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Migration, Nation, and Home: A Reading of *A History of Burning*

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Abstract

Migration is an age-old concept. Whether it is voluntary, in search of growth and opportunity, or forced due to political or socio-cultural reasons, displacement of all kinds has a significant impact on one's life. This paper seeks to study Janika Oza's *A History of Burning* (2023) to unravel the concept of migration. It examines relocation through the perspectives of the evolving geographical concepts of nation and nationality, as well as the psychological notions of home and homeland. It draws upon Michael Fisher's concept of migration, Tagore's ideology of nation and Helen Taylor's study of homeland to understand the liminal spaces in which the characters of the novel exist. The paper also relies upon Homi K Bhabha's idea of a "new internationalism" and a "middle passage" to further understand the shift in their identity and being across generations.

Keywords: Migration; nation; home; Janika Oza; diaspora

INTRODUCTION

Janika Oza's 2023 debut novel, *A History of Burning*, is multi-generational historical tale encompassing different ages, lifestyles, characters, continents and even a century. Tracing the lineage of a family originally from India, the novel explores significant themes of identity, homeland, belonging, displacement, colonialism, migration, and nationality. Oza follows the journey of the family and its descendants in India, Kenya, Uganda, and eventually Canada. Instead of focusing on a

single protagonist, the novel presents different perspectives across generations and the turbulence in their lives. The characters encounter traumas of diaspora, migration, expulsion, and social and political instability while simultaneously trying to make sense of what "homeland" or a "nation" means to them.

This study aims to investigate this idea of "nation" as a byproduct of multiple migrations across generations for the same family. The paper seeks to understand what defines a nation: is it merely a geographically

enclosed physical space or a fluid entity depending upon one's subjective opinion? Does one leave their nation behind, or is it possible to carry your nationality along with you?

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Migration is a concept which has always existed. Humans, birds and animals are all known to relocate in search of food, opportunities or other resources. Michael Fisher, in his seminal work *Migration: A World History* (2013), points out, "We are all the descendants of migrants and we virtually all migrate during the course of our own lives" (xii). For some, the reasons for relocation may be positive and voluntary, to seek progress and development. But for others, it may be a forced form of displacement due to social, political, climatic or other reasons.

Migration has often made people question the idea of one's nationality and homeland. In light of this, it is significant to know what a "nation" is. Tagore's *Nationalism* (1917) throws light on this foundational concept and refers to it as "the political and economic union of people... which a whole population assumes when organised for a mechanical purpose" (9). He also takes away the sentimentality associated with a society and communal bonding by stating, "Society as such has no ulterior purpose. It is an end in itself" (9). This makes one wonder how one's nationality is different from one's "homeland". Additionally, how do the ones who have either left a nation or entered a new one find their nationality, or for that matter, homeland?

Homi K. Bhabha refers to the "new internationalism" in his 1994 text *The Location of Culture* and states "The 'middle passage' of contemporary culture, as with slavery itself, is a process of displacement and disjunction that does not totalise experience" (5). He highlights that a majority of "national" groups have been formed by a collection of "disenfranchised minorities" (5-6). In other words, "internationalism" doesn't merely relate to

different physical lands put together, but to the population of displaced people connecting these nations. This highlights the importance of such diasporic communities, which, while carrying the burden of displacement and memory, serve to turn the world into an integrated whole.

The terms "nation" and "nationality" have their etymological origins in the Latin word "natio", which refers to "birth or descent" (Sharma 4). The original idea of a nation meant "a people sharing common race, language, religion, etc must live together in a geographical area" (Sharma 4). However, this opinion does not hold much relevance now. Today, thanks to relocation and migration, people from different races, ethnicities, linguistic origins, and faiths live together and belong to the same nation. In light of this, Fishman asserts:

"I suggest that the word nation be reconsidered as a politico-geographic entity (otherwise referred to as country, polity, state) such as might qualify for membership in the United Nations. A nation may present no high degree of sociocultural unity, and, indeed, nations vary greatly in the extent to which they possess such unity within their border" (39).

This segregates the idea of a nation from a nationality. While the former may refer to a physical space, the latter refers to a sociocultural entity. Further, "A nationality is transformed into a nation when it organises a state or at least cherishes a common will to live together in a state for the future" (Sharma 4). In other words, while the nation is a body, nationality is the soul.

Another significant concept is the idea of home. Helen Taylor points out, "Refugees are, in the crudest way, defined by the loss of home" (130). She also questions whether "individual exiles or groups of refugees continue to define home as the nation that was left behind, or have successfully transferred their allegiances to the place of resettlement" (131). In other words, the loss of nations leads to the loss or the shift of

home. However, does this displacement allow the migrants to find another home, or do they stick to the nostalgia of their original homeland? This shows a certain commonality between nation and home, where home serves as the microcosm of the larger nation. The next section discusses the idea of homeland, nation, and nationality in light of Janika Oza's aforementioned novel.

Shifting Nations and Nationality

A History of Burning explores how different generations and genders witness multiple migrations across ages. The first and the foundational act of migration can be seen when Pirbhai is recruited from Gujarat and lands in Kenya. The second movement happens when he, along with Sonal, relocates to Kampala, Uganda, in order to build a career and family. Together, they give birth to Vinod, whose wife, Rajni, marks the next migration from Karachi to Kampala around the turbulence of the 1947 India-Pakistan partition. It is significant to note that in the first part of the novel, Pirbhai relocates twice. Both his migrations have economic reasons, where he moves in search of a better livelihood. However, the women, Sonal and Rajni, both leave their homes due to marital reasons. While Sonal does it after getting married to accompany her husband, Rajni leaves her home to marry into a household she still doesn't know much about. Thus, the novel highlights how the act of migration is different for genders as well. Women's displacement from their homes is an age-old tradition. Interestingly, Oza explores this shift as a form of migration too by bringing in the question of nations, not just homes, in this relocation.

Part two of the novel shows Mayuri, Vinod and Rajni's second daughter, leaving from Uganda to Bombay (India) when she's accepted into a medical school. This is the first example in the text when a woman relocates for her own career, as opposed to her husband's. By this time, her elder sister, Latika, is already

married to Arun. She is a journalist who writes a resistance newspaper under her husband's name. Arun is eventually arrested and imprisoned because of this, never to come back. During this period, Uganda is under the control of Idi Amin, a dictator, who orders the expulsion of all Asians. With Latika urging to stay behind in her search and hopeless wait for Arun, and Mayuri in Bombay, Vinod and Rajni leave for Toronto, Canada, with Kiya, their youngest daughter and Harilal, Latika and Arun's son. A simultaneous migration can be seen during the expulsion order when Vinod's sister, Pirbhai and Sonal's daughter, migrates to India, whereas her son Biju and his wife move to the United States. This shows how families get scattered during migration.

Part three of the novel shows the new life of the family in Toronto, where they raise Harilal, keeping him oblivious of his parents. Losing hope for Arun's return, Latika eventually finds a passage to London, United Kingdom, where she spends the rest of her life, geographically cut off from the rest of her family. Meanwhile, Mayuri returns from Bombay and joins her family in Toronto. Harilal, the youngest in the novel, born in Uganda, only witnesses one migration, to Toronto, where he grows up.

One may notice that after each migration, the concept of nation is majorly shifting. One adjusts to a specific nation, and before they can entirely fit in, they are made to leave it for another home. For instance, when Pirbhai leaves Gujarat initially, he boards the ship in the hope of the opportunity of recruitment. The fact that it was extremely easy for him to leave India shows how, being a young boy, he hadn't yet understood the concept of nationalism, or had any affinity towards his nation. Next, when he migrates to Uganda from Kenya, it brings a promise of better financial prospects, and of course, marriage to Sonal. Though both he and Sonal wrote letters to their families, they had made up their mind to stay in Uganda. Oza highlights:

"Perhaps once he had entertained the thought of returning home, but he had made a choice to ensure his survival here, and though he still carried the weight of that calculation in his heart, he was determined that it would not be in vain. However many letters he wrote, it was here, on this land, that he too would turn to ash. Pirbhai and Sonal scarcely spoke of their pasts in India. How could they, when it was their leaving that had brought them together? If they were to return, it was only to each other" (80)

This shows how the concept of nation had now changed from a mere boundary and the land of birth, to a land that created family. A nation to them was simply where family was, and nationalism meant their loyalty to each other. His belonging had now turned internal rather than merely legal. The nation may not have accepted him, but he and Sonal had accepted it.

The next generations, however, witnessed Uganda differently. Be it Pirbhai's son, Vinod, or Vinod's daughters- Latika, Mauri and Kiya- all find themselves in a liminal space of identity. Though educated and financially content, they are denied complete citizenship by Uganda. Vinod is depicted to have an entirely Ugandan upbringing. His education, his close friend, Moses, and even the language he learnt, Swahili, all depict how his identity was shaped by the nation he was born in. Yet, he was never a complete citizen. His daughters experience a similar denial. Vinod's daughter once wonders about giving birth to a child of her own, and if it were fair at all:

"What did it mean to bring a child into this world, when the government had just legitimized anti-Asian discrimination, ruling that not all children born in Uganda had an automatic right to citizenship; when the best people she knew were being jailed and disappeared; when her own life

had become one of both servitude and privilege" (174).

In fact, Latika faces this discrimination most harshly. Working for a resistance newspaper, she hopes to bring a change to what she believed was her nation. However, this nation separates her, first from her husband, then from the rest of her family and child, and eventually expels her entirely. Though they believed themselves to be Ugandan, Uganda thought of Asians as "aliens" and "cockroaches" (220). When Amin's order of expulsion in ninety days is released, the family realises that they were never at home.

Oza depicts how Uganda didn't merely dismiss the Asians; it erased their existence entirely. When Vinod's and his family's birth certificates and passports are torn by officers, he is told that they weren't citizens anymore. Heartbroken, Vinod states "We're stateless now" (232). With a loss of citizenship came a loss of nationality and eventually the loss of what one believed to be a home.

The expulsion led to the scattering of the family to three different continents. Earlier living together, they were now broken up into three parts, where Vinod and Rajni migrated to Toronto with Kiya and their grandson Harilal. Mayuri had already left for Bombay for higher studies. Latika, who stayed back in Uganda in the hope of her husband's release from prison, eventually moved to London alone.

For the family, life in Canada appears to settle, but their minds are never at ease. This alludes to Helen Taylor's question of the definition of home, is it what was left behind, or can it be transferred to the new physical settlement? Though they barely discuss Latika, the shadows of an incomplete past lurk in their hearts. Rajni, for whom Canada is the sixth place she has lived in, is confused about the idea of belonging:

"Some days she felt that all the leaving had left her unable to settle. Other times, when making breakfast for her

family or sinking into bed beside Vinod after a long day, she believed that anywhere could become home" (402-403).

In other words, to migrants, a nation had both aspects, the geographical one, and the psychological one. While the former could give and take away your citizenship, the latter depended largely on your sense of home, family and belonging. However, the same was not true for Mayuri, in India. She recounts to her parents that when people learned that she was from Uganda, they often "wrinkled their noses" (269). Though Vinod laughs at this and says "Too Indian for Africa, too African for India", there was an underlying pain in not finding home anywhere at all (269). Expelled from one nation, and frowned upon in the other due to the former's existence, isn't a liminal space either. Instead it is a "no-man's land", a denial of a home at all.

Hari, Latika and Arun's son, is the last generation depicted in the family. For, Hari, nation serves as an inherited wound. The land he was born in is kept as a secret history along with the knowledge of his mother. Across the generations, nation becomes a question they're always asked, but can never fully answer. A permanent state of doubt and a constant condition of betweenness.

CONCLUSION

The novel ultimately shows how the nation is neither a fixed geographical boundary nor a sentimental form of belonging. It is a fluid territory, and its boundaries and people are always decided by the systems of colonial hierarchy, citizen laws, social and religious doctrines, or at times, mere violence. For Pirbhai and his family, nations change, but "Gur Nu Ghar" remains constant. Migration, though forcing change, was the only constant, in addition to the feeling of exclusion and alienation. The family re-encounters the same displacement multiple times, wearing a new flag.

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