

When Mr. Pirzada Creates *Anuranan*: A Study of Home Through the Bong Connection

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*Today, as we turn to face the long march back,
I ache for the cool of welcoming streets and rooftops.
But the memory of this place is forever burnt
into my children's eyes and its cinders ignite my fear.*

-Debjani Chatterjee

There is fear; there is longing and overall, there is a great dilemma which emanate from these lines where the poetess mulls over the possibility of returning to her *Home*, a certain geographical place associated with memory and emotion. How does one feel first to be uprooted and then to romp back to the homeland? What does the homeland denote and what does it connote? Does homeland truly exist or is this *at-homeness* an echo of off-the-centre deconstructive feeling? Here is another poet from Scotland for whom returning to home is-

*There will always be
Paddy green for me
Though the floods come every year
And flow relentlessly*

-Bashabi Fraser

As both the stanzas suggest, *home* has a definite performative importance, especially for the emotional sustenance. But, there are other voices that will argue that diaspora, as part of its essential requirement, has no home in reality. It is a kind of hyphenated existence that celebrates *not-being-at-home*. It contains, according to Vijay Mishra, *hyphenated identities as indicated in their passport*. So a constant remaking in terms of identity goes on at a subterranean level, which creates new spaces for *liminality* and *hybridity*. But what happens when that home is catapulted in some crisis, or the same home undergoes a reorientation, a tectonic readjustment, or when one feels this *vagrant space* of diaspora as the means for alienation? It is really intriguing to think whether the hybridized reality of diaspora, the comfort of living in the first world can restrict one from seeking an emotional succor, a sense of importance from the very association with an imaginary or an ontological space called *home*. In Bengali, there is one beautiful word called *Anuranan* which means resonance, a kind of metaphysical connection. One may be led to retrace his/her root following an *anuranan* at a metaphysical level. This feeling or connection can be termed as *home mystique*, toeing on the line of *feminine mystique*. This story *When Mr. Pirzada Came To Dine* by Jhumpa Lahiri ends by creating a flutter, a sense of *anuranan* as the narrator discovers her hyphenated reality at muddle with her other impulse for the parent's homeland. In Urdu it is called *firaaq* which again implies estrangement, a separation combined with the quest for identity. And, we know that identity is part of the existential aspect of human life. As the narrator and her family are comfortably settled in America carrying a specific, in fact a resounding identity, they could have been free of any pull or tug of emotions towards their homeland, India. They are already in their way to get fitted in the multi-layers of American society, being part of the melting pot that proudly proclaims *pan-Americana*. But the story presents us with an unusual situation where they cling on with their Indian origin articulating and re-articulating their love for Indian-ness. From this point, Mr. Pirzada's presence and his own identity as a *common* brethren are pregnant with labyrinthine possibilities, which gradually involve all the basic tenets of Diaspora as an existential terrain. He is the one who spawns these webs of *firaaq* and *anuranan* that recur through the story, even after he stops coming to dine. So the story travels from a sense of presence to an abiding feeling of absence, a journey that is quintessentially diasporic in various assumptions.

As the title of the story reflects the most important happening or the action of the story is these evenings when Mr.Pirzada, a *desi* guy, came to dine with the narrator and her family in *videsh*. So this identity creates a connection which ends in an ironic disjunction as a new nation is set to appear by another bifurcation between East and West Pakistan. Mr.Pirzada becomes a man of no-nation. So belonging from a single homeland suddenly seems a stretched, exhausted connection. The narrator was completely taken aback by her father's words, *Mr.Pirzada is no longer considered Indian*. It reveals one of the fundamental aspects of such categorization, that *Indian-ness* has some specific *proto-affects* for this person, which is totalitarian and conclusive. Raymond Williams has referred culture as *a realized signifying system*, which is perfectly in concurrence with any homogenizing claim like the *Indian* or the *Pakistani*. There is a presupposition of culture as a *field of values* rather than as a *field of practice* in William's study of culture, but the Diaspora, as a field of culture, prioritizes practice over value. Jane Mummery in her critical piece has stated- *hyphenation is not an identity to be assumed, but a practice to be maintained. We need to remember, in other words, to keep on seeing it as practice as to 'how' we are, given that we can never fully pin down or practice 'what' we are*. Therefore, inviting Mr.Pirzada for dinner is actually tantamount to an articulation of cultural sameness, which is indeed a kind of culture of practice. This becomes more evident from this comment made by the narrator in the story-

In search of compatriots, they(her parents) used to trail their fingers, at the start of each new semester.....circling surnames familiar to their part of the world. It was in this manner they discovered Mr.Pirzada, and phoned him, and invited him to our home

It speaks of an essential trope of living outside home, which is to find different ways of being at-home that makes this primarily an unknown figure more familiar. It is the kind of familiarity that is taken for granted, by the virtue of same origin. This apparent innocuous assertion is pertinent to culture of politics and the politics of identity. There is a sense of desperation in selecting "discovered" Mr.Pirzada as their guest. Now the question that arises is why this desperation to invite someone from their *homeland* given that hybridity claims a complete assimilation after a certain level. Isn't it a fact, which is further consolidated by this statement, that somewhere down the line tall claims of multiculturalism are too ambitious for practical application? This feeling of being not-at-home is actually derived from the desire of at-homeness, which is neither anti-subjectivist nor anti-essentialist. It is true that this practice of essentialising is not free of economical and political maneuvering, but, as far as this family is concerned, they feel a sense of community in the company of Mr.Pirzada and an emotional empathy in essentialising India as *the sprawling orange diamond*. Once Lila, who is also the narrator, puts up an innocent observation which is really intriguing from the point of anthropological interest-

It made no sense to me. Mr.Pirzada and my parents spoke the same language, the same jokes, looked more or less the same. They ate pickled mangoes with their meals, ate rice every night for supper with their hands

Significantly, this sameness has spurred this feeling of belonging to a same land and culture. This feeling of togetherness is further emboldened by the fact that India, or for that matter, the entire sub-continent region is caught in another political turbulence, a political separation, and the creation of another nation. This brings in the issue of history and tradition. What does the history or tradition imply for a diaspora community? Should they take up the history

of their homeland or should they follow the history of the place they have migrated to? This is an existential tension that problematises the very liberal and democratic claim of hybridity. In the story the father enquires, *What exactly do they teach you at school?* And, the mother, who is more inured with the changed reality, replies, *we live here now, she was born here*, so learning the history of India hold no meaning anymore. But this remains a question, why the multiculturalism of American society will not allow an Indian to pursue his or her own history? The narrator, being born in America, assumes a virtual third space, and hence, she is subjected to an oppressive dichotomy between her two selves, the one, following school curriculum, is obliged to learn American freedom movement, and the other self, which following the insistence of her father to learn Indian history, is more inclined to learn the history of Partition of 1947. Mr.Pirzada's position in this whole spectrum is no less interesting as he appears to be an instrument that intensifies the entire two-pulling within Lila. That's why her mother blamed Mr.Pirzada saying, *really Mr.Pirzada...Night after night you spoil her*. In one sense Pirzada does spoil her instilling in her an identity crisis that amplifies by the incidents in the Bangladesh war of 1971. Television seems to have played a crucial means for connection as the news from the battlefield constantly pours in creating spells of tension and a longish recollection of the homeland. The story, in a conclusive manner, shows that home is never completely jettisoned; instead it characterizes and conditions their present existence. In Diaspora studies home is often postulated as an *imaginary space, a very real spaces from which alone a certain level of redemption is possible*. Heidegger in his conception of *Da-sein* describes about an in-between space between *authentic* and *unauthentic* living. There is a tremendous tension involved in this space which injects a sense of agnosticism. The positioning of Pirzada actually comes close to this in-between space creating sadness from a sense of absence, which percolates across the subconscious of all the immigrants. This is more applicable in the case of Lila, the narrator and, more importantly, a second generation migrant. Her parents are more or less settled with the fact that *diaspora never returns*, but she is not. So she more viably qualifies for that *Dasein* state of existence. The story starts with a title consisting of a subordinate clause that automatically anticipates a main clause and the main clause is the entire story, describing and exposing the struggle that underlies any process of assimilation. The title in this sense reduces Mr.Pirzada to an instrument, a metaphor for root and nostalgia. His own human identity is actually reified as a cultural emissary. But the story equally lionizes him as a herald factor. So the dualism begins from the very title of the story.

The story is also critical of a narrow ethno-religious orientation of the Indian identity. In this sense diaspora is obviously a leveler to a certain extent. Religion is relatively an unexplored territory in the context of diaspora. Lila is taught by his father to identify the difference between Pakistan as *yellow* in colour and India as *orange*. This distinctness of India is barely romantic and reeked of a narrow exclusivism. Her father also says- *Lila as you see it is a different country a different colour*. Lila makes a very innocent gesture following this comment-

Now that I had learned Mr. Pirzada was not an Indian, I began to study him with extra care, to try to figure out what made him different.

This expression, in a banal way, castigates such codification like the *Indian* or the *Pakistani*. Mr.Pirzada is a man of Botany researching on the specificity of different plants, but his position in the whole family of the narrator is potentially paradoxical as he is lumped together as a man of sub-continent. So his identity as a Bangladeshi and as a Muslim, after a certain level, doesn't have any importance in the narrator's house. Therefore it can be construed from

this example that diaspora helps bridging cultural, political and, most importantly, the religious gap between people and regions.

This story also takes a stand against Partition of 1947 in India. It was Lila's father who describes to her that fateful event as *one moment we were free and then we were sliced up.....Hindus here, Muslims there*. The amount and the intensity of that segregation, of that gory event, remind us about the severity of religious fundamentalism that virtually is wedged within the hyphenated reality of diaspora. The story also informs that around 1500 million people were killed in massacre soon after the independence and partition. But the way Mr. Pirzada is welcomed and becomes an essential, integral part of the family, this whole religious binarism seems redundant. Diaspora does facilitate to redress such narrowness. Like *The Shadow Lines* by Amitav Ghosh and *The infinity of Grace* by O.V Vijayan, this story within its limited scope questions the validity of forming nation through a huge human loss. The entire pumpkin episode, where all the characters engage themselves in cutting pumpkin, is an allegorical presentation of that partition. Partition in a way also forms an identity crisis and Mr. Pirzada is cruelly subjected to this as he misses his seven daughters and his wife alongside his loss of national identity. Nationalism or *cultural Fanonism* as concepts are against any *cultural bi-focality* which is eschewed in the gospel of diaspora. The story in nutshell holds forth all the problems that are associated with adaptation on the one hand and the cultural, religious nationalism on the other. Actually in some point the story appears as champion of diaspora and its much flaunted claim of *One World*, but never has it claimed of an absolute assimilation or dissolution. So it opposes any extreme stand over diaspora as well. In the story Lila and her mother prepare themselves for the celebration of Halloween Day and when interrogated, Lila's mother replies that *it is the tradition*. This is an exemplary situation of *melting-pot* concept. It is on returning from this celebration that Lila learns about the departure of Pirzada. This is not a mere coincidence but it symbolically and implicitly shows that the coexistence of Halloween and Mr. Pirzada (the desire for root) is perhaps not possible. It really unveils the crucial issue of multiculturalism as the ideal form of constructing a liberal society. It is evident that Lila and her mother enjoy the Halloween festival without any feeling of being discriminated or being imposed upon. But it remains a point of contention and curiosity whether they would have been equally allowed to celebrate Diwali or other Indian festivals. Clifford in his essay on diaspora mentions diaspora as discourse, something that is mostly pre-conceived. Some issues are not clarified, or deliberately left gray. We never know had the Lila's family been subjected to economical or social relegation how well they would have embraced the American culture. It has to be taken into account that after Freud, Nietzsche, Foucault, even a mere emotion or any simplest gestures of human being no longer remain as innocuous as it was usually conceived earlier. So if the mother is unfazed in her acceptance of the American tradition as her own, it has to be remembered concurrently that she is virtually left with no option than to be graced by that tradition of the most powerful country of the world. It is mentioned in the story that the Bangladesh war doesn't feature in the news regularly and nobody in Boston, where they live, is bothered of this war happening in an underdeveloped country. Even Lila was restricted from leafing through the pages of the Indian history in the library of her school. So the assimilation is not an easy and straight affair. It was Bhikhu Parekh who questioned the western liberal tradition stretching from Mill to Rawls. It is, concisely, through his study, that it came to be largely understood that this tradition in the guise of tolerance actually maintains a discriminatory attitude towards the non-West. But the story as it is already said doesn't embark on such difficult and nuanced perception of multiculturalism of diaspora. Rather the whole story builds up a particular pattern of assimilation and pains of missing home. In Foucauldian deliberation of Power any discursive socio-political dispensation will discreetly

muzzle marginal voices in their aim to form a unified structure. This story is not absolved from these charges.

However within its fictional limitation and obligation this story takes on, tangentially, a postmodern perspective because it claims nothing absolute. Neither the meeting with Pirzada is completely free from any divisive politics of identity nor is the need for assimilation in America entirely non-coercive. So when Mr. Pirzada comes to dine, it is actually the whole lot of nation, home, the politics of assimilation, the nationalism, the separation and the desire for re-unification have sneaked into this small microcosmic space of the family. He actually ushers in *anuranan* which starts tingling and finally gets morphed into a *Firaaq* as the girl feels attracted to the history of India and partition. She visits library and looks through pages of Indian freedom movement which was never taught to her. She is more informed of the American Revolution and the freedom struggle. It is the interaction with Pirzada that helped her finding another root of hers, hence her subjectivity undergoes reframing. In fact, through her, a new space for hybridity has opened up. It is assumed in the studies of diaspora that the borders are the most important section of a community as it is in-between those borders the real reciprocation between cultures takes place. This border is very reflectively showed through the story, especially through the character of Lila. The inter-mingling between the Oriental and the Occidental is very subtly portrayed through Lila. Her confusions, her encounters are the literal enactment of what a migrant initially comes across. So the *anuranan* most effectively germinates within her.

At the end, the narrator writes-

.....It was only then, raising my water glass in his name, that I knew what it meant to miss someone who was so many miles and hours away, just as he had missed his wife and daughter for so many months.....my parents predicted, correctly, that, we would never see him again. Since January, each night before bed, I had continued to eat, for the sake of Mr. Pirzada's family, a piece of candy I had saved from Halloween. That night there was no need to. Eventually, I threw them away.

With the departure of Pirzada that *anuranan* finally breaks and restarts with a new course. This story, above all its diaspora considerations, is essentially a human tale that is contingent on basic impulses of human life. After all it's about loving and missing someone, something that is more sensitively portrayed by Tagore in *Kabuliwala*. Life, beyond swashbuckling theories of Foucault and Derrida or any politicization of private, is also a space of memory where some coveted moments get etched permanently. Pirzada is, in that sense, a memory which, through its pain and satisfaction, is stashed away in Lila's memory for ever.

*Someplace
Will recall a face
And your memory will trace
The past years apace
To dwell on bygone days
When we laughed together
Sometimes, someplace, somewhere
When we were together*

-Bashabi Fraser.

This human tale, like this poem, leaves us before an invisible void where we, standing at the edge of our daily existence, start interacting with our most intimate self to get the necessary intimacy with life.

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