



Asian Review of Social Sciences (ARSS)

Vol.4.No.1 2013 Pp 31-35

available at: [www.goniv.com](http://www.goniv.com)

Paper Received :04-12-2012

Paper Published:20-04-2013

Paper Reviewed by: 1. Dr.B. Shanthini 2. R.Rajeshkumar

Editor : Prof. P.Muthukumar

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## TRIMETRIC OF LAND, CULTURE AND IDENTITY IN INDIAN ENGLISH FICTION

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### Abstract

Indian English Fiction is a vast treasure trove of fictional narratives that give an expression to the cultural ethos of the nation. The edifice of Indian English Fiction in fact stands on the trimetrical axes of land, culture and identity that defines and renders shape to it. Contemporary fiction, owing to the large scale influence of the Diaspora is replete with musings of 'home'. In other words land holds an eminent place in Indian English Fiction as a symbol of 'home'; it is the roots that keep the individual grounded onto his native land and links him to his past through the inherited cultural ethos that he carries within his self. Land and culture are the essential elements that engender an individual identity thereby forming the important trimetric that characterizes Indian English Fiction. In other words this trimetric is the major concern of contemporary Indian novelists, who delineate them through their fictional narratives and characters.

Keywords: Trimetric of Land, Culture, Identity In Indian English Fiction

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### 1. Introduction

Land is of prime importance in contemporary fiction. It is inter-related with the concept of roots or the home. Man being central to the narrative, it is natural that his association with land would be equally important. Land, roots, home or nation, whatever be the source of reference, an individual's identity is interminably bound to it. In fact land and culture are interchangeable terms, one being bound with the other, and an integral part of the other. Every land/home/nation has its own set of customs, tradition, ethics, beliefs and practices that contribute to the formation of the native identity. No matter where the person is placed, the individual always carries within the self, the influence of this native identity that is an amalgamation of his land and culture.

Land, culture and identity is fused together in the narrative of Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* (2006), which is set in the Sunderbans. The novel begins with a comprehensive description of the landscape, alluding to the myth associated with the origin of the Ganges. Ghosh has very beautifully portrayed the river with the metaphor of a cloth; India's fabric, "... the ragged fringe of her sari, the achol that follows her, half-wetted by the sea."

The very character of the islands of Sunderban is defined and created by the landscape of the archipelago. The river forms various small channels that cut across the land, meeting to create confluences that are known as the "mohona". The place also referred to as the "bhatir desh – the tide country" is remarkable for its geographical bounds are determined by the tide. "This is a land half-submerged at high tide: it is only in falling that the water gives birth to the forest." This inconsistency of the land the inherent insecurity that is a result of the dissolution of borders influences the life and characters of the people living on the islands. Kanai, one of the protagonist found out that his western education and knowledge were inadequate in an environment where life was lived in close communion with nature; in fact dictated and directed by it.

If Sunderban is the landscape that dominates the narrative of Ghosh then the Kashmir valley looms large over the tale of Salman Rushdie's *Shalimar the Clown* (2005). The valleys, hills, the pine trees, the river Muskadoon, the village of Pachigam, the people and their Kashmiriyat hold a significant influence on the life of the characters even when the story shifts to the locales of the distant America. Even the names of the characters central to the tale are inspired by nature: Bhoomi (earth) preferred to be called as Boonyi, the local name for the "celestial Kashmiri chinar tree" (STC 46), while her mother was named Pamposh after the lotus but instead preferred the nickname "Giri, meaning a walnut kernel" (STC 51). The beauty of the Shalimar garden is depicted by the author enthralling the readers with its enigmatic splendour. India, the daughter of Boonyi and Max reconnects to her Kashmiri roots; "Kashmir lingered in her . . . She no longer saw this as an American story. It was a Kashmiri story. It was hers."

The pristine environment of Dehradun is an integral part of Ruskin Bond's fiction. In his first novella, *The Room on the Roof* (1996), Bond details the local flavour of his beloved Dehra. The story begins with beautiful nature imagery, striking and vivid in its description. THE LIGHT SPRING RAIN rode on the wind, into the trees, down the road; it brought an exhilarating freshness to the air, a smell of earth, a scent of flowers; it brought a smile to the eyes of the boy on the road. Land/Nature is the setting for all the novels: a basis, an inspiration, or an influence. In all three novels the presence of nature is unmistakably strong and integral. If land defines the narrative and character of Ghosh's fiction, then in Rushdie land is entangled with the political and emotional makeup of its characters, while it becomes an integral part of Rusty's life in Bond liberating him from his confined life.

Land and culture are intertwined. Research has proved that land and environment affect and influence the cultural norms of its people. Rituals, customs, tradition, language and food habits

depict this unique association of both. For instance Eskimos have varied expressions for the word snow while the Marshalese has a variety of expressions for the coconut.

Ghosh details the native tradition and belief of the people living in the Sunderban in his narrative. The myth of Bon Bibi and her brother Shah Jongoli, Dokkhin Rai-the tiger demon and his demons, reveal the reverence for the land; the mystery and sheer power of nature. Till today the Sunderban is known for its ferocious tigers and the fragility of life held in balance at the mercy of nature: the man eaters, crocodiles, tides, cyclones and storms. Bon Bibi is the mother earth protecting her children from the tiger demon-Dokkhin Rai, while the dolphins are her messengers. The culture of the island is held in association with the land and land in Sunderban is not stable nor is life. Every step is taken in reverence to and with the blessing of the deified gods and deities of the forest for protection and prosperity.

Kashmiriyat is the culture represented in Rushdie. The village of Pachigam in Kashmir is an example of love and brotherhood. Divisions of race and religion are not a hindrance for its people and so Boonyi, a Brahmin girl is married off to a Muslim boy, Shalimar Noman with blessings and lot of goodwill. The traditional Kashmiri food, “the legendary wazwaan; the Banquet of Thirty-Six Courses Minimum.” (61); the folk art fromof “bhand pather or clown stories” (STC 61); co-exist with the myth sourced from a variety of various sources like Hindu mythology relate to the dance and influence ofthe shadow planets- Rahu and Ketu over the human mind and passions, the presence of mystics like Nazrebaddoor and belief in totems and superstitions like the belief in snake luck by Firdaus Noman, displays the influence of the land on the culture.

The celebration of Holi in Bond’s novella is resplendent with the coming of spring, a time for joy and merriness in every part of India. The natural vibrancy ofnature’s colours get mingled with the colours of Holi, moistening the lonely and desolate heart of Rusty. The walls of the houses were suddenly patched with splashes of colour, and just as suddenly the trees seemed to have burst into flower; for in the forest there were armies of rhododendrons, and by the river the poinsettias danced; the cherry and the plum were blossom; thin e snow in the mountains had melted, and the streams were rushing torrents; the new leaves on the trees were full of sweetness, and the young grass held both dew and sun, and made emerald of every dew-drop . Clouds of coloured dust rose in the air and spread, and jets of water - green and orange and purple, all rich emotional colours - burst out everywhere.

Cultural ethos of a community or group of people are defined and directed by the land. The deification of nature and animals like tiger, projects the importance of nature that influences life in the islands of Sunderban wherein man lives life at the mercy of nature and the natural elements. The fusion of cultures and happy co-existence of the various ethnic and religious groups provides a benevolence of the land that generates a peaceful life and brotherhood in the pristine environs of the Kashmir valley, which is often referred to as the paradise on earth. In a similar vein there is the celebration of the coming of spring after a chilling winter; a breath of

fresh air and new life that finds an apt expression in the jubilation of the people in the revelry of Holi. Land and culture being complementary, they are the basis of an individual's self identification. A person living in intimate interaction with nature inculcates the inherent simpler and natural life, devoid of all artificiality and superficiality, tuned in to the true spirit of life and nature. Modern, city life is however distanced from land and divorced from the genuine concerns and understanding of life.

In *The Hungry Tide*, Fokir is the character who is deeply imbued with the spirit of the land and nature of his environment. A fisherman by profession he lives in close communion with the land and earns his livelihood from it. The simplicity and rusticity of Fokir is evident from his innocence and a lack of greed. When Piya offers him money after being rescued from getting drowned, he is bewildered by the sight of so much money. Yet all he takes from her is the amount lost to the guard. Fokir stands in the novel in sharp contrast to the modern and educated Kanai, who with all his expertise and knowledge still falls short of his stature in a place that nullifies all superficial and worldly knowledge. On one of the excursions for the Irrawaddy dolphins Kanai is left behind on one of the islands and finds himself ill equipped to handle the dangers of the forest. The mysterious vision of the tiger strikes him with such fear that he faints and is rescued in time by Piya and Fokir. Even at the end of the novel it is again Fokir who saves Piya from the storm; shielding her and facing the wrath of its force on his own body. "She could feel the bones of his cheeks as if they had superimposed upon her own; it was as if the storm had given them what life could not; it had fused them together and made them one." (THT 391).

Fokir is a simple person without any affectations, completely harmonized with his environment and land while Kanai finds himself ill at ease in the islands. His westernized education and expertise are of no use. Even his knowledge of various languages is not essential for the illiterate Fokir to communicate with Piya. The sacrifice of Fokir transforms both, Piya and Kanai. They realize their true self and affirm to life and responsibility as is evident in Kanai's decision to return and Piya's to stay back and take the responsibility of Fokir's family.

A similar association with nature lends the freeness of spirit that Boonyi imbibes from her mother Pamposh. She represents the feminine principle of nature that cannot be bounded or restrained. When Shalimar refers to her as the earth, he is correct in his allusion but fails miserably in his assumption when he says, "She was the earth and the earth was the subject and he had grabbed it and sought to bend its destiny to his will." (STC 47). Boonyi represents the free spirit of the land that transcends all societal bounds, yet comes back after her illusions shatter. The dull, debauched living of the city life leaves her bloated and in a degenerated state. But the valley restores her lost vigour and beauty back to her, and also her resilient spirit is revived that bravely waits for her end. Shalimar's identity is also defined by his relation to his art and the land where he practices. The landscape of Kashmir abounds with tall trees like the pine, the chinar, etc. Shalimar literally walks on air as he balances himself on the tight rope. His flight does metamorphose into his voyage around the world; from India to America. His transformation into a killing machine reflects the problem of insurgency that has ruined the

beauty and serenity of Kashmir and the loss of the Kashmiri way of life. Land is also synonymous with home from where the individual is displaced and dispossessed in the modern globalized world. Shalimar symbolizes this displacement and so does Max and India.

Maximilian Ophuls, a German Jew creates his identity under the shadow of the Holocaust and loss of home and family. Commenting on the process of self-identification he says, “The reinvention of the self, that classic American theme . . . began for me in the nightmare of old Europe’s conquest by evil. That self can so readily be remade is a dangerous, narcotic discovery. Once you’ve started using that drug, it isn’t easy to stop. This power of transformation or metamorphosis is best employed and imbibed by the migrant for whom the whole world is home; for him land is not a geographical area barricaded and confined. Yet the influence and pull of the land one originally belongs to is ingrained in the psyche through the emotions and experiences attached to the homeland. Max experiences flashes from his past while visiting the Line of Control in Kashmir, which unsettles him. “Then his history reasserted itself and he climbed back into its familiar garments—in particular the history of his hometown .

The identity of Rusty is forced into confirmation by his disciplinarian guardian. English customs and traditions imposed on the young boy distances him from his land and culture; his immediate environment. The rain lashing on his face and the splash of colours of Holi, generates a new energy in him that helps him to break free from his guardian’s house. His appointment as Kishen’s English teacher and his growing attachment to Meena, Kishen’s mother takes him forth on his journey towards maturity. His identity is mingled fully with his environ but does not realize it until he decides to leave. The decision to leave is also influenced by the absence of his friends, Somi, Ranbir, Suri, which makes him feel lonely and out of place. However the delinquent situation of Kishen makes Rusty reassess his decision and he decides to take responsibility of the child and return to the hills.

They had to go back. To bathe at the water-tank and listen to the morning gossip, to sit in the fruit trees and eat in the chaat shop and perhaps make a garden on the roof; to eat and sleep; to work, to live, to die. Identity requires specificity of history and culture. In the modern times this specificity is temporal and shifting thereby lending a certain degree of complexity to the process of self identification. No matter where a person is displaced, the influence and presence of his land and culture cannot be ignored or negated. It emerges either through the story, the theme, the characters or the situations inherent in Indian English Fiction. In fact it can be said that land, culture and identity are fused together to give a definite form and shape to the edifice of Indian English Fiction, which characterizes it as a unique expression of the life, culture and ethos of India and its people.

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