

Researching the ‘Unhomed’ Anglo-Indians in India: A Postcolonial study of Aparna Sen’s 36, Chowringhee Lane

Sayan Mukherjee

(Assistant Professor, Regent Education and Research Foundation Research Scholar, West Bengal State University)

Abstract: *An important postcolonial concern revolves around the intricate relationship between home and identity. “Home “as perceived by the postcolonial thinkers, is not merely an objective space of physical reality, but space of the mind, interspersed with a subjective sense of possession/dispossession, belonging/non-belonging. Intrinsically connected to the concept of “home” is the question of identity. According to Stuart Hall “identity” constitutes:*

‘what we really are’; or rather – since history has intervened – ‘what we have become’. We cannot speak for very long, with any exactness, about ‘one experience, one identity’, without acknowledging its other side – the ruptures are discontinuities... Cultural identity... is a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as of ‘being’. It belongs to the future as much as to the past. (112)

Such “ruptures and discontinuities” define the very basis of the Anglo-Indian community. An Anglo-Indian has a split identity and is a victim of double marginalization. He is an outsider in his European brotherhood and a misfit in the Indian community.

This paper attempts to study Aparna Sen’s cinematic representation of the Anglo-Indian community as the “unhomed” subject in 36, Chowringhee Lane. Violet Stoneham, the protagonist, occupies the border zone of socio-historical space, her identity torn between European heredity and her Indian reality. The purpose of this paper is to point out and analyze Aparna Sen’s use of cinematic techniques to bring out the crucial “unhomely moments” in Miss Stoneham’s life. The paper also attempts to explore how the experience of “unhomeliness” is forced upon the minority Anglo-Indian group by the dominant Bengali community in Kolkata, thus severing the former from the mainstream national culture and society. Released in 1981, 36 Chowringhee Lane, based on Aparna Sen’s own story and script, represents the minority Anglo-Indian community in Kolkata with a humanitarian touch. The film revolves around the story of aging and lonely Anglo-Indian school teacher, Violet Stoneham, played by Jenifer Kapoor. The title of the film is lifted from the postal address of her apartment.

Keywords: *Anglo-Indian, Unhomed, Diaspora, Postcolonial, Identity, Marginalization, etc.*

Arguably, an Anglo-Indian is a victim of the hyphen, which functions as an irreconcilable disjunct in the formation of his composite identity. Wendel Aycock in his poem “Hyphen-nation” writes:

Sitting atop the hyphen provides a marvelous view, but no direction...

The Hyphen only supports. It does not connect. Japanese-American, Mexican-American, Italian-American -... the hyphen is incomplete...existing between two cultures, it is an eternal bridge with barriers and guards at both ends. (quoted in Trivedi and Mukherjee 196)

Owing to its mixed racial marriages between European men and Indian women, the Anglo-Indian community stands “on the margin of two cultures and two societies which never completely interpenetrated and fused” (Park, 881)

The dislocated self, threatened continually by politics of identity and location, is not one who is “homeless”, but is “unhomed” to use Homi Bhabha’s terminology for the psycho-social alienation imposed on the Other (13). He is pushed to a “borderline existence”, inhabiting the rim of an “in-between” reality (Bhabha, 19). Bhabha points out that the “unhomed” subject is often dramatized through the figure of a woman. In the domestic space that a woman occupies the boundary between the personal, internal and psychological, on the one hand, and that which is public, exterior and political, on the other, is often blurred. She occupies an intermediary “unhomely” space, as though in parenthesis, which makes it difficult for her to determine where she belongs socially and culturally:

Private and public, past and present, the psyche and the social develop an interstitial intimacy. It is an intimacy that questions binary divisions through which such spheres of social experience are often spatially opposed. These spheres of life are linked through an ‘in-between’ temporality that takes the measure of dwelling at home, while producing an image of the world of the history... And the inscription of this borderline existence inhabits a stillness of time and a strangeness of framing that creates the discursive ‘image’ at the crossroads of history and literature, bridging the home and the world. (Bhabha, 19)

The film portrays the lonely, insular life of Violet living in 36, Chowringhee Lane. Her only companion is a black cat, whom she calls Sir Toby Belch, after the name of one of the characters in *Twelfth Night*, a Shakespearean favourite that she is assigned to teach in school. However, being an Anglo-Indian and treated as a cultural outsider, Stoneham is alienated from the mainstream teaching staff, where Anglo-Indian teachers are replaced by Indian substitutes. Consequently, she is dismissed from teaching Shakespeare to higher classes and is relegated to teach grammar to lower classes. Stoneham has no option but to accept with wounded pride the humiliation she is subjected to. Her lifeless routine existence continues with weekly visits to the cemetery, visits to her old and senile brother, Eddie in an old-age home, letters from relatives who have emigrated from India, gossipy colleagues, inattentive students, and a deep love for Shakespeare.

The action of the film turns on Miss Stoneham’s chance meeting with her former student, Nandita Roy and her lover, Samaresh Moitra, a young pair of lovers played by Debasree Roy and Dhritiman Chatterjee. Nandita and Samaresh enter Miss. Stoneham’s barren life like a fresh wind and carry her away to a dream world of love and companionship. They charm her into allowing them to use the space of her small, dingy apartment, where Samaresh can practice his writing skills. The true purpose, however, was to capture the forlorn space of Miss. Stoneham’s flat and use it as a private love-making space, when the old lady is out for school. For Miss. Stoneham, this new arrangement spells wonder as she no longer has to enter an isolated flat or sip a cup of tea on lonely dining table. She is so engrossed in her new friends that she often forgets her visits to Eddie

and letters of Rosemary, her niece in Australia, lie on the floor unread. As time rolls on, Miss. Stoneham celebrates Christmas with her Bengali friends, baking cake, drinking, singing and dancing with them. When Nandita and Samaresh get married, Miss. Stoneham gifts them with her old photograph, an antiquity Samaresh cherished with longing, along with 78-rpm records of old songs.

It is Christmas time again and Miss Stoneham decides to surprise the newly wed with a Christmas cake that she has so lovingly baked for them. She makes a call to confirm if Samaresh and Nandita are available on Christmas evening, but with a courteous apology they express their non-availability as they are going out on a holiday. But nothing can stop Miss. Stoneham from surprising them with her Christmas gift and so she makes her way towards the affluent bungalow of the couple in order to leave the cake with the staff. To her shock, she discovers that the couple is holding a grand party at their residence. The dream world cracks as Miss. Stoneham realizes that the holiday is an alibi to keep an old Anglo-Indian woman out of the party. She walks away, rejected and abandoned. A taxi takes her to Victoria Memorial where a lone dog, following her on her heels. The film ends with Miss Stoneham addressing the dog with lines from the Shakespearean tragedy, *King Lear*:

Come, let's away to prison;
 We two alone will sing like birds in the cage:
 When thou dost ask me blessing, I'll kneel down,
 And ask of thee forgiveness; so we'll live,
 And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and tales, and laugh
 Talk of court news; and we'll talk with them too. Who loses and who wins; who's in, who's out;
 And take upon the mystery of things... (Act V, Scene III)

Followed by the dog, Miss. Stoneham vanishes into the shadows of the winter night. The film concludes with a still shot of a dark and empty street.

Aparna Sen takes utmost care to portray Miss Violet Stoneham with typical ethnic and racial characteristics, which bring out her Anglo-Indian identity on the surface. As a debut director, she explores on the microcosmic level, the psyche of an old Anglo-Indian lady, and then embraces the macrocosm, by showing her postcolonial status within the larger structure of the Bengali community in Kolkata. Violet Stoneham emerges, in the course of the film, as an “unhomed” postcolonial subject – betrayed and psychologically dislocated, with an unappreciated sense of values. Through a strategic use of light and shade, twilight and shadow Aparna Sen makes the “unhomely” moments in Miss Stoneham’s life more pronounced. Miss Stoneham encounters one such “unhomely” moment in her professional world. The school sequences are framed keeping the socio-cultural binaries in mind, where the old Anglo-Indian school teacher is pushed to the margin, while the center is occupied by Indian students and Indian teachers. Despite the medium of instruction being English, Miss Stoneham’s European lineage and English mother-tongue hardly get any recognition. Her students are inattentive and disrespectful, and her colleagues indifferent and heartless. The new Principal calls for a faculty meeting and places the young Miss. Mazumder as the departmental head for having academic degrees, and strategically demotes Miss Stoneham from taking Shakespeare in higher classes to teaching grammar to lower classes. Miss Stoneham responds with a shocking look that immediately subsides to a blank, disinterested look outside the glass window, watching the school girls play. The traumatic experience of rejection pushes Miss Stoneham in that “liminal space, in-between the designations of identity”, where the borders between her private and public spheres overlap, thus throwing up pertinent questions concerning roots, identity and home (Bhabha, 5).

The flashback sequences with Rosemary depict Miss Stoneham’s social dislocation. The flashback depicts Stoneham interacting with Rosemary, who is preparing for her upcoming marriage to a Bengali man. The next flashback shows bitter, chain-smoking Rosemary, whose engagement has been broken because of certain obstacles faced with her fiancé’s family. Rosemary ends up marrying another Anglo-Indian and moving with him to Australia, telling her aunt Violet as she abandons her. “Do you think I want to end up like you, sixty years old in a lonely old flat and then in old people’s home?” The dismal, scary image of social exclusion unsettles Miss Stoneham. While climbing down the stairs of the Old Age Home, she is suddenly frightened by the sight of an old lady climbing up the stairs towards her. As she rushes down the stairs, she looks back, only to find the old lady laughing at her. This distorted and debilitated image of the old lady makes Miss Stoneham face another “unhomely” moment of her life. Aparna Sen makes a brilliant use of light and shade on the flight of stairs, catching minutely the shadow of Miss Stoneham as she paces down the staircase and then runs into the open keeping the dark Old Age Home behind. The darkness however continues in the next shot as Miss Stoneham goes up the elevator to reach her own apartment. Moreover, the staccato sound of Miss Stoneham’s heels on the wooden stairs of the Old Age Home makes the experience of the “unhomely” moment more traumatic. She suddenly encounters her own shadow, old, fragile and debilitated, standing on the rim of life and death, without past and present, without an identity. When placed against a larger context of racial minority, the image of an old Anglo-Indian outcast becomes sadly prominent.

Another compelling instance of “unhomeliness” appears in a surreal sequence in which Miss Stoneham dreams of her deceased fiancé, Davy, Violet and Davy are running through an open field when Davy vanishes. Alarmed, Violet calls loudly and frantically: “Davy! Davy!”. Her childhood home then appears in the shadows. She approaches and opens the door, but the house turns out to be simply a facade. Beyond the door lies nothing but the churning ocean and the howling wind. Violet walks to the beach, where a funeral service is taking place. Nandita and Samaresh are in attendance, and we hear a slow, funereal organ version of Mendelssohn’s “Wedding March” from *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, played in a minor key. Violet is now wearing bridal attire, and above funereal we hear a voice-over of wedding vows between Violet and Davy, who are again filmed in the shadows. Before the vows can be completed, however, machine guns fire; young Violet screams, and her veil is torn. All the characters vanish into darkness, leaving nothing but an image of the shredded lace blown about by the blustering wind. The film, here, is dark and hazy as an impressionistic painting. On a psychological plane, Stoneham is taken out of the frame of the present and transported to the domain of the unfulfilled past. This psychological dislocation shows the gulf between a dream-wish and the unfulfilment of that wish.

Images of frost, mist and darkness continue as the film reaches its climax. Miss Stoneham visits the house of Samaresh and Nandita with a Christmas cake, though she has already been informed by the couple that they would be out of town on Christmas evening. Miss Stoneham merely wishes to drop the cake so as to give the couple a pleasant surprise once they return home. However, as she walks closer to the house, she is shocked to find the couple holding a grand Christmas party. Unseen by Samaresh and Nandita, Miss Stoneham stands alone in the darkness of the night, looking inside through a frosty window. It is her own records which are being played on her own phonogram. These were her generous gifts to the newlywed couple in the past. However, she remains standing today, forlorn and dejected, out in the cold, misty night. The

“unhomely” moment becomes poignant as Miss Stoneham walks away and the camera gradually recedes, shifting its focus from the center of the window to its periphery. At the background the phonogram plays “Silent night, holy night”.

Shocked, betrayed and usurped, Miss Stoneham takes a cab. The next shot takes us to a desolate Victoria Memorial, where Miss Stoneham steps down from the cab. The impact of “unhomeliness” is made more intense by the stillness that infuses the place. Miss Stoneham sits outside the Memorial and thinks aloud, reconsidering the proposal that her niece, Rosemary has given her about moving to Australia: “I never thought I would want to leave the land of my birth, but now...”. The chasm between the land “acquired by birth” and that “inherited by blood” problematizes the concept of “home”. Miss Stoneham, at this juncture, suffers a psychological displacement, arising out of socio-cultural discrimination that she has been subjected to for being an Anglo-Indian. Everett V. Stonequist, an eminent sociologist, emphasizes the socio-psychological state of an Anglo-Indian, who is,

poised in psychological uncertainty between two (or more) social worlds: reflecting in some the discords and harmonies, repulsions and attractions of these worlds, one of which is often ‘dominant’ over the other; within which membership is implicitly based upon birth or ancestry (race or nationality); and where exclusion removes the individual from a system of group relations. (8)

From a personal narrative the film-text suddenly takes a leap to embrace the political reality, where Miss Stoneham is the “unhomed subject”, suspended in a temporality of an “in-between” existence. The false sense of security that Miss Stoneham had associated so long with her acceptance of Calcutta as “home” and Samaresh and Nandita as companions is punctured as questions of roots and identity glare at her. Neither can she retreat to her safe, private European world, nor can she contest with mainstream Bengali community from her minority status. Her present now stands in a ruptured state. Even Victoria Memorial, representative of the glorious British Raj, fails to infuse her with a sense of pride and superiority, which might help her to safeguard and uphold her European heredity. The “unhomely” moment has stripped Miss Stoneham both of the past and the present, forcing her into an intermediary space. Where her home and identity are placed under question. Her existence is made hollow by the sudden thrust of “unhomeliness” that paralyzes her psychologically.

In contrast, Nandita and Samaresh, belonging to the mainstream Bengali Hindu community in Kolkata, emerge as insensitive, heartless people, who are used as effective tools that make Miss Stoneham’s experience of “unhomeliness” heartbreaking. They are more English in certain ways than Miss Stoneham is. Samaresh quotes Shakespeare freely, writes poetry in English and when his slim volume of poems is published, he calls it, “Calcutta: If You Must Exile Me”. He celebrates his new job with Chinese food and wine at Miss Stoneham’s flat. Both Samaresh and Nandita are liberal about sex, freely indulging in love-making, outside the legal sanction of marriage, in the privacy of Miss Stoneham’s flat. When married, they hold party on New Year’s Eve and play the same English records on the same phonograph, which Stoneham gifted them as a wedding present. They represent the neo English educated Bengali Hindus of the milieu, who prioritize self-interest and materialism over human emotions, whose mastery over the English language gives them a false sense of pride and complacency. They seem to have little regard for Miss Stoneham’s old age and sentiments and instead of appreciating and protecting her Anglo-Indian identity, they do their best to usurp it, by using her domestic space, gulping her food and wine, extracting deftly her English records and phonograph and finally betraying her trust. The Anglo-Indian community, Aparna Sen seems to pint out blatantly, after more than thirty years of Indian independence, is neglected and pushed to the margin by the dominant, mainstream community of the Kolkata population.

The Anglo-Indian woman has long suffered the stereotypical representation in cinema. She is projected as an “attractive entity in skirt that revealed her legs, a blouse that often revealed her cleavage, high-heeled shoes that added to the right dose of oomph to her swinging gait” (Chatterjee 50). The credit to dispel most of the myths surrounding the negative stereotype of the woman goes to Aparna Sen. Miss Violet Stoneham breaks every myth associated with the Anglo-Indian female and her community. Aparna Sen’s consistent efforts lie in showing how the minority Anglo-Indian community is prevented from joining the mainstream national culture and society, despite attempts of integration and harmony. Through an artistic depiction of psychological and social “unhomeliness”, made prominent by use of icons, like the phonograph, the English records and the Victoria Memorial, and a pervasive setting of frost, mist, darkness and shadow, Aparna Sen questions the treatment meted out to the Anglo-Indians in the post-independent Indian scenario.

36, Chowringhee Lane is “both an expiation of class guilt for the neglect of a loving, Anglo-Indian teacher as well as a haunting portrayal of loneliness and stoic courage”, writes Maithili Rao (349). Aparna Sen’s consistent efforts lie in showing how the minority Anglo-Indian community is prevented from joining the mainstream national culture and society, despite attempts of integration and harmony. Removed from a racial and political context, Miss Stoneham is just another old lady, abandoned and forlorn, seeking for love, affection and companionship. Her social crisis is the crisis of old age and debility.

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