AFTERNOON RAAG OF AN UPROOTED INDIAN ON THE ROUTES OF DISPLACEMENT: THE SEARCH OF IDENTITY THROUGH HEALING MEMORY

Ileana-Mihaela POPESCU
"Mircea cel Bătrân" National College, Constanța
PhD Student, "Ovidius" University, Constanța

Abstract: *This paper examines the impact that the movement from one space to another has over the individual in the formation of identity. The roots of nationhood, ethnic inheritance and traditions are destabilized in the process of forming a hybrid identity, required by the adoptive space. Thus, the stability of the native roots is challenged by the mobility of the new routes which bring displacement. The Indian immigrant—once uprooted—passes through the trauma of maladaptation and lack of integration, not being able to manage the conflict between his Indian identity and the English one. The shifted and hybrid identity becomes unstable, oscillating between the memory of the healing narrative and the new identity. The analysis will focus on defining and characterising these concepts of space in the dialectics of home–land and host–land of an Indian who left for studies at Oxford. Amit Chaudhuri, in his* Afternoon Raag*, questions the meaning of* raag*—the Hindi for* chant*—in its oxymoronic meaning of "song of happiness" or "song of grief." Therefore, even if the Indian immigrant has achieved his dream of studying and living in a first-world country, still he cannot be content, as he feels uprooted, dejected and not integrated in the new community. He only finds redemption through music, memory and seclusion, or through retreating to his ethnic group.*

Keywords: *space, roots (stability), routes (mobility), displacement (alienation and hybridity), memory, raag (chant), identity*

Issues of immigration, globalization and integration—and their consequences—have long been discussed as having a huge impact on forming a new identity in a new space. This paper aims to demonstrate that the Indian, immigrant to the British space, passes through alienation in her/his path towards integration, as a result of displacement and racism. S/he embodies the prototype of any immigrant uprooted from her/his native space, longing after it. Yet, the stronger the bonds with her/his traditions, the weaker her/his chances for a total integration. Moreover, the roots of the native place give stability to any individual; once uprooted, the immigrant can never create her/his space of living without experiencing the feeling of displacement. In her/his mobility between the two routes, the Indian immigrant vacillates between order and chaos, and ends in a bewildering confusion of shifting identities. Her/his final goal is to achieve integration in the new society, by forming a new identity which can fit to the new social structures. To achieve this end, s/he always compares her-/himself with the foreign standards, through a self-verification process, so that s/he could attain acceptance and thus fight against discrimination. In the given conditions, the new identity is, in fact, a hybrid one; the immigrant has to be skilful enough to find the middle path between following her/his overbearing traditions and the acceptance of the foreign ones. Her/his struggle for integration is hardened by the conflict between the inner world and the outer world, in the pattern: here/ there—present topos/absent topos.

These concepts are applied to Amit Chaudhuri's book, *Afternoon Raag*, which unfolds as the story of an uprooted immigrant on the route to displacement. Amit Chaudhuri is an emigrant himself (from Calcutta to Oxford), a writer and a literary critic, as well as a musician and composer. His *Afternoon Raag* stands for an autobiographical novel, as he himself experienced

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rejection, racism, lack of total integration and the painful memory of the absent homeland. The plot renders instances of oscillations between the present space (Oxford) and the absent one (India) in the character's fight with nostalgia, loneliness and alienation. Even the chapters of the book alternate between here (the campus of Oxford University) and there (his hometown and native place). The descriptions of the Indian setting are more vivid, rich in substance and consistency, while the ones from Oxford are shallow, lacking the depth of consciousness and soul. Chaudhuri's background as a music composer enabled him to come to terms with the vision of music—*raag*/chant—as a means of transcendence, a way of healing the painful memories of the missing land. Thus, music becomes the instrument for the deeply seated division in the oxymoronic construction: home land–host land; inward world–outward world.

Space is the key element in shaping identity and it becomes a trigger in the achievement of integration. Many critics have noticed that the main feature of space consists of a set of associations, and is influenced by a lot of factors, while inducing conflicting emotions. Verraest and Keunen claim that space "is marked by a myriad of associations and meanings in the past, present and future" (35). Foucault supports the same idea when he discusses the "intersection of spaces," which he calls "the space of emplacement" (22). Thus, space functions as a supportive ground for the intersections of discordant feelings experienced by individuals who bring along with them their culture, traditions, myths, and their past and present identities. All these dimensions contribute to the formation of a unique entity which cannot remain unchanged by place; the consequence is a change of identity. Chaudhuri's unnamed protagonist may be interpreted as embodying the author himself—an immigrant living in a hostile space—and, at the same time, any emigrant, who brings with her/him the specificity of her/his home land, which s/he tries to "emplace" into the new land. Even the first-person narrative reinforces the possible association with the author himself. The whole book is structured in alternating chapters which describe, in turn, India, Bangladesh and Bombay, in contrast to Oxford. For an immigrant, "Oxford is dream-like" (Chaudhuri 2), while for its citizens it is not vague but stable and meaningful. This changing of places, along with their perceptions, influences the evolution of one's identity.

Each space becomes relevant for a person and the association: human being, space, culture forms an irrefutable, unique combination. Foucault argues that "we do not live inside a void, [but] inside a set of relations that delineates sites which are irreducible to one another" (24). These relations can be translated through specific influences: traditions, rituals, customs, linguistic background and memories with narratives and myths. The immigrant carries along with her/him this inheritance, which s/he tries to adapt to the new space. The protagonist of Chaudhuri's book has an Indian friend, Sharma, who is even less adapted to the new space than the former. Sharma always goes to his room in search for help and encouragement, as he has reduced the process of integration to acquiring a pure British accent. For Chaudhuri's protagonist, language becomes an impediment for assimilation in the new space, hence his struggle for a better acquisition. He describes the differences in language and accent between himself and his friend as definitive and defining:

> Once or twice, it happened that I had gone outside, leaving my door open, and then returned and closed it, thinking I was alone. But Sharma, in the meanwhile, had come and hidden himself in the clothes-closet, from which, at a given moment, he emerged explosively. Towards the beginning of our friendship, he had told me very seriously that I

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> was to help him improve his English. [...] His English has a strong, pure North Indian accent. [...] Yet this accent, I soon learnt, was never to be silenced completely; it was himself. (Chaudhuri 8–9)

As Chaudhuri's protagonist notices, the language is part of his friend's identity and the traces of his linguistic inheritance can never be effaced with the change of space. Moreover, language represents a means of discrimination and racism, leading to maladaptation, as it will always be a linker with the homeland. Sharma's inherent need for intimacy and closeness makes him involuntarily keep his Indian accent even in a British milieu. Sharma hides in the clothes-closet, an enclosed space, precisely because he needs to find an intimate place he can call home.

Space is not only the outside world, but the inside one, as well. If the outer space is inhabited by people who do or do not share the same nationhood, the inner space becomes the internalisation of everything which is outside, be it friendly or hostile environment. The two mirrored spaces are in conflict for an immigrant; the more they differ, the weaker the match is. Ernst Cassirer considers that "The mythical perception [of space] is characterised by a logic of *inside and outside, inward and outward*" (77, emphasis added). What is this logic about? Which are the laws that guide it? The logic of the outside world is in contradiction with the logic of the inside world. While the former is governed by objective and impersonal social standards, the latter is subjective and personal, and it sometimes becomes illogical from the point of view of an outsider. The protagonist's other friend, Mandira, associates her inner space with her private room:

> [T]he room became her refuge, her dwelling, and when she said, "I want to go back to my room," the words "my room" suggested the small but familiar vacuum that kept close around her, that attended to her and guided her in this faraway country. (Chaudhuri 13)

Just like Sharma's hiding in the clothes-closet, Mandira's retirement to her room reaches for a private space that can respond to her need for intimacy. The outside space is melted into the inside space: the room becomes the soul and the soul becomes India. The inward space enhances different roles: it stands for a healing memory of the native space, it provides a sheltering space against discrimination and rejection, and it brings along the communion with the faraway nation.

Immigrants perceive the lived space as different from the imagined space; thus, the foreign space becomes non-specific, neutral, shaped by global dynamics, while they situate themselves between singularity and specificity. For Bertrand Westphal, "globalization seems to share the paths of chaos" (41), in the sense that rapid communication only apparently simplifies spatial relations. However, globalisation is related to a fictional space, not a real one. For this reason, the immigrant oscillates between the two poles of global–local (Appadurai 27), feeling that the world left behind was orderly and stable, while the new one is chaotic, as s/he cannot find her/his place in space governed by different laws. The local and the specific encompass elements of identification for whatever is original and valuable. Their dislocation and relocation to a foreign space brings instability, uncertainty and a painful memory of what was and cannot be anymore. The paradoxical opposition regarding one individual's existence between inhabiting physically one space and unconsciously the other is rendered poetically by Jouve: "Car nous sommes où nous ne sommes pas" (59). Indeed, Jouve's ontological "For we are where we are not" (my translation) links space and identity in a paradoxical manner. George Lukács decribes

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this philosophical state as "transcendental homelessness" (41), where the immigrant vacillates between the present topos and the absent topos (Mishra 16).

The novel's anonymous protagonist lives on the Oxford University campus in everyday life, while, subconsciously, he lives in India. His thoughts are always occupied with memories from his native place, family and friends. The hero reminiscences of his life are conversations in India through sequences of flashbacks triggered by the British suburban landscapes:

> I had occasion to think of my parents speaking to each other in Sylheti, or the sensation of standing on a veranda on a hot day. Scenes flashed past; and they flashed past when I returned in the evening, when I would see miles of suburbia on the edge of the motorway, house after house with a fragile, luminal television aerial on the roof, beneath a sky from which birds and clouds fast disappeared. (Chaudhuri 42)

The dialect Sylheti becomes an intimate way of communication between the character's parents. This intimacy means love, comfort and home, for which the protagonist longs in this faraway land. India is associated with Mother Nature (the hot day, sky, birds, clouds), which reinforces the idea of a blissful human–nature equilibrium. By contrast, England/Oxford stands for the bare technique of civilisation, devoid of sensibility: motorway, house after house, television aerial, etc. This lack of affectivity and the maladaptation it entails make the Indian immigrant look like a homeless inhabitant of a foreign space, longing for his absent homeland.

Space is encompassed in the relationship roots–routes. While the former stands for stability, specificity, equilibrium through order (social laws which can be fulfilled), shelter (house), and value, the latter stands for mobility, globalisation, search for stability, translation, and lack of identity and meaning. The new space becomes complementary to the original one and directly connected to the representation of the self. Paradoxically, the roots represent the *here*, while the routes epitomize a more distant *there*. If total adaptation and integration had been possible, then *here* should have been the place where the individual was living at the time. Gaston Bachelard considers that "the dialectics of *here* and *there* [is] endowed with unsupervised powers of ontological determination" (212). These oxymoronic concepts are based on the philosophical signification connected with the inhabited spaces, perceived as places endowed with meaning. For Chaudhuri, the separation between the two worlds—of the native place and of the living place—is symbolically rendered by the motif of the window. At the window, his anonymous protagonist stands nostalgically to look at his imaginary lost world, as if looking for redemption and healing. This search for the absent space impedes the process of adaptation even more and causes social seclusion. The window is thus a threshold space that separates the inner experience from the outer world:

> Whenever I looked up that afternoon, I would become aware of the frame of the window, which created an illusory and transparent separation between ourselves and the day outside. (65)

The window stands figuratively for separation, and the separation from the day outside represents the loss of optimism, hope and light in the immigrant's life. "Ourselves" stands for all the Indians, while the elliptic "the others" represents the English people. This polar construction is reinforced by the day–night binary opposition. The day is Oxford, the civilisation and the

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world to which the immigrants do not have access, whilst the night is India–the third world–, the lack of civilisation and the faraway land, the imagined space for which they yearn.

In this context of space–roots–routes, memory plays an important role: of healing the nostalgia and of connecting the two worlds, an obstacle in the path of adaptation and integration. Memory can be of two types: visual memory and auditory memory. In Chaudhuri's novel, visual memory is evinced through mental images from India, the protagonist's hometown, house, family, the accomplishment of certain customs and traditions, while the auditory memory is manifested mainly through music. The scenes reoccurring in his mind are the counterparts of what the character missed or did not have in Oxford: the warmth of a home place, his parents' voices and care, the myths and traditions which augmented his individuality and his way of being. Moreover, his longing after the community he has left behind is triggered by the acts of racism to which he has been a subject as an Asian immigrant. Whenever he felt that he was different from the others and he could not bridge the gap between the two cultures, he recoiled and retired to his imagined land, with everything which belonged to it. Nostalgia comes along with memory, and for the anonymous protagonist, the historical separation of Bangladesh—where his father spent his childhood—from India increases the painful memory.

> Calcutta is my birthplace. It is the only city I know that is timeless, where change is naturalised by the old flowing patterns, and the anxiety caused by the passing of time is replaced by fatigue and surrender. [...] The tiny village in East Bengal he [the protagonist's father] was born in, with its village school he went to in early childhood, seems to have never existed. It is now on the other side of the border, in Bangladesh. It is as if my father came into being from fantasy, like an image, in 1923. Yet, it is an image full of truth. [...] So India took on a new shape, another story began, with homelands becoming fantasies, never to be returned to or remembered. (86–87)

The protagonist shares with his father the hurtful past of the lost land; even if the way in which they are kept apart from their native places is different, the feeling is the same. The town, the village, and everything which belongs to them take another shape, meaning, and dimension: "Calcutta is timeless" and unreal, as if it had been taken from imagination; and "the tiny village [...] seems to have never existed." This failed return hardens the pain of displacement and alienation.

Music, rather than memory, seems to be a way through which the character finds redemption. Even if music can be associated with memory—as Chaudhuri's protagonist used to learn music with a guru when he lived in India—still music is not only reduced to memory. Music fulfils the role of healing, which memory cannot, through moving from one space to another with ease. It reunites the roots with the routes and with the soul, which contributes to the formation of the new identity. Critics have observed the connection between music and memory in Chaudhuri's protagonist, as well as the interrelation homeland and memory in this equation: "For Chaudhuri's character, who is trained in Indian classical music, Hindustani music bears the characteristics of a home that he has left behind and to which he returns in memories of his childhood and youth, which are shown as flashbacks through the novel" (Hoene 51). As Christin Hoene notices, music for the Indian immigrant is more than music for a first-world inhabitant. People from the third-world countries live and express their identities through music, while Western people use music as a means of enjoyment and delectation. The less technologically

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advanced a people is, the more attached it is to its music, rituals, myths and traditions. The protagonist's sensibility is augmented by racism and the absent homeplace. He cannot express himself as a student at Oxford University, or as a British citizen. He knows he will never be accepted or acknowledged by his mates. The single place where he found recognition for his creation was in India, where he played the sitar and sang with his master. As a result of the fact that he finds himself in this "in-between-ness," he uses music as an "anchor to his imaginary homeland" (Hoene 51). Similarly, Josh Kun claims that music is "always from somewhere else and is always en route to somewhere else" (20). Therefore, music provides a tie between the origins and the dislocated self in search for recognition and integration. It binds the roots with the routes in the relocation of identity.

Far away from their native land, immigrants struggle with the memory of their lost roots, displacement and dislocation, which discourages them from actively seeking their own adaptation and social reinsertion. In order to be accepted by the new society, the Indian immigrant should pass through a process of self-verification, in which s/he confronts her-/himself with the standards and values imposed by the dominant people. S/he compares her/his past, culture, as well as national and personal identity, with the host people's identity. S/he comes to realise once again that a possible alleviation of her/his alienation is the acceptance of hybridisation. S/he should adapt her/his singularity and specificity to the culture and national identity of her/his host people; while the dominant people should be open to accept the new-comers as inhabitants in a global world. Chaudhuri's protagonist admits that: "There is no centre in Oxford, only different points of reference. [...] Thus one never feels completely rooted" (72). The lack of centrality is, in fact, the lack of total integration. The community remains split into small ethnic communities which never succeed in bridging up and forming one central entity. Additionally, Chaudhuri continues his demonstration of the lack of integration, as he himself is an immigrant living in a foreign space. "One knows that one has no existence for others in Oxford, just as others have no existence for oneself, except in their absence" (67). This is one path, one way of finding a peaceful living in a society with multiethnic communities: to ignore one another. Adopting this attitude, ethnic conflicts are foreclosed and living together becomes bearable. Unfortunately, this is not a long-term solution. What about each individual's integration, adaptation, and formation of a new identity? Is the immigrant supported and helped in her/his struggle for relocation? The answer is clearly negative. It seems that s/he remains enclosed in her/his singularity, forced to accept the veiled rejections and to find redemption through memory and imagination.

The Indian immigrant feels uprooted in her/his way to the most wanted land, where her/his wishes for a better life can become true. The clash between primary expectations and received treatment makes Chaudhuri's protagonist realise that whatever he does, he will always remain an outcast in a white society. The loss of his roots leads to a lack of stability, even disorder, and ends in swinging between the centre and the margin, in a decentred world, as a displaced entity. Space attains the meaning of stability, although the protagonist sways between one space and the other; each space has its own specificity, shaped and triggered by memories and chants. The home space gives love and the feeling of belonging, acceptance, while the host land becomes the most wanted land for integration and acceptance. Under the circumstances, the failed attempts to form a new identity are replaced with the healing feeling of returning to the past, to memory, to something that was relevant for Chaudhuri's protagonist, namely music. Thus, the afternoon *raag* (chant) becomes a song of recovery and longing after the home space.

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Even the word “afternoon” is symbolic in this context, because the prefix “after” stands for something that is not of the first rank, but of the second: the new identity, the foreign land, and the receiving community.

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