Le Simplegadi ISSN 1824-5226

Vol. XIII-No. 14 November 2015 DOI: 10.17456/SIMPLE-2

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Diasporic Homes

"…the act of imagination is bound up with memory".
(Morrison 1991: 305)

Home? Of course, I have a home! In fact I have two – one is a conventional brick-veneered house in a suburb of a Victorian country town in Australia. I have lived here for the past thirty-five years and my attachment to this residence can be attributed to the familiarity of a long-term association. As for the other place…well, it is not entirely my doing. The Muses were involved. It is built on the foundation of remembrance and given shape by my imagination. It's not only unusual but very special, an ideal place of sojourn where I can dwell in the utmost comfort and roam freely between 'what was' and 'what is', without any restrictions or pangs of deprivation. It is also the source of my creative inspiration. In an instant I can conjure up this collage of a rambling, two-storied building crowded with events and people who influenced me and shaped my formative years. It doesn't seem strange that I meet them in different guises, sometimes as I was and then as I am now. But the people I meet have not changed. Relatives, friends, enemies and acquaintances are blessed with agelessness. They provide drama, relationships, frailties of human nature, glimpses of nobility and mean-mindedness; in other words, the material for fiction. You see, I have discovered the powers of a sorcerer, a wizard…a magus, a storyteller. But alas! If the truth were known I am more of a trickster. Hocus Pocus! And I am away! There it is- my Camelot, Shangri-la, Utopia...Call it what you will, but it is a landscape I can call my own. It is a sanctuary, an immutable retreat where I wander and create, a haven barricaded against the afflictions of Time. It's a place where past and present merge into a composite of the occidental and the oriental, somewhere I can feel no tension or disharmony between my divided self. Here I can peel back the years, rediscover and refurbish my past, locate my cultural coordinates and reassure myself about who I am now and where I began. Among the rooms there is a chamber of mirrors where I can encounter multiple reflections of myself. 'I am a part of all that I have met,' claimed Tennyson's Ulysses and the line reverberates within me, reinforcing the plurality of my identity. Here I am not confused and nor do I feel any sense of loss because I can instantly reclaim the past without leaving the present.

Well, where is it? I hear you frame the unasked question with growing impatience.

Why do you want to know?

How can you get there?

Such persistence should be rewarded, I suppose. All right, I will give you directions. It's really quite simple. Dive into the imagination. Take what is there. Then…'Second to the right and straight on till morning.' What's that? Why am I being so impossibly vague? But that is what Peter Pan said to Wendy about the way to Neverland…Oh, you'll never find it. That's the point! It's my private place which I guard with the utmost jealousy, a creation of memory and imagination. It is shrouded in a permanent fog and I am its custodian with the key to its entrance.

For writers belonging to a diasporic community and leading what Homi Bhabha calls 'border lives,' there is a dual consciousness of place – one which is physically located in the present and the other which is elusive and intangible, strewn in the maze of memory. By dabbling in creative writing, an expatriate finds the opportunity to widen and diversify the cultural landscape. The tensions inherent in the awareness of the 'foreignness' of the past and the 'alienation' of the present, coupled with the unsettled dissatisfaction they generate, are often the energising forces of creativity. For those who are paradoxically blessed and burdened with twin lives of polarised cultures, any form of creative exercise is not merely an indulgence in aesthetics or an expression of socio-political concern. The creative process itself leads to a search, discovery and an engagement with parts of the missing self, those elusive but crucial segments of one's past which appear to have gone missing and cannot be verified by the empirical reality of the present, but which, nevertheless, live in memory. For the diasporic voice, any form of creativity is also an attempt to link with and reclaim what has been and how all this gives shape and meaning to the progression in one's life. In the anxiety to discover selfhood as a constant, it is inevitable to find multiple and composite images of identity, thus creating confusion and disappointment about missing the focus on a single vision of selfhood and a lack of anchorage to a specific place and community. Thomas Turino is of the opinion that a human identity evolves as result of a variety of experiences and interaction with the environment over a person's lifetime. One can, therefore, suggest that the formation of identity is 'hybrid' because it entails engagement with facets of diverse experiences. "Diasporic identities, however", Turino goes on to say, "are dramatically hybrid because of the multiple…iconic maps of reality and bases for cultural resources" (Turino 2014: 13).

For many of us the notion of a 'new beginning' may stem from the desperation to escape hardships, war, socio-economic deprivation and situations which are traumatic and stressful in the extreme. The overwhelming desire to seek a better and peaceful life is often the impetus which subdues the fear of dislocation and gives us the courage to confront whatever dangers imperil the travel ahead. Many of us are

not capable of projecting our thoughts to the future and perceive the subtleties in the changes which await us.

Often we undertake the migratory journey with stuporous naivety, without pausing to contemplate the implications of a seismic cultural shift. In our eagerness to leave and recreate ourselves in a foreign environment, we pay scant attention to anthropologist Clifford Geertz's claim that "there is no such thing as a human nature independent of culture" (Geertz 1965: 112). In other words, both communally and individually, culture embodies us in its mesh of socio-political, religious and economic structures. It is a continuum of man's history and determinant of humankind's development, linking our past with humanity's present condition and beyond. The obvious conclusion is that it is impossible to entirely leave behind our indigenous environment which nourished and shaped us and redefine ourselves as brand new entities without the influence of the past. Our irrevocable connection with what may eventually be considered to be a foreign past is through memory. It cannot be obliterated and nor can it be forgotten. Inadvertently we drag the past with us into the new world where we think our troubles will evaporate.

The experience of diaspora is so varied and complex in its emotional, intellectual and physical dimensions that it defies any reductive explanation of commonality which might resonate across cultures. There has to be, of course, a recognition of some of the fundamental generalities associated with displacement. We can say that there is most certainly a reconfiguration of lives in alien cultures characterised by anticipation, excitement, trepidation, loneliness, nostalgia, questions of identity, adoption of new cultural habits and a struggle to come to terms with the unfamiliarity of different lifestyles.

Despite the eventual attunement to a new life rhythm, a migrant is not necessarily always at ease with himself. There can be sudden and periodic bouts of puzzlement and moments of hollowness when one feels as though chunks of selfhood have disappeared. There is a haunting sense of loss and the bitterness of incompletion which are not immediately identifiable. Alienation begins to creep in as one realises the foreignness of customs and rituals, a lack of the fervour of patriotism and sincerity in the celebratory events of one's adopted country and the exposure to the view that one must be assimilated into the mainstream culture. Introspection lacks clarity because the inner landscape of experiences is weirdly diverse, murky and confused. Among all the unanswered questions, what eventually crops up as one of the most vital is "What is my nation?" Macmorris' famous query in *King Henry V* (Act 3, sc. ii) is one which most of us eventually face in response to that feeling that a critical element is missing from our newly found lives. Nothing is palpably wrong and yet everything is not quite right. It is the

uncertainty of not knowing where one belongs which compels us to examine the dilemma of diaspora and seek an imaginative respite to quell the agitation.

The abjectness of feeling rootless can often force us to seek security in a past which is often redesigned by the effect of the imagination on memory. Memory is selective because imagination edits, deletes, highlights and bridges those chasms of forgetfulness in the past to suit our needs. "Memory is the mind's own theatre", observed Octavio Paz. It "invents and erases" (Paz 1979: 189). On this great stage of the mind, the imagination becomes a leading player as we activate the creativity within us. William Safran suggests that members of a diasporic community have tenacious memories about their homeland with which they continue to "relate personally or vicariously…in one way or another, and their ethno-communal consciousness and solidarity are importantly defined by the existence of such a relationship" (Safran 1991: 84).

The propensity to remember is a natural and cognitive characteristic in humans. Recalling the past often maps the changes in identity and provides a referential framework for the understanding of who we are and how we arrived at a particular point in the present. Memory, however, is not just about perspectives but also about place situations. Location gives anchorage to events and concretises the images which memory provides. A locality acts as memory's grid and, within that network, there can be loci or even a single locus, "a place easily grasped by the memory such as a house, an inter-columnar space, a corner, an arch or the like" (Yates 1966: 6). It is usually within a setting that we remember meaningful happenings and events.

There are gaps and holes in what we recall and the manner in which we plug them with inventions of the imagination is almost reflexive. Remembering is an act of creation, a reinvention of a segment of the past by the imaginative manipulation of events and incidents, often for the sake of achieving a desired end. It could be for emotional satisfaction, stress alleviation, identity check or fulfilment of an incomplete or unrequited experience of the past.

For an expatriate, memory is also a crucial aid to the understanding of the necessity and the complexity of the multiple meanings of 'home' and acts as a bridge to a past which can often appear to be remote and inconsistent because of the 'flickering' and 'unsteady' images formulated in remembering[16]. The cultural splintering, which results from an expatriate's experience of dislocation, is usually at the centre of the perception of living in no-man's-land. In an essay, Edward Said quotes Simone Weil's succinct and lucid comment on a fundamental human need. "To be rooted", she said, "is perhaps the most important and least recognised need

[16] This idea is well articulated in William F. Brewer's essay, "What is Recollective Memory?" (1996).

of the human soul" (Said, 1991: 364). To uproot oneself from an indigenous culture, with the assumption that it is easy to be replanted in alien soil, is a fallacy of diasporic thinking.

The awareness of the tension between what memory serves up about the place of beginning and the empirical reality of what is now home creeps is gradual. It is fraught with transient emotional ripples which we try to underplay as part of our public persona to appear balanced and well-adjusted to our new circumstances. In private the anguish over the missing self is less restrained. There are no easy solutions to such an abstract problem. The polarisation between the past and the present and the attempt to reconcile and align them in a linear continuum of the development of one's identity can be the stirrings of creativity. The need for articulation becomes a compulsion and it can be achieved through an art form which one can contemplate and rationalise in an attempt to accept the changes in selfhood. Such expression is not necessarily dramatic. It revolves around the recollection of the past and can take the form of day dreams, imagined sequence of events, snatches of written words, doodling or sketches. Memory becomes a vital part of the process of creating and recreating, censoring and refurbishing and, above all, selecting the perspective of recall. Judy Giles makes the point that "Memory is an act of remembering that can create new understanding of both the past and the present. Memories are an active process by which meaning is created; they are not depositories of fact" (Giles 2002: 22).

It is a mistake to treat memory and imagination as separate entities working independently to reach conclusions about the diasporic self. Allowance has to be made for both the dynamics of an inextricably changing, symbiotic relationship and the possibility that a free-roaming imagination also entails an ongoing reshaping of memory. The past is not entirely grounded in some unquestionable form of absolutism because memory is not entirely reliable. As Siegfried Kracauer reminds us: "Memory encompasses neither the entire spatial appearance of a state of affairs nor its entire temporal course. Compared to photography, memory's records are full of gaps" (Kracauer 1995: 50). Like Roland Barthes' notion of *punctum*, there are short and sharp points of remembrance which provide no more than patchy, general information. Nevertheless, some of the images are also puncture points which are entrances to what Barthes refers to as "subtle beyond" (Barthes 1981: 26). What memory cannot provide, the imagination does. The liaison between 'fact' and 'fiction' is sandpapered by the artistic craft to produce a seamless product.

Acceptance of the fact that life is marked with imperfections and dissatisfaction is an acknowledgement of the inevitable discrepancy between the ideal and the real. To avoid a despairing self-pity we have to take measures to reconstruct the past as a place of temporary retirement which is not an anathema to the conscience or the

emotions. It has to be somewhere which offers sustenance and reassurance that despite the cultural fractures life has been worthwhile and enriching. Of course, there are no guarantees that we will not experience doubt, regret, sadness and even anguish. "Man must suffer to be wise" (Aeschylus 1956: 140) laments the chorus in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*. Regardless of whatever wisdom we gather during the ordeal of resettlement, there will remain the uncertainty of whether it was the right decision to uproot oneself from one's indigenous culture. But that is the hefty payment for the richness of experiences to be gained from living simultaneously in two places.

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