

HOMELAND HOODWINKS VIS-À-VIS HOME HOLDS BACK IN ALI SETHI'S *THE WISH MAKER*: NEGOTIATING MOURNING AND MELANCHOLIA

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Abstract:

Ali Sethi's The Wish Maker stands alone in the realm of South Asian novel, for it exquisitely brings out the sharp and sheer slugfest between homeland and home, which inflicts torment in the psyche of the protagonist of the novel thereby leading him to scramble in between ontological trepidation and cultural conviction. Having landed down in Lahore, the veritable homeland of Zaki Shirazi- the protagonist of the novel, Shirazi stands stunned and stupefied looking at the drastic changes occurred to his homeland. Now he finds it hard to connect himself with this veritable homeland that he had left behind while shipping to America. The dynamic homeland comes in conflict with his static notion of home and it triggers a number of maladies in his mind. The more Shirazi recounts his growing up days spent in Lahore, the more he gets stuck in limbo and fails to settle the ongoing dispute between homeland and home in his psyche. He can neither stay indifferent to the pricks of his memory nor can resist himself from delving deep into it. The roles of memory, mourning and melancholia are intended to be taken into cognizance in this context to account for the relentless and rigorous attempts of Shirazi to get rid of this poignant faceoff.

Key Words: *Homeland; Home; Memory; Mourning; Melancholia.*

I

Happy families are all alike. Every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way. (Tolstoy qtd. in Sethi 391)

Sometimes we feel we straddle two cultures; at other times, that we fall between two stools. (Rushdie 432)

Ali Sethi's *The Wish Maker* turns out to be an engaging *tour de force* in the realm of Diaspora Studies in that unlike other contemporary Pakistani diaspora novels, *The Wish Maker* meticulously brings out the long standing faceoff between homeland and home conditioned by mourning and melancholia, and subsequently the poignant striving of the protagonist to get disposed of this agonizing conflict. The conflict between homeland and home seems unsettling and disconcerting to the protagonist who has to take a plunge into his memory to settle the dispute. He is compelled by exotic experiences in America, to intervene into his childhood days in order to understand why he has to scramble in between homeland and home while staying away from his veritable homeland. This novel problematizes the notion of homeland by pitting it against the notion, i.e. home. The protagonist at times thinks that his homeland is a stationary entity and will not be subject to physical alterations, and at once this realization is deflated by the onslaughts of reality. Mourning and melancholia play crucial roles in leading the protagonist to get stuck in limbo as far as the conflict is concerned. In one hand, it helps him recount his old days and on the other hand, it confuses him regarding the "truth" associated with homeland. This account is thus designed to delve deep into the fictionalized documentation of this never-ending and putative faceoff between homeland and home in order to assess the significance of mourning and melancholia in forging the identity

of the protagonist in the novel.

II

Ali Sethi's *The Wish Maker* unravels the irrepressible and irreversible yearnings of the protagonist of the narrative, Zaki Shirazi, to walk down the memory lane to explore his veritable homeland. Zaki left his homeland when he was young and has been recounting his unforgettable memories associated with his childhood. While staying in America, he contemplates upon the homeland and goes back to those early days in his life by free association of thoughts thereby intending to explore his homeland. As the narrative unfolds, readers are introduced with Zaki Shirazi who has landed down in Lahore to attend Samar Api's wedding. Immediately after the introduction, one may trace an explicit shift in narration from third person to first person, which implies that the author of the narrative allows the protagonist to spell out his subjective interventions and interpretations of the faceoff between homeland and home so that his poignant striving seems credible and worth exploring to readers. Zaki expatiates on his growing up days and meticulously recounts all his memories right up to present day in order to find out ease and comfort in homeland. He recalls all the old familiar faces in his extended family and explores his relations with each of them. While recalling childhood days, he refers to the then dynamic socio-cultural scenario time and again thereby implying that homeland has been passing through changes of different sorts since long. Zaki remembers that along with other cousins, he was born and brought up in a joint family in Lahore. Right from his childhood, Zaki has been reticent and had a limited number of friends. He used to spend time with Samar Api who one day fell in love with a person whose identity was kept secret to everybody except to Zaki.

Having spent early days in his life, Zaki left for America for higher studies leaving all his eventful memories behind. In America, he has to willy-nilly settle down making a number of compromises to comfort and ease and has to find out a job to bear his expenses. While staying in America, Zaki has been in constant touch with his family living in Lahore through Internet. His memories start pricking his psyche and pushing him to remember his childhood days. Zaki can neither resist himself from delving deep into his memories nor can stay indifferent to the appeals of memory. When he lands down in Lahore, he is disillusioned finding it out that his homeland has worn a number of changes that he cannot recognize. He feels that his homeland has disappeared into the snares of time and will not come back to him. Towards the end of the narrative, Zaki even comes to this realization that he had trusted deceptive and misleading memory which has actually debunked all his expectations and wishes.

In Diaspora Studies, the notions of homeland and home bear tellingly important significance in that theoretical insights pertaining to these terms are time and again resorted to account for the wretchedness and woe of people dwelling in liminal space. For instance, Salman Rushdie in his seminal collection of essays, i.e. *Imaginary Homeland: Essays and Criticism (1981-1991)* has pertinently observed: "We are. We are here.' And we are not willing to be excluded from any part of our heritage" (Rushdie 15). What he meant to say is that people prefer to remain rooted to his veritable homeland and once he is excluded from it, he can never return homeland. It is at best that homeland can only be imagined from an exotic location. In other words, homeland can be revisited in terms of memory and can never be physically met in reality. Rushdie's approach to homeland bears flaws in it in that though he had advised people to re-explore their homelands on the basis of memory, memory cannot always be trusted because memory does not always provide flawless information and it tends to get twisted with one's imagination and thus homeland cannot be exactly grasped in that way. As homeland goes through changes over a period of time, the physical appearance of homeland is bound to be altered. Consequently, it becomes difficult for people to come to terms with the alterations that have occurred to homeland.

The notion of home is problematic too in that critics have debated on the nature of it. One may here pertinently ask whether there is any dichotomy between homeland and home. It needs to be made quite

clear that the concept of homeland incorporates the constitutive components of home but the reverse is not true. Whereas homeland refers to a spatio-temporal concept, home is essentially held as a distinctly subjective orientation of mind that an individual possesses. Thus home can be borne in mind from one place to another. Uma Parameswaran has rightly said: "Home is where your feet are, and may your heart be there too ..." (Parameswaran qtd. in Paranjape 291) and following this pertinent observation one may argue that concept of home is fluid and entirely subjective.

Memory turns out to be a very important theoretical tool by means of which homeland can be remembered. Femke Stock said: "Memories of home are no factual reproductions of a fixed past" (Stock qtd. in Knott 24) and it reveals that memory is not at all trustworthy. It is through memory one explores his own identity. Sometimes, distorted memory becomes an impediment for one to know his identity. In other words, incoherent memory problematizes identity formation and makes one's survival all the more miserable. But it is through memory, an individual seeks to intervene into his past that has been on a deferral since he left it for some reason, inasmuch as he can neither rewind the time past nor can physically get reconciled with it. Thus it is an important tool for the exploration of both homeland and home.

The ideas of mourning and melancholia seem worth exploring in this regard to figure out miserable and wretched survival of an individual living in between the beaconing of homeland and the impetus of home. Freud in his seminal essay "Mourning and Melancholia" pertinently observes the subtle discrepancy between mourning and melancholia:

Mourning is regularly the reaction to the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one's country, liberty, an ideal, and so on ... The distinguishing mental features of melancholia are a profoundly painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, inhibition of all activity, and a lowering of the self-reproaches and self-revilings and culminates in a delusional expectation of punishment (244).

What Freud meant to say is that whereas mourning is a plaintive reaction to amnesia at large and particularly to permanent disappearance of homeland in this regard, melancholia can be understood as the inevitable consequence of mourning in that melancholia reveals the "truth" in mourning, i.e. absence. Melancholia can be interpreted in this way that it is essentially a psychological disposition that enables an individual to see through mourning conditioned by memory. Melancholia bears "ambivalence" within itself and serves to accentuate the pangs of one's poignant existence in a liminal space. Vijay Mishra in his influential work *The Literature of the Indian Diaspora: Theorizing the Diasporic Imaginary* has brilliantly worked out Freud's thoughts on mourning and melancholia and cogently remarked:

True mourning, then, can only dictate a tendency to accept incomprehension, which means leaving it as an absence. In other words, the truth of mourning in literature, as figurative language, effectively implies that true mourning can never be defined, except as an absence. (8)

In the case of melancholia, it seems difficult to draw a contour and consequently melancholia tends to transgress the veritable boundary of mourning and becomes "unpresentable". Taking cue from Mishra, one may tenably argue that melancholia serves to exacerbate one's pining for the loss of his homeland in this regard by divulging the limitations of mourning and is necessarily a state of mind that tempers one's rational attitude towards homeland.

III

Zaki Shirazi begins to recollect his old childhood days in Lahore while staying in America and wonders how his homeland will be looking when he will return homeland. He is anxious and apprehensive

of the fact that he might not be able to get back at his homeland because a long passage of time has already passed since his departure from Lahore. One may here reasonably suppose that Zaki might have been smitten by homing desire- a kind of desire that is absolutely distinct from one's craving for his homeland and resembles to one's constant longing for homely ambience even in abroad. His constant search for homely locale in exotic land might have led him to revisit his memory to get back at his original homeland. He recalls his strong bonds with people around him in Lahore and it is through remembering his homely bonds, he actually tries to embrace his homeland. The more he recounts his past days, the quicker he gets stuck in bewilderment. One after another, memories crowd in his mind and he gets lost in the exploration of his homeland, as it were. When he tries to check out the correspondence between his recollections and actual realities having landed down in Lahore, he gets disillusioned and immediately realizes:

That was there and I was here now, at home. But home too was changed. The airport was new, and the roads were new; the hoardings and building on the way from the airport, many have come up in these last two years alone and pointed again and again to the ongoing nature of things. There was an added estrangement from the known: the drive home was too short, the bridge too small The veranda was no longer an avenue, and all day the kitchen has a smell. (Sethi 8)

The deceptive nature of memory is exposed to Zaki when he witnesses that his homeland has worn a different look altogether and it seems unrecognizable now to him. He witnessed:

I returned to Lahore in late December, to unshed leaves that were silver in the daytime and thickened with shadow as the light withdrew into evening. Bombs had begun to go off in the north of the country. And they said it would come to the roads of Lahore, where there were more bicycles now, more rickshas, more cars hastened by bridges and underpasses where once walls had stood. The house had aged. The tree was stooping in the garden, the walls bulging behind the paint. My mother's hair was threaded white, and Daadi descended the steps of the veranda with caution, lifting her salwar at the ankles as if preparing to step into water. (Sethi 403-404)

Zaki feels that his homeland has hoodwinked him in that on one hand, it draws him towards its bosom and on the other hand, memories have made him realize that homeland is a distant and elusive reality and the face of which is constantly altering with time. When he left for America for higher studies, he could only carry home along with him and the memories pertaining to home have been persuading him to retain adherence to homeland. He falls in the tension between homeland and home, and cannot find a way out this brawl. While exploring his old familiar relations, he realizes that he has lost his homeland as it were and his original homeland has already been altered by social, political, cultural, and economic changes. Zaki felt:

Words are vacant, adrift, waiting for contact with life, for moments that will come to cause the unmistakable throb of recognition. At home there was no recourse to hollow wisdoms. There was only the loss, and it took the place of life, of habitual arrivals and departures and of sounds from behind doors that now stayed shut. (Sethi 281)

The title of this novel is very significant in the sense that Zaki assumes “the wisher maker” in the narrative, who gives vent to his latent wishes incited by memories, to meet his homeland but towards the end of the narrative, he comes to this comprehension that it is along with the regression of his homeland into perpetual deferral, his indigenous identity has become vulnerable and can be subjected to subversion. Zaki has to take recourse to memory to try to grasp receding homeland as he finds no option left in his hand but all his overtures simply fall flat at the end.

It is through his fervent recollection of childhood days spent in Lahore, Zaki unconsciously mourns for homeland which is conspicuous by its absence in actuality. On one hand, Zaki thinks that his memory drags him to catch hold of his homeland and on the other, home keeps on persuading him to approach it. Memory at times seems to have come at Zaki's disposal and at once have triggered distress and discomfort in his mind. Zaki's mourning ends in his being stuck in melancholia and he realizes:

News from home makes you aware that the flow of memory has stopped. A life you no longer live is a life you no longer know. But you rely on memory to inhabit, however falsely, what now lies outside your experience; and every homecoming involves the puncture of memory's airy bubbles. (Sethi 400)

Zaki cannot get back at his homeland not only because it has been receding but also because he cannot find correspondence between the original homeland and his subjective understanding of home that he has been carrying with him. Zaki's misery knows no bound when he understands the gulf between homeland and home, and subsequently the tension between the two.

Thus at the close of this discussion, it can be plausibly put forward that the conflict between homeland and home is undeniably psychological and it arises out of Zaki's inability to anticipate the consequences of leaving homeland behind at certain stage of his life. Had Zaki recognized the elusive nature of homeland in advance, he could have averted this dilemma that has been perturbing his psychological equanimity. It is Zaki's subjective "wish" to meet homeland powered by the impetus of home, which happens to be the prime cause of his psychological trepidations and concerns for the inscrutable onslaughts of time as far as his identity is concerned.

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