

Caught Between Homes: Depiction of the Diasporic Dilemma in Sethu's *Aliyah: The Last Jew in the Village*

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Abstract:

The paper analyses the depiction of the dilemma regarding 'return to homeland' as experienced by the Jewish community residing in Kerala after the creation of the nation of Israel. Responding to the Zionist call, the Jewish settlers started their journey back to the 'promised land'. But the people were torn between their loyalty to home land and host land. Sethu's Novel, *Aliyah: The Last Jew in the Village* depicts this psychological and ontological dilemma experienced by the Jewish community in Chendamangalam, a rural village in Kerala. It also depicts how the idea of the 'imagined' promised land comes in conflict with the reality of the 'experienced' homeland. By skillfully merging history and myth in the narrative structure of the novel, Sethu also portrays how the concept of homeland becomes problematic in the postcolonial world of transnational and transcultural identities.

Keywords: diaspora, homeland, identity, belonging, collective memory

'Home' has always been a core concern in Diasporic writing along with the issues of identity, belonging, uprootedness etc. In a world of transnational and multiple identities set in the context of eroding and diffusing borders, crossing of borders, living on the borders and conflicts over borders, it becomes complex and problematic. The concept of home in diaspora studies is closely related to the question of identity in philosophical and cultural terms. Placed in an alien world and in the background of ontological and cultural crises of identity,

longing to be back home has always been a basic urge of the diaspora. The implications and significations of the homeland at individual level often come in conflict with those at the collective level as found in certain experiences of the Jewish diaspora.

“Diaspora refers to a group of people with a common heritage or homeland who have moved out to places all over the world. Diaspora implies a dislocation from the nation-state or geographical location of origin and relocation in one or more nation-states, territories, or countries” (Briziel and Mannur 1). Originally it was used to refer to the exodus/dispersion of the Jews from Israel. But now it is generally used to refer to any group of people settled far from their ancestral homelands. It is also used to refer to the movement, dispersal or scattering of a people away from an ancestral homeland.

The Jewish diaspora, though beset with all the general features of the diasporic experiences and issues, stands apart due to its historical, cultural and religious peculiarities. It was more or less an event of dispersal that resulted in the settlement of the Jews in different parts of the world. In diasporic experience, the idea of home can be conceived only through an interaction between the plurality/duality of homelands. But in Jewish diaspora, this duality or plurality is mostly absent, rather unrealistic as they are often confronted with the ambiguity of prospects and possibilities of life in a land which most of them have not even seen. It remains part of their collective memory/ imagination which is sustained through stories, myths and religious performances.

Most of the diasporic communities live by the nostalgic memories of their homelands. They cherish the urge to be back in their homeland which is full of hope and dreams which remains as a bright reality to rely upon. Mostly these are their places of origin where they have deep roots and a sense of belonging. On the contrary, in Jewish diaspora, the connection between diasporas and their native place of origin is characterized by ambivalence and apprehension. The home/homeland for most of the Jewish communities living outside Israel remains more of an abstract/ imagined place where they no longer have any direct roots. Therefore their homeland, ‘the promised

land' as they call it, often becomes more alien than the countries that they live in which has turned into their real homeland.

The subjective and cultural experiences of the Jewish community residing in Kerala have to be seen in this background. They have assimilated themselves to the life of Kerala so much so that most of them do not feel any kind of alienation. Instead, they feel so homely in the place that is marked with unique touches of cordiality and fraternity. But the concept of the ancestral homeland is crafted in their consciousness by the earlier generation through the narration of stories and other modes of representation. As a result, there exists a conflict between the collective and the individual spheres in conceiving and understanding the homeland and the desire to return to that land.

Sethu's novel, *Aliyah* depicts this conflicting experiences of conceiving, imagining and understanding 'homeland'. The novel centers around a young Jewish man named Salamon and it delineates the story of three generations of a Jewish family living in the rural village in Kerala called Chendamangalam. When Judah was conquered by Babylonia, the Jews got dispersed all over the world. Several deportations took place after this and it is believed that the Jews reached India after the destruction of the second temple and the final desolation of Jerusalem in AD 69. The group that reached Chendamangalam, were granted sanctuary by the king of Kochi. Ever since their arrival here, they lived in close affinity with the natives. They were accepted in the land in an inclusive way by allowing access and opportunities to them in all walks of life. But after the formation of Israel, in response to the Zionist call, they prepared to leave this place of anchorage, shelter and love. The novel, *Aliyah* is set in the background of this crucial period in their life as they had to make an important decision- should they migrate to Israel? Or should they remain in Kerala?

This dilemma is made complex in the background of two factors related to the Jewish diaspora. One is the uncertainty about their native land and about the prospects of life in the land of Jerusalem which they were trained to believe as their home. Secondly, there exists a cordial relationship between the Jewish community and the native

community in Kerala. As a result, the characters in the novel look at the prospect of returning of the Promised Land from different perspectives. Majority of the people decide to return. But this decision is not because of a feeling of alienation felt in Kerala, but because of an emotional and collective longing to be back in the native land. “Home is a place of relationships, bonding and a pool of collective memories that assume identity and nativity formulating a longing when dispersed. Home temporally is a historical function that collectively contributes to communal myths and personal memories” (Raj 90). Salamon’s uncle Eliacha very clearly explains that they were leaving not because of any religious reason, but because Israel represents a final refuge from the historic persecution of Jews and they have to be together in the ‘promised land’. So he makes the decision to go even though he reiterates the fact that he loves this land and its people.

But there are people like Salamon and Daveed Chettan who decide to remain in Kerala as they see this land as their own land. They couldn’t think of leaving Kerala, the land which welcomed them, and where the generations of Jews have lived in harmony without any unpleasant experiences. The Promised Land was one which they knew very little about, a land which they wanted to rebuild their life which they had already constructed. Therefore the ancestral home for them becomes a mythic place of desire forged by imagination. Most of the characters do not know why the Jews feel that they are foreigners in the place where they have been living in perfect harmony and fraternity. Speaking about the different ways in which ‘home’ is imagined in diaspora communities, John McLeod says: “As an *idea* it stands for shelter, stability, security and comfort. To be ‘at home’ is to occupy a location where we are welcome, where we can be with people very much like ourselves” (210). For the Jewish residents of Chendamangalam, it was their home that gave them shelter, stability, security, comfort, love, cordiality and co operation.

So when the time arrived, they were tempted by some of their elders reminding them of ‘the promised land’ which was repeatedly narrated to them through stories, myths and biblical references. Still, some persisted in their beliefs and convictions like Salamon and Daveed Chettan. When Salamon asks Daveed Chettan:

“Is this truly a return? Or a migration? David Chettan replies: “Is there a difference between the two? They say it is a return, don’t they? To Jehova’s holy land. Who knows from where we came? Return means going back to the place you came from, is it not? How can you say for sure it is the place you say it is? (272)

At the individual level, the loyalty of the Jewish community is to the host land which welcomed them and safeguarded them these years. This individually and emotionally experienced homeland gets into conflict with the collectively transmitted idea of the promised land. As a result, the people are caught and torn between the imagined and narrated home land and the real experienced home land. On the back cover of Sethu’s novel, *Aliyah*, K Sachidanandan writes:

“An alluringly graphic narration of a little-discussed chapter of Kerala’s—and the world’s—history: the migration of the black Jews to the promised land of Israel. It is a moving tale of the reluctant migrants torn between two loyalties: to their native soil and to their Jewish identity. Fiction here turns into a site for raising some of the vital ontological questions of the post-globalized world: about identity, being, becoming and belonging. A gripping novel that moves from the past to the future and from strange dreams to stranger reality”.

Aliyah: The Last Jew in the Village by Sethu documents the psychological, social and cultural dilemma of the Jewish diaspora in Kerala. It is also the documentation of the dichotomic experience of the diaspora at individual and collective levels. While majority of the Jewish community in Kerala shares a sentimental affection with the land of Kerala, some are having the yearning to return to their homelands. *Aliyah* portrays the personal dilemma of the characters torn between loyalty and attachment towards the host land which is more of a native land and the prospects and hopes of return to the ‘homeland’, which is more of an alien land. The protagonist, Salamon ultimately chooses to remain in his host land which he has already accepted as his real homeland. “Thus finally the Ephraim family too was preparing to leave the land....No one knew the name of the first one to come. But perhaps someday someone might engrave on the wall of the synagogue the name of the last one. Evron’s son Solomon called Salamon. He was born here and he was buried here. To merge,

melt into the soil of one's birth – could there be a greater blessing than that?" (394). Thus the novel portrays in a very touching manner, the dilemma experienced by the Jewish diaspora in Kerala after the formation of the nation of Israel. It also shows how the concept of home land has become complex and polyphonic against the monolithic and homogenized imagining and forging of the same.

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