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Visions of Home in British Asian Women's Writing: Leena Dhingra's *Amritvela* and Roma Tearne's *Bone China*

Introduction

In this contribution I intend to focus on British Asian women's writing, which has been shaped by the writers' own experience of migration from the Indian Subcontinent to Britain. Over the last decades this thriving trend in contemporary English literature has grown to reflect the reality that "there are now three generations of Asian women living in Britain", as sociologist Amrit Wilson has noted (*Dreams, Questions, Struggles* 129). Women writers have variously addressed issues of individual and group identity, and explored the link between gender and ethnicity. The search for a diasporic, cross-cultural identity, along with the quest for home and belonging, are crucial issues in British Asian women's writing: the diasporic experience has engendered multiple linguistic and cultural relocations and the concept of home has become an increasingly contested terrain. In diasporic women's literature home is poised at the intersections of being 'unhomed', as suggested by Homi Bhabha (*Location of Culture* 9), and feeling more or less comfortably at home in one country or more countries. British Asian women's writing stems from a tentative negotiation of opposites such as freedom and confinement, uprooting and displacement and, as postcolonial critic Susheila Nasta has pointed out, offers an ongoing reflection on multiple ways of conceiving 'home':

Home is both here and there, past and present, local and global, traditional and modern. It may provoke a referential construction of a past lost, but may also be a deliberately invented construct, extending and reshaping the boundaries of both the familiar and the strange (*Home Truths* 244).

Constantly suspended between uprooting and regroundings and striving to negotiate what are often seen as conflicting parts of the writers' identity, such as England and India, British Asian women's works hinge, therefore, on the tension between the fragility of making a home in the host country and the lure of 'back home'. As the editors of the volume *Interpreting Homes in South Asian Literature* point out, the concept of home for diasporic writers navigates between the future as a "movement ahead" towards a point of arrival, and the weight of a "given up past" (*Interpreting Homes* ix):

The literature emerging from (...) diasporic experience tends to be a remembering of the world through a backward glance. (...) the journey would be transformative and irrevocable; its narratives henceforth would dwell in the realm of the imaginary. The diaspora functions through much the same sentiments, those that speak of a voluntary movement ahead with the inevitable baggage of a given up past clinging somewhere in memory (*Interpreting Homes* ix).

In her book *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Postcoloniality* (2000), cultural critic Sara Ahmed reflects on the meaning of home for diasporic subjects and poses a series of questions central to the understanding of the process of home making: “what does it mean to be at home? How does it affect home and being at home when one leaves home?” Ahmed suggests that definitions of ‘home’ usually “shift across a number of registers” (*Strange Encounters* 86): home can be where one usually lives, or where one’s family lives, or one’s native country. It is possible that one’s native country might not be felt as home - *being-at-home* is arguably a matter of how one feels or how one might fail to feel.

On a similar note, in her book *Cartographies of Diaspora* (1996), Avtar Brah outlines the difference between home as where one lives, and home as where one comes from in terms of affect. On the one hand, home might be a mythical place of desire in the diasporic imagination, a longing for a place which exists only in the migrants’ mind. In this sense, it is a place of no return, even though it is possible to visit the place of origin temporarily. On the other hand, home is also the lived experience of locality and triggers more tactile, material associations: “its sounds and smells, its heat and dust, balmy summer evenings [...] all this as mediated by the historically specific everyday of social relations” (*Cartographies of Diaspora* 192). Brah elaborates on the link between home and diaspora and suggests that “the concept of diaspora places the discourse of *home* and *dispersion* in creative tension, inscribing a homing desire while simultaneously critiquing discourses of fixed origins’ (*Cartographies of Diaspora* 192-193). And diaspora always evokes multiple locations within and across territorial, cultural and mental boundaries.

Following from the conceptual tools offered by Ahmed’s and Brah’s interventions, favouring a notion of home in terms of affect and multilocality, so as to reflect the unhinged positioning of diasporic, hybrid female subjects, I intend to discuss the ways in which the works by authors Leena Dhingra and Roma Tearne project different and mutually non-exclusive visions of home. The two writers represent two different stages of development in South Asian women’s writing in Britain and have, each in her own way, contributed to inserting a distinct British Asian voice onto the literary map of contemporary British writing.

***Amritvela* (1988)**

Amritvela (*First Light of Day*) by actress and writer Leena Dhingra published in 1988, was one of the first British Asian novels to emerge from the experience of the Asian Women Writers’ Collective, which was set up in the mid-1980s and provided a forum for women wishing to explore through creative writing the diversity of British Asian female subjectivities. Leena Dhingra was an active member of the Writers’ Collective, a cultural endeavour which was clearly redolent of the spirit of the 1980s and figuratively provided a ‘home’ for their members. The collective was one of the series of fledgling Asian women’s organizations in Britain, which at the time marked the growing activism of Asian women who were fighting racism in the society at large and the patriarchy in their community. Writers shared their work through public readings, and some of the writings were collected in anthologies, whereas others grew to become full-length works.

The novel *Amritvela* reads as a reflection on home in terms of affect, loss and remediation: Meera is an Indian woman brought up in London, who at a difficult moment of her married life decides to visit her family in India and ultimately ponders whether to move back there permanently with her daughter Maya. The novel engages with the predicament of second generation characters who struggle to become Asian and British and

pinpoints the contradictions Meera has faced all her life, after settling in Britain, where she had struggled to create "a home without walls", "whose boundaries are always deferred, always in translation" (*Home Truths* 244). Her search for a translational space and identity is intensified through the motif of the journey signifying movement and transformation, as the novel chronicles Meera's three week long visit to the family home in Delhi. The novel has a circular structure, with the narrative framed between two journeys, away from and then back in London. It opens with Meera on the plane flying to India, where she feels suspended between Britain and India:

I feel myself suspended between two cultures, then this is where I belong, the halfway mark. Here in the middle of nowhere, up in the atmosphere, is my space – the halfway point between East and West (*Amritvela* 1).

Meera connects her physical state (being on the plane) with her dual identity. As one of the first British Asian voices, through Meera Dhingra tests the limits and explores the contours of the hyphen, the halfway mark which reflects the dual, hybrid identity that second generation British Asians were struggling to forge for themselves, in the face of racism and patriarchal constraints in 1980s Britain. During her stay in India, Meera recreates India as a sensory experience, through flavours and colours, a "mythical place of desire", as Avtar Brah would have it (*Cartographies of Diaspora* 192).

When I was a child and even later when I would come to India, it was like magic, so full of promise and possibilities and idealism. It was like a cake full of layers, colours, aromas, flavours, soft and light and rich with infinite possibilities (*Amritvela* 153).

However, Meera soon realizes that her view of India is based on the past, on her recollections of childhood and on the illusory security which such memories offer:

For me, India has got something to do with being a child. Something to do with feeling loved, protected and belonging. Maybe even something to do with my parents' own longing to return. For the child in me it is warm and familiar, and for the grown up that I am, it is a strange land, in which I don't know my way around (*Amritvela* 114-115).

During her visit in Delhi, Meera is suspended between "feeling at home and declaring a place as home", according to Brah (*Cartographies of Diaspora* 194), and realizes that these two attitudes are irreconcilable. The feeling of exclusion she experiences while discovering a different India with new norms and customs, prevents her from proclaiming India as home. Meera's belief to find a home in India was initially based on what turns out to be "a false notion of India as a homogeneous unit, a false belief that some sort of harmonious, idyllic, Gandhian India is there [...] to be rediscovered" (*Amritvela* 9).

Her partial and almost inauthentic notion of India is progressively problematized and ultimately redressed by Meera as she gradually accepts a multilayered view of India: Meera is gradually assisted in her process of home making and becoming aware of other sides of India by her great aunt, the matriarch Bibiji, whose words offer a key to the resolution of Meera's crisis and a relief from her growing uneasiness in defining home: "India is all

the things you feel it to be.” (*Amritvela* 115). Meera has nurtured an unchanging, timeless vision of India and imagined Indian identity as “singular and static” (*Displacement and Identity* 13), and consequently has expected to find the India of her childhood still in place. Once realizing the many faces of the country, she has to face the fact that the past is like a “foreign country” (*Displacement and Identity* 13) and that she is no longer the child who she was.

Her aunt Bibiji’s home, which throughout the novel works as a symbol of tradition, belonging and identity, is redolent of the colonial past, and to Meera it signifies hybridity, a place which conflates multiple identities. For instance, her aunt’s drawing room is full of “Indianised Victoriana, a testament to a bygone era”, where Meera notices “the familiar mixture of India and Victoriana” (*Amritvela* 17). Bibiji’s home is also a repository of past memories, as it houses objects and stories from the family’s original home in Lahore, before the events following the partition of India after the independence had forced the family to relocate in Delhi. Spaces are thus used effectively to refute the idea of identity as singular and unchanging. What is made clear through the description of places is that “there is no pure space” (*Displacement and Identity* 13) and that every place is subject to transformation.

The novel ends with Meera on a plane back to London. The circularity in the narrative favours the character’s reclaiming of her diasporic identity “as a successful resolution of the struggle between the halves of her divided self” (*Displacement and Identity* 15). Meera does not leave India for England: she carries India back to London with her, thanks to some emblematic objects which she takes with her, such as a *shahtús* (the shawl) belonging to her great-grandmother in Lahore, an item symbolizing her family. When she is on the plane, she uses such a shawl to cover herself: at that very moment, she inhales the smell of her mother country. She also takes with her aunt Bibiji’s diary, along with the many stories told by her relatives, each of which has a moral which she will never forget. In turn, she leaves two of her prized possessions behind: her epistolary journal, which her aunt has to throw into the river Ganga, and her mother’s statue of Parvati, the Hindu goddess of love and devotion. In other words, “she takes India with her, while leaving herself in India” (*Displacement and Identity* 15), ultimately finding her place in a genealogy of women of the family which strengthens her sense of home and identity.

Meera wakes up at the time of *amritvela*, “where past, present and future are for a brief moment magically one” (*Displacement and Identity* 15). This moment coincides with her acceptance of her dual identity, as well as of both her homes: she admires the *amritvela* by looking out of the plane window and thinks:

I am on my way home. From my home in the East, to my home in the West, safely through my space – my home in the clouds. Yes, I come – and I’m going – home. For now I can sleep, safely on the plane. For a plane is always safe: whichever way I am going, it always carries me home (*Amritvela* 177).

At the end of the novel, she realizes the multilocationality of home “across territorial, cultural and psychic boundaries” (*Cartographies of Diaspora* 194) and understands that her identity is “not continuous, uninterrupted, unchanging [...] but instead plural and in process” (*Writing Diaspora* 68). Meera accepts and elaborates on an active vision of home: she no longer considers India a mythical place of desire to which she aspires to come back, but celebrates instead the permeability of the boundaries between India and England and ultimately places herself in the continuum between the two countries.

***Bone China* (2008)**

Bone China, a novel written by Sri-Lankan English writer Roma Tearne and published in 2008, also offers a reflection on home that is indelibly bound up with the author's - and her characters'- experience of escaping the war-torn Sri-Lanka, formerly Ceylon, and seeking a refuge in England. Born to a Sinhalese mother and a Tamil father, as a small child in the early 1960s Tearne left her native island "with all its tropical beauty" (*Brixton Beach* 83), as unrest originating in the conflict between the Sinhalese majority and Tamil minority intensified and escalated into full-blown civil war.

The centrality of home, along with the longing for her island, permeates all of Tearne's novels and is poignantly captured in one of her earlier novels entitled *Brixton Beach*, where Alice, the main character of the story, as a little child on the eve of her departure from Sri-Lanka heading towards England, is offered a comforting view of home by her doting grandfather Bee:

'Listen, Putha,' he had told her, trying very hard to be fair...'this is your first home, you were born here. That's a powerful thing, don't ever forget it. But it may not be your last, you understand. And that's all right, too. It will be beautiful in England even though the difference will surprise you. You'll just have to search for it.'

Standing in the doorway he recalled that conversation. Wondering if he should have told her what he really believed; that this place with all its tropical beauty was where she should remain. And also that it believed it would make no difference. For although she would leave Ceylon, Ceylon would never leave her." (*Brixton Beach* 82-83).

In *Bone China* Tearne writes a sweeping family saga spanning two countries and three generations, privileging the perspective of the female members of the De Silva family, a Catholic Tamil family in the capital city of Colombo. The first part of the novel is set on the island and the main character of this part of the book is Grace De Silva, the mother and presiding matriarchal figure, who struggles to keep the family together and preserve the decaying family home, in the face of progressive economic hardship and social decline and under the growing threat posed by the civil war. Four of the five De Silva's children, grown up and exhausted by the war, decide one after another to move to England.

In the second part, the narrative focuses on one of the De Silva's boys, Thornton, and his wife Savitha, as they struggle to make a home in Britain for their little daughter Anna Meeka. In the London part of the novel the author offers glimpses of Savitha's life as an immigrant in London by concentrating on her homesickness and on her condition as a displaced person. Savitha feels disoriented and longs for her lost home; however, she finds the strength to endure isolation and homesickness in the belief that London is the right choice for her young daughter Anna-Meeka. Therefore, she tries not to be discouraged by loss and nostalgia and resorts to the healing power of memory by recreating a Sri Lankan atmosphere in her flat and preserving her customs. For instance, she cooks with typical Sri Lankan ingredients, whose 'smells were of home' (*Bone China* 191). Furthermore, she continues to write to her mother-in-law Grace, an action which allows her to keep a bond with the members of the family back home in Sri Lanka. Savitha's longing for her home is reflected in the way she

carefully handles the precious bone china Grace has given to her grand-child Anna-Meeka in order to keep the memory of home intact.

While she waited she decided to reorganize the cupboard that held her collection of bone china (...) when she opened the cupboard, hidden memories tumbled out, competing with each other... only now did she see the extent of Grace's generosity. Her mother-in-law had given her the best, most treasured pieces of her china. Savitha gazed at them, unexpected tears springing up. (*Bone China* 211).

The family bone china works as a leitmotiv symbolizing both the value and the fragility of home, as well as the necessary– albeit frail – Savitha's connection with the past:

Holding the tea-rose cups high up to the light, Savitha felt as though she was cradling her own fragile existence. Fiercely, stacking the lily-of-the-valley tureens, she decided, I will never stop using them. I will never allow Meeka to forget her home (*Bone China* 212).

The handling of the delicate, fine set also magnifies Savitha's own vulnerability:

She went back to pouring tea into their lovely bone-cups. But it was not simple. Later on even though she was busy, there was plenty of time for her homesickness to return. She sat working... a small exotic seabird, stranded on a narrow spit of land. Her wings closed. (*Bone China* 214).

Savitha sees herself as cast adrift and indulges in her memories of Sri Lanka as a mythical place of desire in her imagination, a country of no return that, due to the civil war, has turned into a broken paradise. Throughout the London part of the novel, Savitha's inability to assimilate is offset by her daughter's all too eager acceptance of England as her home: Anna Meeka finds her family, and particularly her mother's longing for a lost home, irritating and hard to understand:

'Moan, moan, moan. We' re *here*, aren't we? What's the use of thinking about a place we can't live in any longer? Why do they go on and on about Sri Lanka?' . . . Every single time they get together that's all they talk about,' (*Bone China* 278-79).

Savitha struggles to control her homesickness, and grasps the real meaning of her condition in England thanks to a sudden manifestation of the essential nature of displacement. Savitha's epiphany is triggered by a garden party at Buckingham Palace that she and other members of her family are invited to attend along with other displaced Sri Lankans, which ultimately has a profoundly disturbing effect on her.

She had gone to the arcade in search of the papery bone china she had seen at Buckingham Palace, but instead all she found was a crude imitation of the real thing. She would find nothing like it ever again. [...] Nothing was real any longer; all was insubstantial. For on that afternoon, in the palace grounds, Savitha had caught a glimpse of something different, something that had been completely invisible until now. It gave context to this thing they called Empire and to people who once had ruled their country. With a shock she

realised that only by leaving her home could she have seen any of it. For distance, thought Savitha, what had been needed, distance had sharpened her perspective, revealing many hidden truth. (*Bone China* 314).

After such an epiphany, Savitha experiences a sense of loss and ensuing disillusionment, as she realizes that immigrants like her are displaced people belonging nowhere, and that London will never be her home. In other words, she fails to equate her sense of home with “the lived experience of a locality” (*Cartographies of Diaspora* 192) and consequently feels at a loss as she faces “the unhomely moment”, one that “creeps on you stealthily as your own shadow and suddenly you find yourself taking the measure of your dwelling in a state of incredulous terror.” (*Location of Culture* 9)

Savitha can only brood on the fragile continuity with her past life the bone china stands for and realizes that history was “what made you what you are - gave you a solidity, a certainty”, and her unhomed, displaced clan “had no history left, for carelessly they had lost it along the way. Escaping with their passionate ideals, they had arrived here. Hoping.... But she saw it was for *them* to understand. We belong nowhere”. (*Bone China* 315).

Conclusion

Amritvela and *Bone China* have contributed to exploring in the literary terrain the experience of British Asian women, as both novels engage with the complexity of writing home for diasporic female characters. The narratives strive to recreate visions of home that can accommodate the characters’ past and present, by actively reclaiming memories, habits, objects and places that have been uprooted in migration and displacement.

Home resides in an in-between state, as Meera seems to suggest in her acceptance of duality and multilocality, which strengthens her awareness that home is both England and India. During her stay in India, Meera “sheds the negative feeling of being caught in a flux between cultures and moves towards an appreciation of both” (*Writing Diaspora* 68).

Bone China offers a more problematic and arguably more negative vision of home that is reflected in the fragility of papery bone china and is found only in a much longed-for mythical place of no return. Savitha fails to actively place herself in an in-between position between England and Sri Lanka. She ultimately finds it impossible to feel at home in England and resorts to the soothing, nurturing memories of Sri Lanka which she envisions for herself as “an imaginary homeland built on the shifting sands of memory” (*Home Truths* 244).

Through their ongoing exploration of physical and mental interpretations of home, Dhingra and Tearne offer “intimations of home ” (*Uprootings/Regroundings* 9) and, as Antoinette Burton has argued, write literary narratives of home and belonging where: ‘home’ emerges as a very specific kind of space, a ‘telling place’ through whose doors, windows, and passageways people’s pasts are glimpsed, in whose rooms life stories are relived and consequently re-membered” (*Dwelling in the Archive* 15).

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