CHAPTER - II

THE CHILLING FRONTIERS OF EXILE

“…The dead end

With no return ticket

And the sentence for life:

To look back.”

Rosemary Sullivan

The feeling of exile is in every heart. Man runs away from so many things in life, seeks shelter in distant havens, and longs to return to what he has left behind. Constantly on the move, packing up and resettling, he is an exile in all conditions. Being plucked from everything familiar and pleasant and thrown into a cold and hostile world, he is made victim of an unassuaged nostalgia, an endless longing for home. The saga, which began when Adam and Eve were thrown out of Paradise, still continues, in different dimensions and drastic climaxes.
The experience of exile has become emblematic of the fissured identities and hybridities generated by colonial dislocations. In crucial ways diasporic identities, which are a characteristic of the 20th century, have come to represent much of the experience of ‘Post-Colonialism.’ Countries all over the world have had the misfortune of being colonised and so have they undergone the trauma of being wrecked of their selves. Writers throughout the world, who identify with this phenomenon, have gracefully penned the influence it has generated on different cultural landscapes-the displacement of civilizations and the irremediable isolation which result from it; the effects of acculturation, the psychological impacts like segregation, discrimination, and alienation, all have found their way into works of such authors and immortalised the consequences of violence and communal conflagration, and the pain and suffering that comes along.

In Reflections on Exile And Other Essays (2001) Edward Said defines the notion of ‘exile’ and that of an exiled person. He differentiates among, ‘exiled’ persons- who are banished and isolated; ‘refugees’-who ask for assistance and ‘expatriates’-who choose to leave. The image derived from this analysis is that of, a land of exile as non-chosen, and that which does not suggest any feeling of welcome. ‘Exile’ represents in fact the burden carried by the pilgrim. To this instability caused by ‘exile’ is added the instability caused by the identity crisis. Nevertheless ‘exile’ is
dual in nature, for even as it produces a decentring of self and identity, it triggers the search for a new, more evolved identity.

‘Exile’ is generally described as forced removal from one’s country; as banishment or expulsion from home. To exile is to banish or drive away someone from their country or home. An exile is a person expelled by the authorities. ‘Exile’, however, can also be voluntary: ‘exile’ denotes voluntary absence from one’s country or one who separates himself from his home. An immigrant, is an exile who departs voluntarily in search of economic opportunities and upward mobility. He is an exile in any way and the feeling of banishment or isolation advances in the process of his settlement- as memories disappear and new values and traditions are adopted.

Whether imposed or voluntarily chosen, ‘exile’ is a condition, a real location in the political, social and geographical space. It is not an identity arbitrarily imposed by census officials, or by well-meaning social scientists and literary theorists. Those who find themselves thus situated know and embrace ‘exile’ as their status and their role, as their place in history, because it is, their fate- who they are, and they know it.

“To know who I am is a species of knowing where I stand… it is the horizon within which I am capable of taking a stand.”

3
Both in the political sense and as a metaphor, ‘exile’ has a life as long as recorded history; it is not just about the social relations that separate people from home and homeland, but a way to capture the suffering that ensues from all forms of estrangement.

Exile is both a political phenomenon, referring to the effects upon individuals and collectivities of political struggles, and a universal phenomenon that captures, in a powerful metaphor, the psychological and emotional effects of the loss of that which anchors individuals in spaces, both literally and figuratively. ‘Exile’ is also about the loss of roots, the loss of place, the loss of one’s bearings in the world. It is a rift, forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home. The sadness caused in the process is insurmountable and unable to be healed. It has torn millions of people away from tradition, family and geography.

Since exile is a universal experience, it is but natural that it is expressed in universalized terms. But while of course there are themes in common across different kinds of diasporic experiences and exiles, there are also enormous differences between them. The experience of diaspora is also marked by the histories that shape each group that move. Yet there are a large number of people in the Third World that have not physically
moved, and have to speak from ‘where they are’, which is also often an equally ideologically or politically or emotionally fractured space.

“….And I knew I was in the corridor of time, standing in between the past and the future….I then walked out of the pillared hall with its ribbed vaults and flying buttresses and frescoes of dancing deities. Once outside I knew where I was. I was in exile.”

Uma Parameswaran.

Migrations end in loss of homes, possessions and memorabilia. When the smoke clears, we are faced with charred pieces of identification, shards of language, burned tongues and cultural fragments. The migrants’ relations tend to be of a surface character, and if there is a strain or conflict, it too is superficial. His ties to his homeland are unimpaired and his native culture remains a steady reference for his judgments and actions.

The immigrant by the very act of his movements alienates himself from his native culture; there is strangeness, dislocation and perhaps rejection of the new land and of its different ways. For millions of years, some remain in these cultural gaps, and as strangers in a strange land.
Once he accepts his loss of stable communities and the inevitability of exile, then the interdependency of linguistic and cultural experiences, both at the local and global level becomes self-evident.

‘Exile’ is a two-faced phenomenon for writers who have migrated to an alien land, -negative, because the writers are forced to leave their culture, and positive because they are- in the process or as a result of being exiled, exposed to others. They become accustomed to another kind of life, and it becomes quite evident in their writing. The writer is uprooted, displaced and the idea that he belongs to no part of his own culture, becomes a familiar motif in his works. But the fact remains that the view of an exiled writer is much more insightful. A problem of post- colonial writers, especially living abroad is how to incorporate and express these diverse cultural influences in other ways than thematic. 20th century is full of protagonists who are profoundly ill at ease with their surroundings. There is a notion of strangeness, of being different no matter how well-adapted one is.

The adoption of export led economic policies by most impoverished nation states, was followed by an accelerated worldwide circulation of capital and labour. As capital speeds around the globe taking advantage of rapidly changing profit making opportunities, the economic devastation it
leaves behind compels millions of workers to uproot themselves and join local, regional, and international migration flows.

Migration and dispersion are natural phenomena, widely familiar to the human race. As early as the 13th century A.D, Mongol tribes under Genghis Khan captured China, Southern Russia, Turkistan, Afghanistan, Iran, Mesopotamia, Syria, Asia Minor and even parts of Eastern Europe. Such invasions resulted in subsidiary waves of displaced tribes and peoples, including Visigoths, Ostrogoths, Vandals and Ottoman Turks. In the 9th and 8th centuries Arab tribes swept eastward through Persia to Chinese Turkistan and into northwest India. They also spread westward through Egypt and across northern Africa into Spain and Southern France and north westward through Syria into Asia Minor.

The decision of an individual or a group of people to leave their homeland in the first instance and then to settle down in an alien land is influenced by various reasons. These push and pull factors may operate in combination to determine the actual migration. Among these include the presence of an agency facilitating emigration; the policy framework, governing movement of population both in the homeland and in the recipient country; and convenient mode of transport.
It was the unequal distribution of wealth, repressive governments, and poverty that drove the peoples out of their homelands in Europe, to seek refuge in host countries after the World Wars. Migration to the north American Continent was at that time, largely eurocentric. Millions of Africans were left dispossessed from the 15th to the first half of the 19th century and sold into bondage in distant lands, and sent to Portugal and other European countries; 20 million Africans were forcibly relocated to the Americas. Africa with more than 40 nations and 600 ethnic groups has about one-third of the world refugees. Political and ethnic fighting in Rwanda displaced more than 2 million people in 1994. In the 15th Century itself Jews and Muslims fled Spain as a result of Christian Inquisition. In 1948 when Israel was established, hundreds of thousands of Jews migrated to that state and the displacement of about 720,000 indigenous Palestinians resulted. Further in 1989 after the break-up of the communist regime in USSR another migration of the Jews was seen.

The Industrial Revolution gave rise to a migration within nations – people moved in large numbers from rural and agricultural areas to urban centres. This movement came to the industrial countries in the 1800’s and then exploded in the developing countries in the 20th century. The peak of modern migration occurred in the 50 years preceding the World War I. In the 19th and 20th centuries millions of western and eastern Europeans seeking
political or religious freedom or economic opportunity settled in North and South America, Africa and Australia and New Zealand and other parts of the globe. In the early 1990s the violence that accompanied the break-up of Yugoslavia into separate ethnically based states forced millions to leave their homelands. War caused Iraqi Kurds and Shites and Iranians to flee their countries. The Soviet Union occupation of Afghanistan in the 1990s resulted in more than 5 million of Afgans leaving their homeland and migrating to Pakistan and Iran, making up the world’s largest refugee group.

In Europe the trend of migration has been relatively peaceful from east to west and from south to north. Millions left Eastern Europe to escape repressive Communist governments and later to flee the chaos and poverty that came after those governments fell. From the South- from Mediterranean countries like Turkey and from the former African colonies like Senegal- migrants have come in search of economic opportunities. Millions from Cuba and from Mexico and elsewhere in Central and South America have settled in the U.S mostly in California, Florida and Texas. Large numbers of Southeast Asians, including refugees from the Vietnam War have immigrated to America.

Migrants leave behind nation states where, at least for the foreseeable future, there are no emancipatory politics of any substance left.
As patterns of migrations continue to disperse growing numbers of people across the world, the idea of diaspora has become increasingly common in the social sciences. Utilized initially as a predominantly ‘neutral’ term to describe the dispersal of people from a homeland, the term ‘diaspora’ was largely drawn from the historical precedent of Jewish communities, a varied and complex phenomenon, which changed in character through time and space. Although they were not always explicit, certain ideas were embedded in the idea of diaspora. These assumptions were that- a diaspora was born of suffering and loss, contained a desire to return to the ‘homeland’, and that this dispersed population was, potentially radical in nature, a subaltern in the midst of dominant political structures. These assumptions were powerfully re-iterated when the notion was applied to the forced migration of enslaved Africans, who, in the process of enslavement, were not only denied their history but also faced alienation, brutalization and racism in their new homes.

Unlike those who have arrived in North America from Central Europe and South America, Indians have not come as refugees fleeing from an oppressive regime or unlike those from Africa and the Carribeans, Indians do not come with a widely-shared cultural memory of slavery and forced exile from their original mother tongue.
Any literary or sociological theory of diaspora must consider the significance of borders. People, who move away from their native countries, not only occupy but also bequeath to subsequent generations, a liminality, an uneasy pull between the two lands. The term ‘diaspora’ has moved into a broadly conceived semantic realm. Although it originally designated the forced dispersion of major religious and ethnic groups, such as the Jews and the Armenians, a dispersion precipitated by a disaster often of a political nature. Today, greatly diversified and ethnic communities, expatriates, refugees, ‘guest-workers’ and other dispossessed groups sharing a common heritage have moved into the semantic domain of the term.

Diaspora consciousness is a positive and celebratory linking across political borders, of people who are of the same family.

A. K. Ramanujan in his half-jocular, half-profound poem, says:

“Really what keeps us apart
at the end of years is unshared childhood”

This is a metaphor for the divided self of an immigrant who is a member of a distinct diaspora. Wedded though we are to a new homeland, our deepest bonds are often with our diaspora family. The danger of literary bonding is as deep as social bonding is in everyday life. The term
transmits a certain sense of shared destiny and predicament, and also an inherent will to preservation and celebration of the ancestral culture, and an equally inherent impulse towards forging and maintaining links with other migrant groups as well as the ‘old’ country.

The constant problem that comes up in the discussion of Colonial and post-Colonial literatures is the relation of the present to roots. The search of a usable past is more complex than is usually assumed. The past is varied, has many branches and changes as we seek it. It is unknowable, there is no way to go back to the ‘namelessness of childhood’ so often sought in the third world revivals of ethnic traditions and other claims to rediscover origins before the interruption by alien colonial culture. The past, changed by our perspective, changes each time we learn or lose some fact about it. Continuity takes unexpected parodied forms through the petty transactions of life, absurd coincidences, the undignified recycling of the material world; wit and unstable ironies displacing and controlling emotions.

Culture or tradition seems arbitrary, casual, a clutter of what wanders through and is taken over and used because, it happens to be there. But what leaves always returns. Life is a rushing flow in which the relationship between past, future and origins is increasingly improbable.
Memory contains and links this wild, unpredictable pool of images yet inside us there is another calm self, uprooted in a particular environment, unaffected by the flux of reality, which watches calmly, knowingly and judges simply, uncommitted, objective with a fondness of bygone days and an innocent yearning to return. James B. Johnston in his collection, “Exile: Poems of an Irish immigrant writes,

“…… When advancing years slow my steps
and my mind turns increasingly
To the contemplation of past years,
Will I, in exile, fondly remember?
The land of my birth?”

A sense of place, the idea that the physical world shapes our spiritual world is at the heart of Johnston’s impressive volume of poetry, an account of the history of thousands of Celtic descendants who were forced to leave their homeland to find a safer and better life in the Appalachian region.

“In each passing century there are a few defining moments. One occurred just seconds after midnight on Aug. 14 1947,
when the Union Jack, emblazoned with the star of India, began its final journey down the flagstaff of Viceroy’s House in New Delhi. The last retreat of that banner proclaimed far more than the departure of the British Raj and the independence of 400 million people. It heralded the end of the Age of Imperialism and its precursor, the age of Conquistadores, when the great explorers—from Columbus to Cortes, Magellan and Pizzaro—opened up the world by conquering boundless lands for God, gold and the monarchs of Spain, Portugal, France and England.”

Larry Collins and Dominique Lappierre.

The trauma generated by the single largest population shift in history—the division of the Indian sub-continent was quite different from any major movement that occurred as a result of migration from the once colonized nations, anywhere in the world.

The appalling outburst of violence dwarfed anything witnessed throughout the history of bloodshed and warfare. Large numbers of people though did not physically move, continued to live in an equally fractured space, ideologically, politically or even emotionally. Large-scale population transfers as a result of the partition of the Indian subcontinent in
1947, was a desperate remedy resorted to tackle many of the complicated communal conflicts on the land. But instead it created a host of new and insoluble problems. The event took about a million lives, and the scar created was so deep that it remains fresh and inconsolable, decades later in popular consciousness.

‘India required a deft and sensitive surgeon, but the British…carelessly butchered it. They were not deliberately mischievous-only cruelly negligent!’ (The Bride.p.14)

With the birth of two new nations, communal riots flared up from the most unthinkable quarters of the country. Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs slaughtered each other by stopping trains of refugees fleeing to either side of the sub continent. They raped women and murdered children, property left behind was seized, civil tension mounted for several months hence, in which tens of thousands of women were raped, kidnapped, abducted, and personal scores settled in the midst; forcibly impregnated by men of other religions and paraded naked; families split apart, homes burnt down, villages abandoned. Women humiliated refused to return home or were refused a place back in their families, retreated into self-exile and broken households. People saw in each other an enemy who was to be destroyed before he managed to destroy you. Hate, indifference and loathing was the
rule of the day. This massive destruction was to haunt the populace on either side centuries later, causing grievous Post-Partition trauma.

“This daybreak, pockmarked-

this morning, night-bitten.

Surely it is not the morning we’d longed for….”

Since the dawn of human civilization, people have felt the fundamental need to divide the world into territorial areas. By the end of the 19th century most of world was divided into colonial territories or claims. The British colonization over the Indian subcontinent began in 1757 with the Battle of Plassey and through a series of major invasions and wars, the crown took over the Indian government in 1858 thus setting the imperial rule for about 90 years till it was forced to leave in 1947 not without but, tearing the country into two halves and sowing the seeds of communal conflagration which were to lead to inundated rivers of blood and hatred.

Until the beginning of the Medieval Age, India was by and large a Hindu society. With the Muslim incursion began the story of the see-saw relationship between the two communities. Socially as well as culturally there was much cooperation between the lower strata of the two
communities. At the elite level however the socio-cultural created a plurality of cultures of its own kind. The rulers transplanted the cultural traditions of the countries of their origin on the Indian soil, in their dress, mental make-up and habits. The upper strata of the Muslim community differed radically from the Muslim masses and also from the elite of the Hindu community. The artificially created cultural world had no roots in the native soil, and therefore the cultural fusion differences remained wide and sharp. The rigid exclusiveness practised by the elites was only peripheral and could in no way affect the separate mainstreams of the two cultures. The latter half of Aurangzeb’s reign saw a gradual loss of Muslim power elite and a steady rise of Hindu power elite which created a new sense of insecurity among the Muslims and they tried to unite themselves by emphasizing the common bond of religion, faced by the threat of the Maratha, and the Jats and also because the political and economic compulsions obliged the Muslim ruling class necessarily to fall back on religion to maintain their own cohesion and identity.

The establishment of the British rule in India brought for the upper class another calamity in its train. The substitution of English for Persian in 1938 further turned the balance against them and in favour of the Hindu elite who showed a greater inclination towards learning English. The failure of the popular uprising of 1857 strengthened the obscurantist
tendencies among the Muslims. Since the partition of Bengal and the Morley-Minto Reforms it became impossible to keep Muslims totally passive politically and so the Muslim League was formed in December 1906 by a group of landed aristocracy, ex-bureaucrats and other upper class Muslims.

Communal Award of 1932 fulfilled all the major demands of the Muslim League- separate electorates, Muslim majority in Bengal and the Punjab, one-third representation in the Central Legislature, separation of Sind from Bombay and introduction of reforms in the North-west Frontier Province-and yet on 17 October 1937 the League changed its creed from full responsible government to full independence and adopted a resolution that, the object of All India Muslim League would be establishment in India of full independence in the form of a federation of free democratic states. Thus what was once the political ambition of a minority group turned into a firm resolve to create a new nation.

The masses remained immune to these fissiparous tendencies, and practised religious tolerance. The illustrious examples of this were the ‘Bhakthas’ and Sufi saints who invariably preached the message of love between the two communities. Bhakti and Sufism ushered a new religious atmosphere in the country. In this atmosphere, faith was valued more than
form. Orthodoxy was discouraged. Some of the rigid attitudes became relaxed. Conflicts and prejudices still existed. Nevertheless a liberal influence had entered Indian life and indicated the way to reconciliation between the Hindus and Muslims.

But the impending possibility of independence released forces of communal differences between the Hindu and Muslim elites. They assumed so powerful a proportion that they encroached upon the spirit of communal amity inherent in the popular culture. Consequently the two communities were pitted against each other to a point that they scarcely hesitated from perpetrating the most heinous crimes against humanity and God.

At midnight India became free of the 350 years of colonial rule. But the partition left the two countries devastated, the process claimed many lives, people were looted and women were raped and used as instruments of power by either side in the riots that followed. 15 million refugees poured across the borders to regions completely foreign to them, for though they were Hindu or Muslim their identity had been embedded in the regions of their ancestors. Not only was the country divided but so were the provinces of Punjab and Bengal, divisions which caused catastrophic riots and claimed the lives of Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs alike.
“The nation was new. The recently–born bureaucracy and government struggled towards semblance of order. Bogged down by puritanical fetish, in the clutches of unscrupulous opportunists–the newly rich and the power drunk–the nation fought for its balance. Ideologies vied with reason and everyone had his own concept of Independence.” (The Bride. p. 50.)

Years later the two nations are still trying to heal the wounds left by this incision and many are still in search of an identity and a history left beyond an impenetrable boundary.
NOTES


