



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 4. Issue.2., 2017 (April-June)

ISSN INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA
2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

REMINISCENCES, THE WAY TO SURVIVAL: A CRITICAL STUDY OF RAMANUJAN,
DHARKER, AND ALEXANDER

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ABSTRACT

Life is a journey. This journey is made and filled with innumerable people, events, incidents, feelings of mirth; sorrow; rejection; dejection; expectations, emancipation, and many more. The people and incidents one comes across every single day of this prolonged journey gift one uncountable moments and memories. Living with the people does not always make one realize the value of it. Distance and space create a sense of alienation. Being away from one's place, people, home etc. gives rise to a kind of discomfort in the heart and mind. The soul rushes to the acquainted and familiar people and life; it searches for that previous cosiness, that comfort. The journey of life does not entertain us with any rewind and forward facility. One away from the people, the home and the land so close and familiar craves for the past spent among his own people, family and friends. The heart aches and seeks a way out and to rush back to the moments full of warmth of one's own people.

Keywords: Memory, Journey, Distance, Space, Alienation, Home.

The agony and pain give birth to a longing and a strong desire to be with them, but the realization of the truth that denies the fulfilment of any such desire disillusion the person. The longing to reach back to the past moments and people plus the knowledge of the unrealistic character of this longing push one to vent the feelings of pain, anguish, restlessness and helplessness through some means.

Writers like A.K. Ramanujan, Imtiaz Dharker and Meena Alexander have found that power and solace in writing. They retreated in the shelter of words. They knit their memories of the past creatively with the thread of their imagination. But it is also difficult to remember one face from the sea of faces, to recall one moment from the heaps of moments. They write whatever comes to them, however, in fragments. A.K. Ramanujan says:

Memory
in a crowd of memories, seems
to have no place
at all for unforgettable things
("On Memory," *TCPAKR* 21)

Ramanujan, being a migrant, remembers his family, the pleasant and happy moments. His poems show a box of memories that his heart holds. He mentions the smallest of the things and mundane incidents. Ramanujan recalls:

the smell of woman's perfume
in a childhood latrine, a peanut seller's
raucous cry, or three obscene lines
mating white and black lizards
in schoolbook Sanskrit. Or a slant
of rain on the sunshine and the papaya tree
("A Lapse of Memory," *TCPAKR* 76)

In his another poem, "Small-scale Reflections on a Great House" a feeling of nostalgia and pathos runs throughout. Here, Ramanujan carves a picture of his old big house which enjoys a great absorbing power; whatever, whosoever comes in the house gets lost, gets absorbed forever and ever. He talks of the borrowed library books which are never read and which are long overdue and still stay in the house. He talks of the servants who once came in the house and stayed back and so did their children. Ramanujan also talks of the diseases such as epilepsies which are passed on from generation to generation and failed to leave the house.

Sometimes, I think that nothing
that ever comes into this house
goes out. Things that come in everyday
to lose themselves among other things
lost long ago among
other things lost long ago[.....]

Unread library books
usually mature in two weeks
and begin to lay a row
of little eggs in the ledgers[...]

like the servants, the phonographs,
the epilepsies in the blood

("Small-scale Reflections on a Great House," *TCPAKR* 96-99)

The migrated, displaced people turn to writing which seems the only way to their survival. Living in an uncanny world as an outlander brings to them feeling of isolation, of strangeness. They at times feel shocked at the different people, different cultures and the surroundings. They, being far far from their motherland, from their relatives and people, remember their roots in one way or the other. Sometimes, even the pettiest incident or a general sight carries them back to the past. Sometimes, a mere sight of a thing brings the acquainted taste of a food they would eat at their homes.

Imtiaz Dharker is one of such writers who still keep alive the very roots of their mother country in their hearts. The very sight of the cliché happenings ignites the flames of the past memories in her heart. In her famous poem, "At the Lahore Karhai", she is reminded of the lives of the truck-drivers in Punjab and Amritsar who would be full of lust for the food that is prepared at a dhaba. As soon as they reach the dhaba, they would relish the food just like homemade food. Dharker, sitting herself at a restaurant in London city is constantly being reminded of the truck-drivers and the dhaba food they would relish in Amritsar and Punjab. She sees a great similarity between these truck-drivers and herself or all the other migrants. The parallel that she draws between the migrants, displaced people and the truck-drivers brings up a critical picture of all the struggle that a migrated person deals with.

It's a great day, Sunday
when we pile into the car
and set off with a purpose-

a pilgrimage across the city,
to Wembley, the Lahore Karhai.
Lunch service has begun-

'No beer, we're Muslim'-
but the morning sun
squeezed into juice
and 'Yaad na jaye'
on the two-in-one.

On the Grand Trunk Road
thundering across Punjab to Amritsar,
this would be a dhaba
where the truck-drivers pull in,

swearing and sweating
full of lust for real food
just like home.
Hauling our overloaded lives
the extra miles,
we are the truckers of another kind
("At the Lahore Karhai")

A migrant jostles through a lot in the process of assimilation, of accepting the culture as well as maintaining his own culture, and of being accepted by the people from an altogether different culture with different perceptions. The trials to be accepted and to be familiar with them cause the migrant a sense of bewilderment and disillusionment. The migrant suffers and struggles through all this carrying a cumbersome baggage of many fears, expectations, desires and hopes. Also she associates this visit to the restaurant with a pilgrimage which is a journey that one takes to connect with God or the inner self. It is the way to stay in touch with one's roots, the culture, the ethnicity, the identity. On one hand she maintains her cultural values that in Islam liquor is prohibited, she, at the same time misses the food that her mother would make for her.

Dharker's another poem, "Postcards from God 1", indicates to the agony, confusion and bewilderment of a migrated, displaced and uprooted person. The soul cries for familiarity, for own people. The memories of the people visit in fragments and disappear. Multiple journeys, stays in different cultures away from one's home create a strangeness, a feeling of being an outlander. Nothing is home; one is only a visitor and supposed to be moving to another place on another journey.

Yes, I do feel like a visitor,
a tourist in this world
that I once made.
I rarely talk,
except to ask the way,

distrusting my interpreters,
tired out by the babble
of what they do not say.

I walk around through battered streets,
distinctly lost,

looking for landmarks
from another, promised past.
("Postcards from God 1")

Similarly, Meena Alexander who is a South-Asian American woman writer has been a traveller since her childhood. The multiple journeys and shifts have created her an urgency to write her heart out as it is what

will keep her alive and going. Her various collections of poetry are indicative of her struggle in evolving as a poet and of learning to deal with the pain and void that a migrant suffers from.

Alexander's poems are nostalgic and always reminding of the past memories, at the same time dealing well with the anxiety caused by displacements. Like many other poets, she also vents out her restlessness giving words to the memories. Her past lingers within and cries. People, places all call her back. She wants to catch them, listen to them. She is carrying so many souls, so many voices in one single body. The voices shriek out from her heart, from her mind to be free, to be out. How to handle this palimpsest of the multiple voices? Writing the memories remains the way out:

I must write what I hear: both cry and response, till the poem, instead of being cut and polished like a stone- though who does not long for solidity, for precision?- is glimpsed as a body, another body, *chinmaya deha* ("The Other Body," TSOA 111).

The past memories perturb her. She feels anxious and restless. She cannot sit still; she has to move. Things from the past flash before her in fragments. The shards of the memories in pieces pain her. How to cope with it? Where should she go? What should she do? *How to solace herself, how to calm that heart down which runs madly after embracing those moments again.* The poem "Roadside Music" exhibits her predicament in these words:

I do not know for the life of me
how to sit quietly.
Something takes hold of my feet and makes the fret.
Dust scribbles the way to my mother's house.
When I shut my eyes, all that red dust
makes my room disappear
("Roadside Music," *Illiterate Heart* 81).

Writing is the means that share the feelings and pain of the perturbed isolated should of the migrant writers. She tries to collect the shards of fragmented memories and make a whole with her imaginative flair. In one way or the other the writers associate their homeland, their people or the past familiar incidents to their present lives and scenarios and thus feel connected and rooted. This is how they survive and keep moving with the an altogether new world that they create through word for themselves to comfort and solace their fractured selves, as Rushdie famously writes:

It may be that writers in my position, exiles or emigrants or expatriates, are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back even at the risk of mutated into pillars of salt. But if we do look back, we must also do so in the knowledge- which gives rise to profound uncertainties- that our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost: that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind (*Imaginary Homelands* 10).

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