ‘home’ should be safe and suitable where one can spend best moments of the life. It should make someone at home. Hence it becomes a mission for everyone throughout the life to search and/or secure a place anywhere in the universe where safety crosses the threshold of their ‘home’ with gladness. And during this hazardous journey, they come across with so many delightful and/or gloomy experiences, but never let their dream dies unto the last second of their lives.

Along with the time and place, the meaning of the ‘home’ changes accordingly. The range of the meaning of the ‘home’ widens geographically as it starts from smallest and ends nowhere like human desires. To confine the idea of home only to some area produces claustrophobia. No one likes to live in boundaries or in restrictions and always desires to cross it. However, when one reaches to bigger, misses the previous one though it was smaller means it’s a kind of attachment, generally everyone develops with the place where he/she spends some time. And the desire to move to higher level or in the bigger or developed places is very intense in human nature that leads them to be a part of ‘migration’. While migrating willingly some pull factors- better employment, health care, educational opportunities, laws, safety, human rights conditions etc. are responsible whereas the push factors- war, poverty, lack of employment, natural disasters, lack of food and shelter, political instability, unfair legal system, lack of educational opportunities, terrorism etc. force anyone to leave their home country unwillingly. During the transformation of meaning of ‘home’ with time and place, no doubt there are some social, political, economical and cultural factors play a pivotal role in providing a sense of safety, privacy, freedom, satisfaction to anyone. And if the proposition of such factors is not balanced properly, the result would be negative. But generally, in both cases, the (e)migrants miss their

‘homeland’. While crossing the boundaries, everyone has some romantic ideas about the *host* countries and already planned to plant their roots on new soil of the foreign country with their existing cultural connection. However, such dreams never comes true in most of the cases as the (e)migrants have to experience harshness of the new soil-new country where first of all everyone has to do adjustments with the prevailing social and cultural condition and sometime in this procedure they have to lose their original identity which results into ‘identity crisis’. Besides, the fear of being rejected by the ‘host’ country where they have to experience marginalization or discrimination from the larger group of the society generally known as ‘majority’ which discards the (e)migrants as *others* or *foreigner* and a new group having ethnicity develops as ‘minority’ experiencing marginalization in broader sense. The dire desire to be in larger group and its failure and difficulties in doing adjustments, force the migrants to think about their decision to migrate from their original ‘homeland’. This put them in dilemma which leads to nostalgia. At some level every migrants thinks to go back but it seems impossible because after sometime there is no scope or space for them in their ‘home’ as they uprooted themselves completely and are totally dissociated from their originality. The side effects of this condition are visible in the second generation which is not aware of their origins or original tradition or culture. The critical condition becomes worse when a migrant is ‘refugee’-someone who leaves their country, especially during a war or other threatening event- because in new country the refugees suffer from ‘homesickness’ as they have to leave their ‘home’ forcefully and so it remains in their heart unto the death.

‘Homesickness’ is a common phenomenon in almost all works of Neil Bissoondath, a Canadian author whose most of the characters or protagonists have experienced migration (un)willingly and face harsh realities as *others* in foreign countries. Whether it is Raj in *A Casual Brutality* (1988), Sita in *The Innocence of Age* (1992), Shakti and Celia in *The Worlds Within Her* (1998), Frank and Boobie in *Doing the Heart Good* (2002), all have faced the pain of being away from their home. But in *Doing the Heart Good* (2002) Bissoondath has projected the problem of ‘homesickness’ in different sense because the characters- Frank, Boobie and his brother from are refugees and suffering from identity crisis, homesickness, linguistic problems, displacement, marginalisation, racism, communalism, poverty, sense of detached etc. The protagonist-Alistair Mackenzie (75), a retired English professor recalls his past and the people who had entered in his life, stayed for some time and left with a great amount of memories which have changed his whole attitude, thinking and perception about life. One of them is Frank, their once-a-week gardener who meets him after a long time because Frank needs a favour from Mackenzie for Boobie, a petulant looking 16 years old young lad who has not yet learnt how to face callous realities in this world because he has belief that as a refugee, he can trust only to a piece of paper- passport, visa for his better fortune which is like an illusion, not affordable by anybody in this world. Boobie (16) and his brother, a year or two years older have the visa and a letter of rent guaranteed for six months by the church sponsors for superintendent. The letter guarantees for work too. They are searching a building on Concord Street where the said superintendent would be available, to stop their wandering in unknown country where no one knows them. Initially Frank keeps distance from those two young men and avoids answering about the address of the same building where he stands in as acting superintendent because actual person is absent-ill or on vacation. Frank behaves unfriendly because he believes that nobody pays him to be nice in different country since he lives alone after the death of his wife, at the corner outside the apartment building and he doesn’t wish to establish any new relationship with

anyone. Besides, he has sold his business as no one is there to whom he can give it to. But when he comes to know that they are also ‘refugees’ like him, he feels sympathy for them so he gives some right instruction and watches them keenly. When they are unable to get the superintendent and have to admire the ‘green’ grass outside the apartment on Concord Street, which has become the temporary shelter for them in new country- Canada where everything seems different from their *dream*. Boobie is annoyed with Frank and his cussedness as he feels exposed and unshielded in this new place-‘second home’ for them. Boobie would confess that:

...even here, in the street (Concorde Street), he felt exposed, that his backbone remained taut in anticipation of the hot bite of impact. That he saw the neat buildings as blackened ruins, apartments revealed through rubble, the school at the corner dismantled and smoking, the street pitted with shell holes. The corners of his eyes wove constantly among the shadows; seeking movements and the glint of a rifle-barrel...he panicked for the people (Doing the Heart Good, p.226)

It’s like shocking experience for both of them as they had fascination about Canada which has gone away very early as they are facing harsh realities of migration from the very beginning of their arrival in the country:

...even here in a lobby no longer new and haphazardly cleaned. He (Boobie) had been doing this since their arrival in this country, marvelling over the washroom at the airport, at the church basement where they were housed for the first month, at the university dormitory where they were housed for the second. (Doing the Heart Good, p.229)

It is resulted into shattered dreams of Boobie and his brother who had great imaginings while moving to Canada from their ‘home country’, the country of ‘past tense’ where the poverty has rotten the human condition at such a bottom level that no one can expect a good and healthy social life with betterment. The push factor-poverty in the words of Boobie who is:

...washing in similar fashion in the ruined city, an impatient queue behind him, people with buckets and pots and pans waiting to get the water that no longer flowed to their homes. Suddenly, crouched at the tap, the water grew frigid on (his) neck... the line dissolving behind him, people scattering in every direction, running to the scantest of cover at their utensils clattered to the cobblestones like metallic rain. And where before there had been clucks and mutterings of impatience, now there were only moans. (Doing the Heart Good p.230).

To get rid of the poverty and make a successful career, both the brothers have flown to Canada with ambition to shape their life according to their wish and talent but their decision is erroneous as Boobie’s brother is confused whether to be an architect or actor though he has done two years Academy of Dramatic Arts. Finally he has to compromise with his acting talent and work a craftsman who designs metal sheets for other’s home. Even Boobie has to learn new language only for to be accepted and approved by the host society for any job. Frank helps them to get a small place to live and pass their routine in new home-new adjustment in new country. It is a pick of their adjustment when they accept a ‘small’ place at corner of the building as their ‘new home’ though they had a ‘letter’ for guarantee ‘house’ in the same apartment building. Due to financial crunch, both have to distribute works especially for cooking in which they

experiment and get so-called self-satisfaction. Even they have to restrict their appetite for saving the ration for a week by eating frozen food once in a day.

Though they are facing hardships, they consider their ‘home’ as not better, ‘here’ (in Canada) it is better. This is a kind of hypocrisy to prove their decision right and in this way they betray their ‘souls’ too. Sometimes Boobie suspects that his brother was more pained by the destruction of their beautiful city than by the decimation of its inhabitants. Frank is very much disturbed by the state of refugees – “gloom from one, dismay from the other, A pathetic sight” (Doing the Heart Good, p.233) – as he had also faced such problem at time of arrival as a refugee. For Boobie language classes and work for his brother become the routine and they adapt with cooking. All these problems they face as they consider their passport – papers- visa like ‘gold’ and future ‘hope’ for lucrative job and gigantic house in another country. But in reality, it is not enough because this is a ‘second life’ for them and everybody is not so lucky to get whatever they have dreamt at the time of migration as the reality is always solid, harsh and absolutely terrified from which everyone has to wakeup since it is not a ‘sweet dream’. It reminds the lyrics of Lady Antebellum:

I felt I was spinning my wheels
Before too long the road was calling
I packed everything I owned
So sure that I was leaving this small town life behind for good
And not a single tear was falling
It took leaving for me to understand
Sometimes your dreams just aren't what life has planned
(<http://lyricstranslate.com/en/Lady-Antebellum-Home-Where-Heart-lyrics.html>)

Boobie feels homesickness-‘Home is where the heart is’ (Doing the Heart Good p.237) and in language classes the word ‘home’ oblige him to confront with it. For Boobie, old memories like high walls from which words (new language) cannot jump so the memories of his home, his friend – Ingam and girl friend – Adriana never go away. Ingam, his childhood best friend about whom now sometimes Boobie has no words after he had chosen to join the armed groups hunting down ‘rug-kissers’ so Boobie’s gesture had turned sinister. This suggests Boobie’s dislike for the armed people whose presence during the war-time propels his disgust. During the war time everyman between the ages of eighteen and fifty had been rounded up marched off at gunpoint. The cruelty of soldiers was visible when they cut and play football with Adriana’s head and her body was spat all over with their semen. Moreover, Boobie’s grandfather was a rich farmer and he had many hectares of wheat for which he needed twenty – thirty men to help harvest. Now his grandfather’s land has been taken over and his grandparents, father and mother are dead and their sacrifice to protect the land is running like poison in the mind of Boobie and at any cost he wants revenge and that land back and for that he has to labour for many years, and that is why he is in Canada. Besides the attachment to the land, the war had created the atmosphere where life became hard to live in the city:

...And the war started. Life in the city grew hard. Taps ran dry, electrical wires lay curled on the asphalt like dead serpents. Walls disintegrated in the darkness. Soon their city itself was reduced to their neighbourhood. Tall buildings once a half-hour tram ride away became nests for the other

side, the dark windows obscuring men with slender rifles and telescopic sights. The mountains surrounding the city, tamed for decades by hikers and picnickers, grew diseased with concealed mortars, heavy artillery, dug-in-tanks. Everywhere, the stench of sulphur and burning rubber. (Doing the Heart Good p.230)

Boobie's stay in Canada becomes uneasy when his 'past' revives in 'present' as the war-time criminal, a well-known rabble-rouser in Boobie's town before the war, whose men were permitted to rape any woman to cool their bailing blood and responsible for Adriana's cruel murder, has just moved to building the building where Frank is a superintendent. That criminal is living there with changing identity as there are many bakers today who were once butcher. Boobie is too much angry by knowing this and passionate to kill him to take the revenge of Adriana. Frank constantly watches his anger and worried about the act and its consequences. So finally, Frank killed that man as a revenge of Adriana, on behalf of Boobie, by thinking that Boobie would be in trouble if caught with charge- a refugee intent on murder which will spoil his whole life in another country where laws and procedures of the country aim to keep its own carpet clean, so Frank, himself has decided to act. Alistair is terribly fearful for Frank. Initially it looks a foolish act done by a matured person but then we realize the reason for this unprecedented act as for Frank, there is no life to go back to 'the country of past tense' (probably Bangladesh or Pakistan or Asian country), from where he belongs. He has no choice to go back, only he can chose to go to future (the country where he is now) because nothing is left or no one is there to welcome him. Though Frank is also suffering from identity problem as every refugee face it he has decided to stay in Canada for his remaining life:

I was like an orphan flung onto another planet. I could remake everything. I began by changing my name. Otto Frank is my name because it has been for so long, but it is not the name I was born with. An easy enough matter. At the end of the war, who had documents? So when they asked. What is your name, I made one up, right there on the spot. I said, Otto Steiglitz Frank, this is my name. Then they wrote it down, it became real, and it found its way onto every document, making them real and itself even more so. (Doing the Heart Good ,p.249)

Another emotional reason for Frank's killing is his disturbed marriage life as his wife failed to conceive which is a great shock for Frank because as a refugee everyone wants children not for *yesterday* but for *tomorrow* but for Frank nothing is stored in future. This moment redeemed everything. Frank is a kind of man who wants to live life only for peace and also there should be no regret for performing their duties for Boobie when Frank considers as his child. Hence, he thinks it was necessary for him to act rather than Boobie who is about to start his new life, so he has ended his own life by putting it into trouble and accepts it as a father's sacrifice of his life for his child (Boobie). Ironically, Frank has sacrificed a great amount of emotion and remaining life for his son like Boobie, but the newspaper story tells only that Frank, a retired gardener killed the man who was notorious in his own country for his role in several massacres and there is no single word in report mentions of Boobie!

The idiom 'home is the place where your heart is' is itself telling the deftness of its meaning automatically where everyone has to accept that 'home' is a haven on the earth and constant source of happiness. Even Neil Bissoondath while uncovering the cracks in Canada's multicultural mosaic, accepts that there is 'no place like home'.

<http://newint.org/features/1998/09/05/multiculturalism/>)

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