

IN SEARCH OF ONE'S ROOTS: THE JOURNEY OF ANANTHAN AS THE QUEST FOR SELF OF A DIASPORIC INDIVIDUAL IN MALAYALAM FILM *ANANTHABHADRAM*

Saljimol S Abraham
Post Graduate Student
Department of English,
Christ University, Bangalore.

India

Abstract: The question of identity and culture is always a significant subject in the area of postcolonial studies. Leaving one's own land puts the person in 'diaspora' and brings him/her 'hybridity' and 'ambivalence'. In fact, 'home' plays a crucial function in stability of one's identity. The desire to return to one's homeland and the inability to separate one's self from the foreign land creates the unending identity conflict in an individual. This study has been tried to investigate the 2005 Malayalam film *Ananthabhadram* directed by Santhosh Sivan through Homi K. Bhabha's theories of 'hybridity' and 'ambivalence' as the causes of merged- and even lost-identity in post-colonial discourse and similar ideas of other theorists. It views the protagonist of the film, Ananthan, as an individual who is in an unconscious search for a single identity, as his identity is trapped between two different cultures that are orient and oxidant. The study makes use of a qualitative method of research where it interprets Ananthan's journey to his homeland from America as a search for self, which is lost in his western upbringing. The study lay roots in the hybrid identity of a diasporic individual which becomes the source of conflict throughout one's life.

Keywords: *Ananthabhadram*, Diaspora, Hybridity, Sense of home, Loss of identity

The question of identity and culture is always a controversial issue of post colonialism. Identity is defined as 'the fact of being who or what a person or thing is' according to Oxford English dictionary, but in the postcolonial context, identity is a complex concept that would be difficult to define. The identification of an individual or a group or a nation in postcolonial terms is often fluid owing to the increase of immigrant numbers, hybrid nations, and constitution of countries with different cultural diversities in the modern world. The question of a single self or identity came to the surface in this plethora of complex identities. People of a particular country and culture have their own special costumes, language, religion, and any other features which define them as members of that culture and separate them from the other cultures. When a person leaves his/her own country and goes to another one, he/she experiences new opinions, new culture, new language which brings him/her a dual life. Living in the 'in-between' spaces and between two different worlds brings the person a merged identity. And this is what Homi J. Bhabha calls the 'third space' which is full of ambivalence and contradictory.

Leaving one's own land puts the person in 'diaspora' and brings him/her 'hybridity' and 'ambivalence'. In fact, 'home' plays a crucial function in stability of one's identity. The desire to return to one's homeland and the inability to separate one's self from the foreign land creates the unending identity conflict in an individual. This study has been tried to investigate the 2005 Malayalam film *Ananthabhadram* directed by Santhosh Sivan through Homi K. Bhabha's theories of 'hybridity' and 'ambivalence' as the causes of merged- and even lost-identity in post-colonial discourse and similar ideas of other theorists. It views the protagonist of the film, Ananthan, the character played by Prithviraj as an individual who is in an unconscious search for a single identity, as his identity is trapped between two different cultures that are orient and oxidant. The study makes use of a qualitative method of research where it interprets Ananthan's journey to his homeland from America as a search for self, which is lost in his western upbringing. The study lay roots in the hybrid identity of a diasporic individual which becomes the source of conflict throughout one's life.

Hybridity arises when a person is caught between two different things, often two different cultures, which leads him/her to a 'double vision' or 'double consciousness' and finally a merged or even a lost identity. Homi J Bhabha in *The Location of Culture* explains that this 'border lives' put the person in "the moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion, [for] there is a sense of disorientation, a disturbance of direction in the 'beyond'"(1). Therefore anybody who lives in the in-between spaces, between two different cultures, lives a dual life which doubles his/her identity. "These 'in-between' spaces provide the train for elaborating strategies of selfhood- singular or communal- that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself"(Bhabha 1- 2). The inherent sense of 'unhomeliness' can be the main cause of a merged or even a lost identity. This sense can be conscious or unconscious in a person. But in every diaspora, the conflict between the dual identities could get activated by external and internal forces. As Bhabha remarks, "to be unhomed is not to be homeless, nor can 'unhomely' be easily accommodated in that familiar division of social life into private and public spheres"(9).

Any individual facing with another culture is under the impact of losing his/her real and pure identity as the result of hybridity and ambivalence. Bhabha mentions that both colonizer and the colonized can be the victims of such circumstances (11). In the study, the protagonist's divided self is studied as the reflection of both the colonizer and colonized attitude. In other words, the manifestation of both occident and orient culture culminates in a single individual which ultimately makes him a victim of hybridity and ambivalence, thereby in a loss of selfhood. The protagonist fluctuates between two different worlds and this oscillation victimizes him. As Frantz Fanon articulates in his work *Black Skin, White Masks*, "in the world in which I travel, I am endlessly creating myself" (227). Thus, what is left for an individual in foreign lands is a fragmented self.

The movie *Ananthabhadram* follows a young man Ananthan who returns to Sivapuram in Kerala from San Fransisco with his deceased mother's ashes, in order to fulfill his mother's last wish of lighting lamps in Shivakkavu, a temple dedicated to Lord Shiva. The movie portrays the drastic incidents and encounters happening in his life during his stay in Madampi family, his mother's home in the village of Shivapuram.

Avtar Brah in her *Cartographies of Diaspora* says: "'Home' is a mystic place of desire in the diasporic imagination. In this sense, it is a place of no-return, even if it is possible to visit the geographical territory that is seen as the place of 'origin'" (192). Thus, when people of a specific culture and nation leave their homes and migrate, a sense of loss is always with them. Consequently, they begin to imagine their homelands through some scraps of the past, through the stories and accounts they hear about the home land from others. This state of imagination is what Bhabha calls the 'third space'. The movie *Ananthabhadram* starts with Gayathri Devi, Ananthan's mother telling mystical stories about her village to a little Ananthan. Gayathri Devi, who is from the prestigious Madampi family in Shivapuram eloped with Sethu, her love interest and never returned. They migrated to America and Ananthan was brought up as an Indian among the foreign land. The above sense of loss is explicit in Gayathri's memories and stories of her abandoned homeland. Gayathri tells Ananthan that his family comes from a line of powerful magicians and that they are responsible for protecting the *nagamanickyam*, a jewel on a serpent's head. She carves a world of mystery for her son Ananthan through the stories of her native land, Shivapuram. Gayathri plays the role of the protagonist's root which stables him and avoids him from losing his identity in the host land, America. Gayathri's stories reveal the intricacies of a rigid culture that weave the life of the ancestors, the elites who reside in the Madampi *tharavaad*, Ananthan's ancestral family house. Through the folk tales his mother told him, Ananthan constructs a mental picture of his homeland. Ananthan's imagination, or his own 'third space' is filled with the images of his ancestral village Sivapuram, the *manthrikappura* (the magical chamber), *nagamanikyam* (a powerful little jewel which is guarded by snakes), Kunjootan (a tiny snake), magicians, sorcery, etc. The initial scene of the movie shows a key element of the identity formation which was characterized through folk tales, mystery, and memories in Ananthan. His identity is divided in his early childhood itself, between the imagined sense of 'home' constructed through myths and folktales and the material reality of the foreign land which is the exact opposite of the 'other' unseen land. The homeland becomes an imagined reality for Ananthan, the exact 'other' of the physical reality he lives in, that is, America. For Ananthan, the distinction between foreign land and home land is fluid as the foreign land forms the physical reality and the home land remains as an imagined construct or the 'third space'.

Franz Fanon writes about the consequences of colonialism and the change formed by the experience of immigration, " the experience of having to wear "white masks' to get by Europe, of having to bend one's own

identity so as to appear to the colonizer to be free of all taint of primitive native traits"(236). Jonah Goldberg argues that identity "is not simply imposed. It is also chosen, and actively used, albeit within particular social contexts and constraints. Against dominant representations of "others", there is resistance. Within structures of dominance, there is agency" (10). The colonial subjects, here the diasporic individual, developed a 'double consciousness,' that is, perceiving the world through the consciousness of the colonizer. The double consciousness of Ananthan about his identity is evident in his train journey scene to Sivapuram with his mother's ashes. Ananthan's return to Sivapuram is not because of his own desire to return, but to fulfill his mother's last wish. Ananthan tells in his mind: "I shall light up a thousand lamps for my mom. I will tell those lamps than that Gayatri of Madambi by sitting on the other corner of the world dreamt a lot about this temple full of lamps! She craved much for a comeback." (*Ananthabhadram*) Ananthan's conscious and 'chosen' self perceives his return to Sivapuram as a journey to fulfill his mother's dream. He says to his co-passengers that he will return to America after placing his mother's ashes in Sivapuram. The unconscious desire of self to return to one's roots remains hidden at this point of time. The western upbringing of Ananthan has put a veil over his dual self and lead to an appropriation to the Western identity. He easily identifies himself with the foreigners on the train more than the natives. The conversation with the mysterious stranger in the train is an example:

Stranger: "Devils and spirits still wander around there in Sivakkavu even now!"

Ananthan: "I have heard my mom telling stories like this."

Stranger: "Nobody dares to light lamps there for a long time!"

Ananthan: "Why not?"

Stranger: "Digambaran the sorcerer performs sorcery in that place. It is black magic and blood sacrifice there!"

Ananthan: "Interesting!" (*Ananthabhadram*)

Ananthan dismisses the account of the native about Sivapuram as interesting stories and myths similar to those which his mother told him. To him, Maravi Mathai (the character played by Cochin Haneefa) seems more like a character from the stories of his mother than a real persona. Ananthan looks at the natives through the lens of his Occidental perspectives which views the orient as inferior characters devoid of any individuality, as Franz Fanon says in his *Black Skin, White Masks*. (229) Later in his walk to Madampi family through Sivakkavu, Ananthan teasingly doubts a tribal man to be a ghost when the latter warns him about the danger in taking the path. Later he shudders when he sees Chempan for the first time, who is from lower caste and dark-skinned. The inferiority of Chemban in Ananthan's eyes on account of his dark color is evident in his dubious expression when Maravi Mathai identifies Bhama as the sister of Chemban. Ananthan asks, "Did you say that she is his sister?" and he answers, "That is a big story. A beautiful mother..." (*Ananthabhadram*).

The movie shows Shivapuram through the eyes of Ananthan. The mysterious and dark setting of the plot is a part of Ananthan's unconscious construction of his native land characterized by ghosts, black magic, and spirits. The cultural practices and beliefs of Sivapuram are perceived by the protagonist as superstitious, mythical and fascinating at the same time. The objective lens of the Western man who cannot understand or comprehend the culture of the East, categorize them as mysterious. By making the eastern counterpart as mysterious and therefore unreal, the West successfully covers up its inability to comprehend the essence of the West. Ananthan's self-identification as a foreigner makes him view Sivapuram, its living and non-living beings, and its cultural distinctiveness as part of myths and stories that are fascinating. Many of the things which he sees in Sivapuram are fascinating to him. Ananthan's repetitive use of the expression "interesting" validates his fascination for the native, including Bhadra –the beautiful young cousin of his, the custom of feeding guests on the floor, the folk beliefs, people, Manthrikapura (the chamber of magic), etc.

Ananthan's love for Bhadra, his cousin, which forms an important element of the movie is also the aftermath of the western fascination for the splendor of the East. Director Santhosh Sivan has shown this aspect brilliantly through a song sequence which visualizes Bhadra dresses up in resemblance to three different paintings of the legendary painting of Raja Ravi Varma. The song sequence "*Pinakkamano ennodinakkamano*" which is happening in Ananthan's imagination when he sees Bhadra in the Manthrikapura is not just aesthetically alluring, but also reflects upon the occident fascination for the 'typical and traditional' native women, an idea conveyed very much through the portraits of Raja Ravi Varma.

Homi J bhabha says: “The unhomey moment creeps up on you stealthily as your own shadow and suddenly you find yourself taking the measure of your dwelling in a state of ‘incredulous terror’” (15). The identity is not a stable and fixed notion as Stuart Hall confirms. “It emerges as a kind of unsettled space or an unresolved question in that space, between a number of intersecting discourses” (10). Underlying the explicit western fascination for the exotic, there lies an element of belief and fear of these cultural systems in Ananthan as his mind set is rooted in the accounts of Sivapuram which his mother told him. Though he dismisses his first encounter with Digambaran’s (the antagonist) *puja* in Shivakkavu as mere imagination and his own fear as an outcome of his mother’s stories, his sub-conscious which identifies himself as a part of the ancient village shows signs of rising out of the pretended stability. The conflict between Ananthan’s fluid identities begins from his first day in Sivapuram. This conflict gets further simulated by the natives’ reception of Ananthan the superior ‘other’, or the American. Though the family and villagers accept him as the heir of Madampi family, they constantly see him as the foreigner who is educated and cultured than them. The villagers visiting Ananthan, commenting on his hairstyle, the *velichappadu* (the oracle of God) requesting Ananthan to arrange a job for his son, the villagers asking him liquor, etc. can be seen as the eastern belief in the superiority of West. Ananthan’s identification of himself with the West until then begins to shatter as he is received as an ‘Other’ or ‘outsider’ in his home land. Through his language and Anglicized habits, he cannot merge with the natives as one among them. The repressed desire for the sense of belongingness, for a home which was there in the subconscious, comes to the surface in Ananthan’s mind.

The feeling of home is conditioned based on whether or not one is being accepted into society and whether one is willing to integrate into the society and function within its norms, values, and rules. Within a few days of his arrival, Ananthan turns into an important person in the village. Maravi Mathai addresses Ananthan to inform the death of Sreeni (a young native), even though other members of the family are present there. The villagers see him daring enough to propose dreams of change, including lighting lamps in *Shivakkavu*. One of the villagers says: “Finally, we could be in peace. We gained courage from Ananthan.” (Ananthabhadram) The efforts of Ananthan to socialize with the villagers can be seen as his unconscious reaction to the repeated reminder by the villagers of his identity as a foreigner. One part of his self which has its roots in *Sivapuram* desperately wants to prove his worthiness as one ‘among’ the inhabitants, not as an Other. Ananthan’s repeated declaration of his intention to light lamps in Sivakkavu and thereby restore the old custom of the village is a part of this desire for belongingness. Various occurrences in the movie also contribute to Ananthan’s identification of his native self. For instance, when Bhadra and Ananthan visit *manthrikapura*, and the latter expresses his wish to see the *nagamanikya*, Bhadra tells Ananthan: “You might have come from America! That does not mean you could see the diamond so soon.” (Ananthabhadram) But as *Kunjoottan* (the tiny snake who allows one to see *nagamanikya*) comes there, the duo could get to see the *nagamanikya*. Instances like this not only alters Ananthan’s view of everything native as mere stories and myths but also ignites his sub-conscious about his own worthiness as a rightful son of Sivapuram. This internalized belief in his ‘right’ makes his quest for *nagamanikya* as one to ‘see,’ not to ‘conquer’ as his Occident self would have done.

Ben-Yoseph argues in his paper “Longing for home: displacement, memory, and identity”:

“Moving from one home to another, between countries, cultures, and languages is not only a matter of ‘physical displacement but of interior experience’ as well. Different places create different experiences which in turn create different memories. And memory plays a significant role in the construction of identity.” (118)

In the movie, the major factor which triggers Ananthan’s identity conflict and double consciousness is his encounter with the antagonist Digambaran, the evil black magician played by Manoj K Jayan. Digambaran’s character development in the movie happens through the accounts about him by Gayatri and other villagers. From the stranger in the train to each and every villager including the prophetic astrologer Raman speaks of Digambaran’s dark deeds and warns Ananthan about him. Though the character development is in a negative light, the image of Digambaran grows in Ananthan’s mind in parallel to his romantic perception of his homeland. In other words, Digambaran becomes the legendary face of Sivapuram through the accounts and stories. The objective, conscious self of Ananthan sees Digambaran as a black magician, murderer, and criminal. He does not give any special recognition to Digambaran’s power and knowledge. In their first direct encounter, Ananthan advises Digambaran:

“Mister Digabaran, if I tell you the truth, the people all over, have a bad opinion about you! I feel pity for you for that. Why don't you start a better life by not harassing anybody? By worshipping God, doing some *puja* and being helpful to others! Isn't it the right way to live?” (Ananthabhadram)

Here, Ananthan sees Digambaran as an equal and determinedly ignorant to his magical powers. After the murder of Sreeni, he tries to get Digambaran arrested by police. The white savior mentality in him and the belief in his own superiority compared to the villagers leads him to take on the task of defeating Digambaran and thus save the village. He judges Digambaran on a moral plane. Franz Fanon's argument about the colonial attitude where the native psyche is repeatedly represented as savage and attributing them bestiality and foulness are performed by Ananthan here.

Meanwhile, the subconscious self of Ananthan cannot see Digambaran as a normal villain but as a culminating image of everything fascinating about his motherland. While the former self sees Digambaran to be vile and vicious, the latter self which desires absolute belongingness with the homeland develops a fascination for the all-powerful Digambaran whose image is entrenched in the psyche of every being of Sivapuram. Ananthan has developed the unbreakable connection with his homeland through the stories and accounts of his mother. Digambaran, the grandson of Siddhayogi forms an important place in Ananthan's psyche from his childhood memories. His desire for home and dream of Sivapuram comprises a larger image Digambaran in it. His fascination for the magical and mysterious things of Shivapuram thus extends from its people and Bhadra towards Digambaran. The fearful adoration which the natives have of Digambaran subtly influences Ananthan to secretly desire for an equivalent self for him, which solely belongs and carved to the land of Sivapuram.

The underlying deep desire for the powerful native finds a way of expression with the *parakayapravasha*-the act of transmigration. It is not only Digambaran who chooses Ananthan worthier to exchange his body with in order to complete his evil motives, but the act itself is the fulfillment of Ananthan's secret desire to mirror Digambaran's self. The triggered hybrid identity and mental conflict in Ananthan reach its pedestal after the act of transmigration. Ananthan's stability of mind gets destroyed within this conflict. The idea of home becomes ambiguous and fluid to him. He becomes a psychological refugee, in not being able to feel at home even in his own home. At one point, he hallucinates about his childhood-self telling him to go home- which is America. Another time, the same childhood-self he imagines prompts him to light lamps in Sivakkavu and thus fulfill his mother's wish. The whole idea of a mother's wish takes a different meaning at this point in the movie. Ananthan unconsciously associates the mother with his motherland. His attachment with mother gets in parallel to his attachment with his motherland. The dream of lighting lamps in Sivakkavu becomes the dream of his motherland. Ananthan finds himself in a deep dilemma of selfhood when his identity as a foreigner and identity as a native reaches its higher point of conflict. In his final fight with Digambaran in the *Manthrikapura*, Ananthan assumes himself as the savior of the land and willing to die for the motherland's dream. At the same time, he is unable to kill Digambaran, as the latter reflects his own hidden inner desire of identity and belongingness.

At the end where Ananthan and the whole village lights lamp in Sivakkavu as per his mother's wish and Ananthan becomes the cause of the change. But the identity crisis in Ananthan remains unsolved as the villagers still see him as an outsider whose arrival happens to be a blessing for the village. The climax of the movie suggests that the hybrid identity of a diasporic person like Ananthan will continue to remain in conflict and will come to surface when it gets triggered by both external and internal forces.

The colonialist ideology created colonial subjects who behaved in the way the colonizer had programmed. It produced a 'cultural cringe' or 'double consciousness' in the subjects. The present-day diaspora offers a significant example of this aftermath of colonialism. The lost sense of belongingness and 'unhomeliness' resulted out of enforced migrations, rootlessness and diasporic identities have caused identity crisis in individuals. The experience of moving between different cultures resulted in some sort of cultural hybridization, ambivalence, and conflict in the individual exposed to the different cultures. The protagonist Ananthan in director Santhosh Sivan's movie *Ananthabhadram* provides a perfect example of the complexity of the identity formation of the postcolonial diaspora. Through the study, it is proved that Ananthan, the protagonist is an individual who is in an unconscious search for a single identity, as his identity is trapped between two different cultures that are orient and oxidant. As the conflict between desire and conviction, or the conflict of dual-self remains to continue in Ananthan, the research concludes with the idea that the hybrid identity of a diasporic individual becomes the source of never-ending conflict throughout one's life.

References

- Ben-Yoseph, M. "Longing for home: displacement, memory, and identity." *Journal of Prevention & Intervention in the Community*, 30(1/2), 117-125, 2005, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1300/J005v30n01_09
- Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. London & New York: Routledge, 1994.
- Brah, Avtar. *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities*. Routledge. 1997, pp: 192, http://www.urbanlab.org/books/Book2Net/DefaultJob/Brah,%20A.%201996_Cartographies%20of%20Diaspora.pdf
- Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Translated by Charles L. Markmann, London: Pluto Press, 1986, London, pp. 227
- Goldberg, Jonah. *Theories of Race and Ethnicity*. Edited by Karim Murji and John Solomos, Cambridge University Press, 08-Jan-2015, pp 10.
- Hall, S. & du Gay, P. *Questions of cultural identity*. Los Angeles: Sage, 1996, pp. 10
- Sivan, Santhosh. *Ananthabhadram*. Vishaka Release, 2005.

