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978-0-521-45334-9 - The Politics of Home: Postcolonial Relocations and Twentieth-Century Fiction

Rosemary Marangoly George

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Prologue. All fiction is homesickness*

Philosophy is really homesickness; it is the urge to be at home everywhere. Novalis

At times home is nowhere. At times one only knows extreme estrangement and alienation. Then home is no longer just one place. It is locations. bell hooks

Over the course of the last hundred or so years, the concept of home (and of home-country) has been re-rooted and re-routed in fiction written in English by colonizers, the colonized, newly independent peoples and immigrants. What is attempted in these pages is an examination of a central aspect of the novel in English, its investment in the notion of “home,” in a project that does not restrict itself to an exclusive consideration of either “first world” or “third world” fictions. Under the auspices of “global English,” this project examines the ways in which a host of different fictions re-present the ideologies of “home” and thus initiate the movement from English Literature to literatures in English. Bringing global English into the discussion challenges the very logic of a literary field and of an academic discipline that has hitherto been organized into two or three compartments: English Literature (i.e. from the British Isles), American Literature (US Literature), and World Literature (in English and in translation). These are, of course, vigorously contested categories, but “global English” alters the terms of contestation even when the texts under consideration remain the same. I will argue that an examination of the concepts and structures we recognize as “home” in the context of global English generates a reassessment of our understanding of belonging – in the English language as much as in spaces we call home.

The word “home” immediately connotes the private sphere of patriarchal hierarchy, gendered self-identity, shelter, comfort, nurture and protection. Realist novels in English in the last hundred years have

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situated themselves in the gap between the realities and the idealizations that have made “home” such an auratic term.¹ As imagined in fiction, “home” is a desire that is fulfilled or denied in varying measure to the subjects (both the fictional characters and the readers) constructed by the narrative. As such, “home” moves along several axes, and yet it is usually represented as fixed, rooted, stable – the very antithesis of travel.

While this is primarily a study that moves among fictional texts, it is also about homes in culture, about travel away from home, about traveling homes, about home-countries, and about the travel of literary texts and of literary theory. James Clifford has stated that “[o]nce traveling is foregrounded as a cultural practice then dwelling, too, needs to be reconceived – no longer simply the ground from which traveling departs, and to which it returns.”² Dwellings, homes, home-country: given the variations on the practices that would qualify as “home-making”, both in and out of fiction, it would be counter-productive to insist on any one overarching formula for “home.” And yet, in order to begin, I will put forward some formulations that will be fleshed out, substantiated, and on occasion even overturned in the chapters that follow.

What are the dimensions of “home”? I would like to suggest that the basic organizing principle around which the notion of the “home” is built is a pattern of select inclusions and exclusions. Home is a way of establishing difference. Homes and home-countries are exclusive. Home, I will argue, along with gender/sexuality, race, and class, acts as an ideological determinant of the subject. The term “home-country” in itself expresses a complex yoking of ideological apparatuses considered necessary for the existence of subjects: the notion of belonging, of having a home, and a place of one’s own. And yet, in the very reference to a “home-country” lies the indication that the speaker is away from home. This distance from the very location that one strives to define, is, I believe intrinsic to the definition that is reached. The politics of location come into play in the attempt to weave together a subject-status that is sustained by the experience of the place one knows as Home or by resistance to places that are patently “not home.” “Location” in the context of this study suggests the variable nature of both “the home” and “the self,” for both are negotiated stances whose shapes are entirely ruled by the site from which they are defined. Locations are positions from which distance and difference are formulated and homes are made snug.³

Given the global history of British imperialism, any literary consideration of the word “home” in the twentieth century must pay attention

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to the changing status of English as it becomes a world language.⁴ Does “home” change in its significations when articulated from different locations? Does “Home” as said in British India signify differently from “Home” as pronounced in British Africa? And once independence from the British is gained, does this English word, as used in newly formed African and Asian nations and in their literatures, undergo a radical re-orientation of geographical, psychological and material connotations? Studies in global nationalisms and/or in literary studies have not adequately addressed these issues. In this book, I look at the literatures produced from some of these locations and read them for their representations of the everyday imagining of home and country. My aim is to read more than the domestic into representations of the home, to keep location from being reduced to a geographic place on the map and politics from being reduced (or elevated) to nationalism.

In *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Benedict Anderson exposes the complex intertwining of all the texts (especially “print-commodities,”) that are read in a society with the popular imagining of that community.⁵ In the global literature I have chosen to work with, the (re)writing of home reveals the ideological struggles that are staged every day in the construction of subjects and their understanding of home-countries. The search for the location in which the self is “at home” is one of the primary projects of twentieth-century fiction in English. This project may get obscured or transcended as the narrative unfolds, but it is never completely abandoned. It is in this context that I read all fiction in terms of homesickness.

Considerations of the space marked “home” have for the most part been read as the terrain of conservative discourses. “Home” has been abandoned to its clichés. And yet, in recent times, there have been several successful attempts to theorize homes and domesticity as more than the place and pursuit of private individuals.⁶ I would like to contribute to this branch of interdisciplinary scholarship that works toward a deconstruction of the opposition that has traditionally been maintained between four points: the private and the public spheres; the two genders; the colonizer and the colonized; and the west and the rest of the world, especially their respective literatures. Our ways of reading the trope of “home” in literature in English sometimes subverts and at other times enforces these binarisms. For instance, the divide maintained between colonizer and colonized by terms such as “the colonial subject” needs to be rethought. The usual practice is to read “colonial subject” as referring exclusively to “those subjected to

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colonialism.”⁷ Global literature in English as interpreted in these pages compels us to see *all* those subjects constructed by colonial and imperial ideologies in circulation in their location as “colonial subjects.” Such a definition would include both subjects of the colonizing race as well as those of colonized races. Considering both locations (that of colonizer and that of colonized) *simultaneously* guarantees that a recognition of the collaboration between the two groups remains central to the analysis. The heterogeneity of colonial subjects belonging to colonized races is such that expanding the category to include those colonizers who are implicated in imperial and colonial enterprises does not render the category imprecise or unproductive. This simultaneity accounts for subjects who share a history of colonialism, without making the claim that all colonial subjects are identical: it is a strategy that intervenes in the construction of binarisms.

And yet binarisms are essential for the purposes of definition. Homes and nations are defined in the instances of confrontation with what is considered “not-home,” with the foreign, with distance. Ultimately then, distance in itself becomes difference. Thus, for instance, it is in the heyday of British imperialism that England gets defined as “Home” in opposition to “The Empire” which belongs to the English but which is not England. It is under colonial occupation that African nationalists in the region called Rhodesia begin referring to their country as “Zimbabwe,” a location that will come into being *after* “one man, one vote” becomes a reality in that country. As these brief examples demonstrate, it is hard to theorize notions like home or location except when specific historical and/or literary settings are taken into account. And yet, when literary texts are under consideration, the use of a common global language persuades us that indeed “home” is literally spelled the same the world over. Translations are not deemed necessary from English to English nor from realist novel to realist novel.

Over the last two centuries, the novel in the west has been read as having as its focus: love, courtship, seduction, female subjectivity, the home and domesticity. As such, the novel has often been interpreted as being, like its mainly “feminine” consumer, outside or irrelevant to the workings of the national destiny. With the advent of colonial fiction, however, this literary genre’s implication in events of nation and empire can no longer be ignored. In fact, imperial literature can be read as the imagining of one’s (domestic) ideology in an expanded space. Whether the motivation behind such imaginative expansions

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amount to domestication, love, seduction or rape varies from text to text. What becomes clear however, with the advent of the imperial novel is that the tales and tasks of homemaking (understood to be gendered female) are not very different from the tales and tasks of house-keeping on the national or imperial scale (usually gendered masculine).

Fiction in English by the colonized (or the once colonized) is manacled to “English Literature” in myriad ways. And yet, at the very outset, I will insist that to read global literatures in English as a gift bequeathed by erstwhile colonizers is to begin at a dead end. There is, of course, the common language – at first imposed and then shared. The form of some of the fiction in English by writers from the colonies also relies heavily on English literary traditions. This symmetry does not always extend to the contents of the fiction. For the colonized to raise their voices is to change the contents of the English novel, even if their first utterances are in “His Master’s Voice.” Writing alongside nationalist movements and the concomitant resistance to imperialism, the colonized use these same literary tools to assert a subject position for themselves and for the communities they wish to represent – a subject position that draws its validity and energy from a new engagement with the space that can now belong exclusively to “our people.”

The literatures in English by colonial subjects (British and colonized races) work hard to further specific and differently motivated patriotic projects. However, as I will demonstrate in the chapters that follow, twentieth-century literature in English is not so concerned with drawing allegories of nation as with the search for viable homes for viable selves. Literature (even that which is written at the height of nationalist struggles) does not relate the exact same story that nationalism does. Nationalist movements narrate one story, literature creates its home through tangential locations. Literature may thus serve also as a site for resistance to dominant ideologies like nationalism. Hence Ayi Kwei Armah’s *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born* and Ama Ata Aidoo’s *No Sweetness Here* are both set against the backdrop of Ghanaian independence, yet the narratives are different from each other and from non-literary discourses produced from that site. In a very different context, George Orwell’s writing, with its loyalty to England undermined by a recognition of the violence of Empire, is emblematic of this simultaneous capitulation and resistance to the ideologies of nation and empire. As the chapters that follow will demonstrate, “home” and “home-country” are used to articulate a whole range of political stances – radical, reactionary and revolutionary. They can, of course, also be completely

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bland terms for those subjects for whom “home” or “feeling at home” is always a given, under all regimes.

What all this indicates is that homes are not neutral places. Imagining a home is as political an act as is imagining a nation. Establishing either is a display of hegemonic power. Similarly, having all these markers laid out for one to step into as part of a naturalized socialization process is an indication of the power wielded by class, community and race. Reading within a context of global English exposes the political anchors of language, literature and space. The chapters that follow attempt to examine the broadest implications of the term “home” as present in various literatures in English. The attempt is to capture in one frame the dynamic fashion in which a particular fiction formulates its ideological stance on the concept of home. I have chosen to focus on certain literary instances in which the very notion of the home undergoes substantial revision.

I begin the first chapter by noting that traditional readings of nationalism cannot fully account for the processes by which diverse subjects imagine themselves at home in various geographic locations. Recent developments in the scholarship on nationalism and the writing on homes and subjecthood in other discourses are then brought together. Finally, in an attempt to rethink the links between the self and the home I turn to the promising examination of this equation in contemporary feminist theory.

In the second chapter, I work with novels and home-management guides written by Maud Diver, Flora Steel and others, to examine the impact on the British female subject of managing homes in the empire in the early twentieth century. The argument is that the colonial occupation of the Indian sub-continent established one of the primary arenas in which an identifiable group of English women first achieved the kind of authoritative self associated with the modern female subject – “the full individual” that Elizabeth Fox-Genovese sees as the desired goal of feminism in capitalist societies. The English home in the colonies was represented in these texts as an empire in miniature. More interesting and unexpected in this discourse is the representation of the empire as an expanded domestic space peopled by masters and servants. Given that their work of household supervision was valued for its contributions to the imperial cause, these English women in the colonies were closer to the position of national subject than their sisters back home – even those struggling to win the right to vote.

Turning to a consideration of Conrad’s masculine representations of

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home and nation, I attempt to read his strangely “unreadable” politics. Is his work no more than the conservative and panic-stricken writing of an aristocrat who saw all kinds of terrors in women, domesticity and the working class, or was he an iconoclast whose fiction took apart the bourgeois ideals of the sacred home, chaste femininity and social order? Is he one of Perry Anderson’s “white emigres” who buttress the dominant ideology’s worship of home by capturing its elusive, illusionary dimensions in fiction?⁸ Or does Conrad’s writing attempt to alert the English of the dangers that menace their fetishized understanding of England as “Home”? This chapter assesses the polar oppositions in Conrad’s work by examining the contesting binarisms that the narrative in *Almayer’s Folly*, *Lord Jim* and *Heart of Darkness* constructs in order to produce coherence. I then argue for a repositioning of Conrad’s writing that takes him out of his usual literary category (Modernism) and reads his work in relation to other international writing produced in the English-speaking globe.

The next, mainly theoretical chapter makes the transition to contemporary fiction and the politics of reading such texts. It attempts to destabilize the position of tacit influence occupied by Fredric Jameson’s “Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism” in the writing on and especially in the teaching of postcolonial literature in the west.⁹ The attempt to fix “third world” literatures in nationalist moments and/or nationalist texts does them a disservice and yet it does give these texts, which Jameson calls “alien,” a focus that renders them recognizable to western readers. In resisting the urge to be at home everywhere, this chapter argues for a revision in western theorizing on postcolonial literature.

This is followed by an examination of issues other than nationalism in Indian literature written in English: homes, religion, marriage, personal fulfillment and the burden of gendered subjectivity. Working with *The Dark Room* by R. K. Narayan, I demonstrate that the model recognized in the west as “The Third World Novel” (national allegory, despair after independence, horrors of gender inequality, community as core) is only one type of writing that has been mistaken for the whole. In the next chapter I examine novels by several prominent Indian women writers who write in the English language to argue that this writing in the language and diction of privilege may not be the radical, resistive act that is today automatically associated with the very term “postcolonial,” but it reveals the complex writerly allegiances at work in such locations.

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The subject status of the immigrant, especially that of the non-white immigrant to the west, forces another literary reinscription of the self and of home. In this final chapter, I reconsider the usual association of immigrant fiction with the themes of loss, painful homelessness, and the “less-than-whole” subject who longs for assimilation into a national culture. With the aid of *The Gunny Sack*, M. G. Vassanji’s powerful novel on Indian immigrants in East Africa who relocate to North America, I demonstrate that the immigrant genre is marked by a curiously detached reading of the experience of “homelessness” as well as by excessive use of the metaphor of luggage, both spiritual and material. Do such belongings impede or facilitate belonging? Homi Bhabha’s theory of “DissemiNation,” Jamaica Kincaid’s *Annie John* and Edward Said’s *After the Last Sky*, are among the other texts on immigration and exile that are deployed in this attempt to formulate the characteristics of the immigrant genre.

Clearly, this is not an attempt to “cover” the entire English speaking globe, nor will this book offer a systematic history of global English. Instead, I envision this project as examining the construct “home-country” in several distinct instances where the political, historical and cultural location makes revisions necessary. The theoretical debate initiated in the first chapter continues in subsequent chapters. Two of the chapters that follow examine the rhetoric of home in the writings of women of privilege – in the first instance provided by English women, privileged by race and in the case of Indian women writers, privileged by class. Other chapters examine masculine readings of “Home”: the figure of Conrad as a troubled outsider/insider is problematized by the representation in Vassanji’s text of joyous international homelessness. I do not wish to imply that every situation in the fiction of those who have been colonized or of the immigrant can be read as variations on similar events in the realm of the colonizer. Yet, in each of these instances, both halves of the formula “home-country” are made to take on weight that they do not bear when considered independently. Ultimately, I would like to see both “first” and “third” worlds implicated (albeit differently implicated) in the term “the postcolonial,” rather than have it refer specifically to the non-west.¹⁰ Such a move, I will argue, may set the stage for considerations of the non-west in an arena where both sides are not held down by the always already assigned central and marginal positions. Acknowledging a common history of colonialism implicates both margins and center in the future course of this history. Under this revised rubric of postcolonialism, one

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could genuinely be confused about which location (the one-time colonizer or the one-time colonized) takes on the center and which the margin in the arena of cultural politics. Certainly in assessing the literature produced from these locations one finds that often the marginal (for example: women and domesticity in *Heart of Darkness*, England in *Annie John*) takes over the center.

What, then, is home? How do we travel from Novalis' "urge to be at home everywhere" to bell hooks' "home is nowhere"? And what lies beyond this impasse? One distinguishing feature of places called home is that they are built on select inclusions. The inclusions are grounded in a learned (or taught) sense of a kinship that is extended to those who are perceived as sharing the same blood, race, class, gender, or religion. Membership is maintained by bonds of love, fear, power, desire and control. Homes are manifest on geographical, psychological and material levels. They are places that are recognized as such by those within and those without. They are places of violence and nurturing. A place that is flexible, that manifests itself in various forms and yet whose every reinvention seems to follow the basic pattern of inclusions/exclusions. Home is a place to escape to and a place to escape from. Its importance lies in the fact that it is not equally available to all. Home is the desired place that is fought for and established as the exclusive domain of a few. It is not a neutral place. It is community. Communities are not counter-constructions but only extensions of home, providing the same comforts and terrors on a larger scale.¹¹ Both home and community provide such substantial pleasures that have been so thoroughly assumed as natural that it may seem unproductive to point to the exclusions that found such abodes.

This prologue brings together the many concerns that provided the impetus for this study. The rest of the book addresses the formulations put forth here and attempts to complicate the assumptions that underlie much of what is suggested in these initial pages. I have been enabled in my own analysis by the work of practitioners in the fields of feminism, gender studies, Marxism, postcolonial theory, cultural studies and semiotics. However, the novels that I read for this project are the cultural texts from which I have derived the greatest pleasures of theory and praxis. These novels serve as the ground for this study.

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CHAPTER I

Home-countries: narratives across disciplines

“What’s Home Got to Do With It?”

Biddy Martin and Chandra Mohanty

Today, the primary connotation of “home” is of the “private” space from which the individual travels into the larger arenas of life and to which he or she returns at the end of the day. And yet, also in circulation is the word’s wider signification as the larger geographic place where one belongs: country, city, village, community. Home is also the imagined location that can be more readily fixed in a mental landscape than in actual geography.¹ The term “home-country” suggests the particular intersection of private and public and of individual and communal that is manifest in imagining a space as home. Home-country, while widely used in travel documents, personal narratives and fiction, is not quite the object of nationalism as it is usually understood.

At the different levels of discourse that a culture engenders, the notion of physical or spiritual home-country is variously announced: as a heritage as well as a place where *some* persons were/are/or will be “at home.” These utterances and assertions are routinely categorized as: personal, local, communal, and/or national affiliations. These affiliations are held apart as separate mutually conflicting claims or they are co-opted to satisfy the requirements of the specific narrative that is unfolding at any given location. In this chapter, I will document some of the readings of “home” formulated in various academic locations. The narratives are not similar, yet common to the rhetoric of “Home” in most disciplines, is an ahistoric, metaphorical and often sentimental story line. In fact, fictionality is an intrinsic attribute of home. The homes that are constructed through these texts are multifarious experiences and desires which are at best vigorously interrogated, frequently unchallenged, and never quite rejected. I will examine the overlapping constructs of home and nation to sug-