

Homes on War In Stephen Gill's *An Immigrant Complains,* *Go Back and A New Canadian in Toronto*

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Diaspora is an occurrence that is not limited to any particular region but one that stretches all over the globe. With the whole world having shrunk into a global village, the number of people on the move has increased rampantly and the term diaspora has been used with reference to the communities of people who are displaced or relocated “from their homelands to new lands for social, political or economic reasons” (Evani 100). *Diaspora* the term, has various connotations. Despite its usage with respect to people’s movements, its usage can also be extended to indicate dislocation of ideas, language and culture.

Tracing the etymological roots of the word, it becomes conspicuous that the word first evolved to characterize the dispersion of the Jews, centuries back. Much earlier, the Hellenic Jews in Alexandria who were on exile from Palestine, their homeland were called the Diaspora. Historically, soon after the conquest of the Jews by the Babylonians and their demolition of the Jewish temple, many Jews were scattered / dispersed from their homeland like seeds. The dispersion of the Jews did not come to a halt with that but their frequent expulsions from their native land remained one long on – going process. Very importantly, the Jews thus dispersed, tugged with them their language, customs, beliefs, tradition, ethnicity and culture

Moreover, long back, Diaspora was also frequently used to brand the Black Africans who were dislocated from their native lands and strewn all over the “New World” by force in the name of slave trade. These blacks who survived amidst intolerable hardships in the “New World” experienced momentary / fleeting happiness when they relived their past and rejuvenated their ‘selves’. They too, like the Jews, had hauled with them their oral tradition, their religious beliefs and their undying passion for community living. However, the communities of the Jews and the Blacks battled against all forces to “maintain a sense of historical and cultural community” (Meffan 391). Also as a group, they strove hard to maintain a unified identity.

consider them to be lands with greener pastures. Besides the luring jobs and comforts, the new land also poses threats of alienation, rejection and non-acceptance. Consequently, the individuals from varied places find themselves at their comfort zones in the groups of people who hail from the same land as theirs and thus mushroom new diasporic communities.

These diasporic individuals or communities are identified as hyphenated or hybridized individuals. It is to be comprehended that:

The question of identifications is never the affirmation of a pre-given identity, never a self- fulfilling prophecy; it is always the production of an image of identity and the transformation of the subject in assuming that image. The demand for identification, that is, to be for an Other – entails the representation of the subject in the differentiating order of otherness. Identification (thus), is always the return of an image of identity that bears the mark of splitting in the other place from which it comes. (*Bhabha 45*).

It is indeed a Herculean task undertaken by the diasporans to establish an identity of their own in the alien land. Unmasking themselves, they discover only their hybridized identity, an upshot of their not-at-homeness. As a matter of fact, “ they are not-at-home in any attempted definitions of them by the ‘they’, regardless of whether the ‘they’ is the host, the homeland, or indeed the wider diasporic community” (Mummery 38).

For the individuals of the diasporic community, ‘home’ can be related with nostalgic memories that stir in them a feeling of loss. They are not at home in the new land. Subsequently, they are conscientised of the truth that they cannot stake a claim over the land of origin or the land of adoption as theirs. The alienation that the diasporans are subjected to in the host society incites them to seek refuge of their roots only through the feasible tapping of the memories, a treasure trove of their past. Such is the plight of “An estimated number of over twenty million persons who are either Indian citizens or of Indian origin (who)... currently live (or are permanently settled) outside India”(Ghosh 287). It is pathetic to note that most of the diasporans are thus torn asunder between their past and present lives, a plight that is on par with that of Trishanku.

Trishanku, a Hindu mythological character was the son of Prithu who belonged to the solar dynasty, a dynasty as that of God Rama. Trishanku quite unusually desired to ascend heaven even before his death with his mortal body. So he sought the help of Guru Vashishta who

refused to fulfill his wish on grounds that it was against the laws of nature to step into heaven with the mortal body. Not being convinced with it Trishanku approached Vashishta's sons who on knowing their father's refusal, curse him with incapacitating diseases that make him abandon his country and roam in the forests.

There, fortune favours him and facilitates his meeting with Sage Vishwamitra, Vashishta's rival in the forest. Getting to learn about the humiliations inflicted on Trishanku by Vashishta and his sons the sage is infuriated and he assures to help Trishanku in reaching heaven with the mortal body. Instantly, the sage sets on to perform the needed rituals (yagnas) to send him to heaven. This act of Vishwamitra alarms the Devas who inform Lord Indra about this unnatural event and request him to keep Trishanku away from the gates of heaven in all possible ways. Paying heed to their pleas, Indra does not permit Trishanku and so he falls back to the earth. The short-tempered sage is enraged and so using his powers he arrests his fall and suspends him mid-air.

Unable to take back his words the sage starts creating a parallel heaven and also another Indra. This alerts the Devas once again and so they try to explain him that it is an unnatural act. Hence, the sage allows Trishanku to inhabit the new heaven but in a suspended upside down manner so that he does not supersede Lord Indra's celestial orders. Since then, Trishanku is caught between the heaven and the earth not belonging to either of them. The phrase, "Trishanku's heaven" as stated in the Wikipedia "describes a middle ground or a compromise between one's goals or desires and one's current state or possessions"(1). A phrase, that aptly describes the plight of the diasporans.

The Trishanku experience is universal to all immigrants that finds an expression through umpteen literary creations. The literary outpourings of the immigrant writers are awesome showpieces of the longings and yearnings for their native life and everything that is bound to their roots. Their works are also good exhibits of their self, the loss of their roots and their experiences in the new land. As these immigrant writers are loaded with hands-on experiences of marginalization their works are loud shrieks of alienation, hybridization, multiculturalism, community life, socio-political scenario and above all marginalization. They rip off:

... the lived experience (in all their ambivalences, contradictions, migrations, and multiple traversals) of people whose lives have unfolded in myriad diasporic

communities across the globe. Diasporic subjects are marked by Hybridity and heterogeneity – cultural, linguistic, ethnic, national- and these subjects are defined by a traversal of the boundaries demarcating nation and diaspora. (*Brazil and Mannur* 5)

In fact, the diasporic writers have embarked on the journey of narrating their own stories to avoid delineation of their misconceived selves by others in their literary undertakings. Furthermore, they fear tampering of their images, identities and their own worlds.

Upholding these notions, the diasporic writers toy with the themes like search for the roots/identity and convergence of yawning gorges like language, culture, religion, ethnicity, class and status. Beyond all these, the immigrant writers are found to be on a continual hunt for their literary spaces. However, of the different categories of diasporic writers, the focus in this paper is on the Indian diasporic writers.

Indian Diaspora is emphasized through the diasporic writers who have migrated from India to different and distant places. Amitav Ghosh, Salman Rushdie, V.S. Naipaul, Bharati Mukherjee, Vikram Seth are the diasporic writers who in their work represent the diasporic condition. The agonies of the diasporic people, being stranded in an alien land, who had to adopt the alien culture either willingly or unwillingly is represented in the works of these writers. (*Nara and Ghanshyam* 112) Besides these renowned writers, writers like Kavita Daswani and Stephen Gill also fall into the same line.

Stephen Gill, born in Sialkot, spent his early teens in Karol Bagh, New Delhi, witnessing the blood – shed that followed the Indo-Pak partition in 1947. He bears testimony to the mass killings that took place with the Hindus and Sikhs on one side and the Muslims on the other. The traumatic experiences, that he had in Delhi prodded him to leave India. The job of a teacher in Ethiopia that he had secured four months after his application, for the same post based on a newspaper advertisement came as a welcome relief. After his short stay in Ethiopia, he moved on to Canada where the University of Ottawa offered him a part-time job and he was sure to get a fellowship within a year. Thereafter, he comfortably settles down in Canada the land of opportunities. In his “Preface” to *Shrine* he records. “Canada is a united Nations in Microcosm. It is a country where it is illegal to propagate hatred against other beliefs. It is a country where the government legally supports multi-culturalism to foster tolerance” (25)

Even in such a multicultural and tolerant nation, he is not spared from alienation and marginalization. Further, like any other diasporic writer he too inks his Trishanku experiences in his literary works. Having dabbled in all literary genres, and having dealt with innumerable subjects that reveal his social concerns, his novels, *Immigrant* and *The Coexistence* and some of his verses project him as a diasporic writer. His poems, “An Immigrant Complains”, “Go Back” and “A New Canadian in Toronto” published in the collection of poems, *Shrine* are powerful verifications of his diasporic experiences. His poems “... explore the centrality-marginality of space as a mobilising trope in the construction of national / regional, homogeneous/heterogeneous identity crises of people ensnared in the geopolitics of migration” (Majumdar 240).

Stephen Gill in “An Immigrant Complains” describing an immigrant says:

He views golden gates,
 displaying the dances
 of the dragons of disharmony. (78)

The immigrant looks at Canada as a promising land that can give him all the comforts that he hankered after in his native land. The phrase, “Golden gates” underscores all the riches and fortunes that the immigrant can possibly make in the new land. Throughout the poem, there is no specific reference to a particular place but the subtle references to the new land vouchsafes the point that the new land is a promising land. But the alliterative lines “displaying the dances/ of the dragons of disharmony” remind the readers of the crashing hopes of the immigrant when he comes face to face with racial prejudices and biases. Very beautifully Gill visualises disharmony as a dragon that dances. The immigrants, who land on the new land, with rays of hopes of a bright future undoubtedly, crumble into pieces.

The dream with which an immigrant comes to the doorsteps of Canada is well documented in “Go Back” as:

I came here
 carrying the lily of my dreams (80)

His dreams that make the freshness, fragrance and beauty of the lily wither off when he witnesses discriminations in that multicultural society. Emphasizing the immigrants’ nature of

moving from one place to another the poet imagines him to be a bird Stephen Gill begins the poem “An Immigrant Complains ” as follows:

His feathers flutter
wounded by sickles of bigotry
in an estranged world
around the isle of loneliness (78)

Various modes of bigotry inflict unbearable pains on the immigrant. Already laden with the feeling of being in an “estranged world”, the hurts of biases are too painful for the immigrant to bear. Resultantly, the immigrant finds himself in the island of loneliness. The phrase “isle of loneliness” reiterates the extremities of loneliness that an immigrant has to face.

To the onlookers especially his friends, relatives and even the people in Canada, the life that he leads in the land of his dreams may be enviable. He may appear to be carefree, happy and rich. But only an immigrant can well picturise his plight. Stepping into the shoes of an immigrant in the poem “A New Canadian in Toronto” Stephen Gill as a piece of advice to the new comer warns:

My friend
don't think I am lucky
because I live in a metropolis
where you presume
life is young
and the goddesses roam with me
You are a sovereign of dreams. (141)

Such words of wisdom can drop only from the mouths of experienced people like Stephen Gill. Being a down- to-earth person, the poet exhorts the newcomer to shun all positive presumptions about the new land and also about the metropolis lifestyle. He also warns him against having rosy pictures about the land as a place where all that is good may shroud him and that the goddesses of luck and fortune may favour him. He drives into his head the fact that despite

being a metropolis it is one's own self that has to be the master of his/ her dreams and that he cannot bank on anything or anybody else.

As pointed out in "An Immigrant Complains", in 'A New Canadian in Toronto' too, Stephen Gill stresses how the diasporans maneuver into loneliness yielding to the pressures of racial prejudices, preached in the poem as:

The word friendship

you will hardly find in its book

the cover is attractive though

there is nothing inside to read.

The words are hieroglyphic;

it needs ages to decipher them. (141)

As a wise man who would teach his disciples the poet tells the new Canadian, a diasporan that he can hardly find true friends to combat loneliness. The way the Canadians interact with the immigrants may seem to be filled with friendly gestures, assuring enduring relationship as that of friendship. But, only after enough discernment can one gauge the amount of farce that laces the relationship. Since it really takes ages to get into meaningful relationships, individuals naturally seek the haven of loneliness.

After his tough decision to leave behind his homeland and settle down in a new land hoping to be accepted by the Canadians, he bumps into only disappointments in the form of rejection and non- acceptance, an issue that all diasporans encounter. To cap it all some even boldly and outrightly express their dissent over his settling down in Canada. In "Go Back", a very mean question asked hits as a ball of fire.

He discloses:

After a short pointless talk

it said;

"Why don't you go back"

To your country?"

The Strange voice dissolved

into the silence of my basement. (79)

The question asked over the phone comes to him as a great shock he senses alienation and a prick of being an outsider sinks deep into him.

However much he tries to overcome the sense of alienation and strives hard to swiftly get into the mainstream, he courts only failure. He is forcibly dragged and thrown out of the group that he desires to get merged with. At such a juncture the predominant feeling is one of being lost, that he beautifully captures in “A New Canadian in Toronto” as:

A deer lost in the jungle
I wander for water.
Often I have to caress
even those thorns
which knowingly pierce
my feet (142).

Of all the animals in the forest, a deer is the animal that is most susceptible and vulnerable to dangers. In the jungle, any fierce animal can lay an ambush on the deer and take away its life. Similarly an immigrant too like the deer is prone to dangers and may be entrapped/ ensnared in trouble any moment. Biblical echoes can be heard in the first two lines of the excerpt. They bring to the readers’ mind “As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O! God”, the lines from psalms 42: 1 of the Bible. Further, the lines, “often I have... pierce/ my feet are low key references to the humiliation, biases and non-acceptance that he is subjected to. Such a grave situation compels him to continually analyse and re-analyse the situation that engulfs him to find solace which he pens in “A New Canadian in Toronto” as:

I still toil to uncork the bottle
to sniff its insides,
while sipping the sickening wine
under the solacing shade of the memories
I nourish. (142)

Ultimately, as is typical of all diasporans, he finds consolation in cherishing his memories of the life in his native land. Only when he connects himself with the roots through his memories, he

regains his identity and feels secure in the new land. Almost akin to these expressions of yearnings, his perpetual longing for his language, his culture, his religion and above all the life of his roots is chronicled in “An Immigrant Complains” as:

Under the clouds of emptiness
 he sings of the spring fragrance,
 decorating his home
 with the blooms of longing. (78)

Gill makes it clear that it is only when he faces emptiness in the new land and is pushed into the deep valleys of loneliness that he resorts to memories that blossom alongside the longings of a diasporan. Walking down the memory lanes of the native land instills in the immigrants, the much needed confidence and a deep sense of belongingness.

Nurturing all these in him, an immigrant steadies himself in the alien land and tries to establish his identity in the new land. In fact, as jotted down in “An Immigrant Complains”:

...
 he ponders
 to strengthen his muscles
 to wrestle against
 the demon of injustice (78)

This spirit to fight against all odds in the strange environment pops up after due quantum of mulling over on the issue. The sleeping spirit thus awakened functions on the base of logic and reasoning. The immigrant is aware of the fact that impulsive reactions to the unpleasantness that creeps on his way may cost him too much.

Rationalising his response to the person who urges him to retreat to his homeland in “Go Back”, he ruminates:

“I came here
 some thirty years ago
 long before you
 You are not that old,”
 I would have said (80)

These lines reveal the conflict within him on belonging to the place of his adoption. Even after thirty years of his stay in Canada he is not accepted as an inmate of the nation. Being a member of the visible minority that is determined based on the skin colour that distinguishes and separates him from other groups of minorities, instances of prejudices he encounters are all the more. Even if the white settlers are younger than him by age and by the years of his settlement there, still they seem to be larger stakeholders of the land than the Asians who are betrayed by their very appearance. It is pathetic to observe in "Go Back" how he pleads:

I have offered
the boon of my life
to my new mother
and the warmth of blood
to the snow. (80)

Justifying his stay in Canada he lists out how he has spent most of his prime youth in Canada and has borne the brunt of the climatic conditions in Canada. He experiences the pull between the cultures of the land of adoption and the land of origin. Moreover, he is made aware of the fact that he does not belong to Canada and at the same time he knows fully well that he cannot go back to his own native country as primarily his children and secondarily he would face alienation.

In *Go Back* he sets his foot down to prove his identity and to logically reason out why he can claim to be a Canadian. He stresses:

My children are of this earth.
You want me to go back. (80)

Plainly speaking he reinstates how unlike him his children are second generation immigrants and so are close to the Canadians, or rather they are Canadians. Affirming his own Canadian identity too in a friendly tone towards the later part of the same poem, he articulates:

Do not tell me to go anywhere,
my friend.
This is our land

where our father lives.

We are all in exile (81)

Soon after testifying his children's proximity with the Canadians, he illustrates how he belongs to Canada as his predecessors live there and so, he has all rights to continue to stay there. The basic crisis that the diasporans come across is one that of how much they can call themselves as part of the land and that is precisely what Gill expresses in his poems too.

Ironically enough Gill conceives what would happen if the diasporans responding to such foolish questions of the hosts decide to move back to their roots. In the same poem he documents:

What a monstrous act
 to fancy
 terrifying torrential rains
 of human exodus
 from the east and the west.
 flooding the countries of birth!(81)

Highlighting the intensified movement of people from one part of the globe to the other due to globalization, and the eventual process of making the land of their choice their own homes, he opines that the "exodus" of the immigrants back to their respective native lands would be a "monstrous act". In such a case the diasporans whom he likens to "terrifying torrential rains" may flood their birth places. Hitting the nail on the head, Stephen Gill drives in the idea that going back would be too catastrophic. The immigrants, very particularly the visible minorities not-at-homeness is excellently portrayed in these lines by Gill. Further, he enables the so called hosts to ponder over the fact that in reality everyone who lives in Canada is a settler. He asks:

Where would the whites go?
 How about the Mohawks and Inuit?
 If you know Canadian history!(81)

In keeping with the Canadian history, Gill tries to bring to the readers' mind that the Whites, Mohawks and Inuits are also immigrant settlers with just the difference that they had settled

there centuries ago. “Empirical ethnologists assert that Indian group immigrated separately, over long periods of time, from Siberia, when the Bering land bridge still existed, and also moved north as the ice sheets receded (New14). Therefore, the claims of the Indians that they belong to Canada may not be completely accepted.

It is veritable that people get enticed by greener pastures and so are propelled to move towards and settle there. But then, the tormenting thoughts of the land of roots are inevitable and it is the only oasis in the strange desert. An analysis of the three poems captures the image of the immigrants who like Trishanku dangle mid-way between the two lands. But, the poet seems to have outgrown all such tugs and pulls between which he is caught and he offers a suggestion at the end of “Go Back”:

Open your eyes my friend,
in the clean air to see
that the world has become a village
where no one is an island to self
anymore
anymore (82)

He is right in dreaming of a utopian global village. As long as human beings realise that they are all loving children of the Mother Earth and that the whole world has been created for the sake of any man irrespective of caste, creed and colour, nobody will ever stake a claim over a piece of land and affirm his belongingness to a nation thus, chasing away the Other. In such a scenario nor will any one experience alienation or non- acceptance and so be pushed into the inescapable quagmire of longings. The immigrants can then be happy anywhere and not suffer like Trishanku.

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