

The Poetics of Placelessness: Imagined Spaces Inside Out in Rabindranath Tagore's "The Post Office"

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Real or imaginary, journeys free the subject from the binds of a particular location, responding to the desire and pleasure of discovery, while simultaneously threatening with the unknown. The relative freedom afforded by travel, corresponds to other sorts of confinement: the estrangement from what the traveler could call a center or a "home," with its symbolic and phenomenological valences, the limitations triggered by the condition of homelessness. Therefore, an analysis of the poetics of *placelessness* underlines the significance of spaces which I find relevant in Rabindranath Tagore's *The Post Office*. What made me reflect on the significance of space in modernist works in general and in the piece under discussion here in particular was Gaston Bachelard's declaration in the preface to his book, *The Poetics of Space*: "I am caught up in the perplexing dialectics of deep and large; of the infinitely diminished that deepens, or the large that extends beyond all limits" (ix). By means of binaries, he begins his investigation of poetic spaces and their reflection through language into the human psyche. In other words, he suggests that, through imagination or what he calls reverie, the human psyche follows a sort of imitative enactment of the spaces it inhabits, influenced by the archetypal symbolism of different locations, moving the subject closer or further from the place of utmost security which all spaces inherently connect to, the womb or the primary matrix.

In constructing his journeys / reveries, Amal mixes anxiety with pleasure from a position of neither here nor there, or a *placelessness* both frustrating and fertile. In this paper, I attempt to interpret the role of the placelessness, the fantasy structure that combines desire with indeterminacy and nostalgia in order to explicate that Amal's reveries of travel outside of his house do not satisfy their initiator because they are impossible. In doing this, I analyze imaginary representations of home as spaces robbed of a real location given the ambivalence of polar opposites which define spatial coordinates: through representations of the familiar space, or what I call "here," "there" becomes inhabitable but placeless and suffocating for the subjects who desire escape into the "outside," whatever the outside may offer. Yet, these perpetual wanderers will never escape placelessness since the spaces of their desires are only creations of their imagination, and spaces where they do not belong. As Bachelard postulates, reverie, the creative daydream or the phenomenology of imagination, binds the subject to the object of his gaze, which in our case is a desired space. Yet this space, because of the nature of desire which is to remain in the realm of the imagination, coming close to but never being fulfilled, is synonymous with the desire itself. Therefore, Amal is bound only to his desire of a space, and in this way, becomes indeterminate and placeless. Amal is a

traveler through his reveries of outside places. In the realm of the imagination, Amal is never "at home."

What turns Tagore's character into a modern individual in my view is what the author clarifies in the Introduction to the play of the Dutta and Robinson's anthology, when he declares: "Amal represents the man whose soul has received the call to the open road" (22). In other words, Amal aspires to become the man in the world. The character experiences utter disenchantment with the home where he is trapped behind closed windows as predicated by his illness. Since the development and creation of character are deeply dependent upon the configuration of the spaces he occupies, in the present analysis I suggest that the determination of places changes to reflect aspects of character's identity and to endorse a sense of placelessness the character experiences. Spatial coordinates get blurred or redefined in a play in which the personal narrative of real or imaginary journeys endorse discourses of the empire, of national allegiance or of home allegiance and confinement. Spaces contaminate each other, becoming placeless. Other times they enclose and trap the individual, as loci of disease and suffocation. Other times, spaces turn fluid, in accord with the fluid identity of their inhabitants and its contrapuntal structure within the context of imaginary homelands.

Imagination or reverie to use Bachelard's term allows Amal to identify hierarchies of familiarity in any surrounding. David Lowenthal argues that each object is recognizable to our human mind because it entails "a history of real or imaginary involvements; their perceived identities stem from past acts and expectations" because the past is incarnate in the things and landscaped we build (6). Memory, the best conserver of past, alters and modifies it, organizing consciousness so that all ambiguities become coherent. Other times, memory blinds evidence resulting into a historical myopia. Cultural prejudice invests past landscapes with a different meaning. Pride safeguards things against the erosion of forgetting. Individuals or communities fashion private or collective pasts. Reconstructions replace originals with copies, altering them, inventing replicas (Lowenthal 30-36), filling the space with memories of home.

Like memory, the notion of home is after all free flowing. *The Post Office* operates within the dialectics of home and abroad. In *The Post Office* home is located within the space of a house and a village where the main character is a sick child whose doctor forbids him to go outside the space of his convalescence because the fresh air would aggravate his disease; as he is able to see the Maharaja's post office out the window, he longs to receive a letter from the Raja which will eventually happen in a surreal dénouement as the child dies. Amal's home becomes a home through affiliation, not completely his nor reminiscent of an earlier one, and a barrier to his desired explorations of the outside.

The political nuance finds its way in the author's investigation of home. In Tagore's case, the notion of home and its political climate are problematic. In fact, Tagore plays with the notion of climate, proposing a correspondence between politics and the environment. As the doctor advises Madhav that "on no account should [the child] be allowed out of doors" (25), he implies that the outside air will worsen his

condition, as it happens when the Raja's messenger arrives and orders "all doors and windows" to be open (49). In a different piece, Tagore attributes the educational achievements in the Soviet society to "their greater physical strength: our malaria-struck, under-nourished bodies do not work at full vigour. Progress [in Russia] is easy because in a cold climate people have strong bones" (123). Another time, he finds the reason for the lack of physical vigor in the East in the "blaze of a tropical sun," which may be why the Eastern man makes up for the lack of physical strength with his spiritual power because he "has had the repose of mind which has ever tried to set itself in harmony with the inner notes of existence" (213). While the climate in India is seen as dangerous and potentially lethal, it also allows a rather greater concentration of the mind, a propensity towards spirituality that opposes Western capitalism and possibly the empire. Therefore, when the child dies as he received the letter from the Raja (signifying the King), interpreters have concluded it is because Tagore's reaction against empire and the bureaucracy of the post office institution.

What seems to be of importance is the detail Tagore offers us that Amal is an adopted child, a former orphan, a nephew of Madhav who has recently come to live with him. I interpret this little gesture of adoption as crucial for the understanding of the character's interaction with spaces. Amal comes from an outside to live inside Madhav's home. Thus, relocated into a space which is not his original home (of which we aren't told anything), the subject longs for a reconciliation, a reunion with the homeland, a recreation of familiar places. But having lived somewhere else, in a different cultural environment has already operated a cross-cultural contagion, where estrangement eventually distorts the memory of home in a process Homi Bhabha calls the unhomeliness. "To be unhomed is not to be homeless, nor can the 'unhomely' be easily accommodated in that familiar division of social life into private and public spheres. (...) The unhomeliness [is] inherent in that rite of extra-territorial and cross-cultural initiation" (9). In this process the borders between home and the world, between public and private blur and mix and they become part of one another (Bhabha 9).

In discussing the nature of the (post)colonial imaginary, Homi Bhabha advances the argument that as a characteristic of colonial desire, the problematic of seeing and being seen is indeed central to how the unhomed perceives his new location (*The Location of Culture* 76). I suggest that his argument as a central mode of constructing colonial discourses may be applied to the formation of the imaginary and particularly of the imaginary spaces of enclosure, security, or familiarity Amal recognizes in his friends' descriptions of places. The pleasure in seeing the object of one's desire is called upon through nostalgic memories in the (re)creation of spaces of comfort and homeliness. The surveyed object, which is in our case the real geography longed for, is fetishized through desire and therefore conceived of as real but lost. Like the voyeur who only watches but never completes the action himself, the nostalgic imagines a geography which is not real because it exists in the realm of the desire and is idealized. This idealization of imaginary places comes very close to Dipesh Chakrabarty's idea of the romantic geography described in Tagore's poetry and poetic drama - the idyllic,

comforting countryside of Bengal, raised to the level of chthonic cradle and place of perpetual homely happiness or nationalistic bliss, constructed in direct antithesis with the mechanized, decrepit urban landscape of his prose.

I can see the Raja's messenger coming down the hillside alone, a lantern in his left hand and on his back a bag of letters, descending for days and nights; and then at the foot of the hills, where the waterfall becomes a winding stream, he follows the footpath along the bank and walks on through the corn; then comes the sugarcane field and he disappears into the narrow lane that cuts through the tall stems of sugar canes; and then he reaches the open meadow where the cricket chirps and where there is no one to be seen, only the snipe wagging their tails and poking at the mud with their beaks ("The Post Office" 43).

Given this blur between reality and nostalgic memory, the imagined place can be seen as "extensions [which] have replaced the emplacement" (Foucault). Reversals turn spaces into fluid places. Formerly fixed concepts of there and here, of inside and outside become erased and reversed. The places over there become here as one travels and inhabits them, recognizing pieces that mirror the home, or the formerly here. Insides become outsides the moment one realizes that imagination breaks away from barriers, and real geographies get deconstructed. Amal is able to exclaim, "Now everything is open - I can see all the stars, shining on the far side of darkness" (49) from the formerly restrictive space of his room. In fact what emerges here is a heterotopia, as a counter-site where borders become outsides and the reverse.

Edward Said in his book *Orientalism* explains how the act of designating spaces as "ours" or "theirs" is an arbitrary act because "it is enough for 'us' to set up these boundaries in our own minds; 'they' become 'they' accordingly and both their territory and their mentality are designated as different from 'ours'" (54). In other words, the arbitrariness Said postulates allows us to carry the our/their opposition outside of the territory designated as "ours" in which case geography itself or the physical our/their places become imaginary, become what I have so far generically called spaces. Said follows the hermeneutics of space propose by Gaston Bachelard where spaces are representative not through their placeness, but rather because of an imaginary attribution of affect that we endow spaces with which Bachelard calls a poetics. Thus the "their" space is also a distant space and a vacant one because the opposition mentioned above triggers an array of affective oppositional attributes of these two spaces through which we explain them in relation to one another. Some place is far because it is not near, and also foreign because it is only possible to know and be familiar with the near which we experience. The "here" is inhabited, while the "there" opens up the vast rift of the unknown. This process is in fact explained by Said when he proposes that "there's no doubt that imaginative geography (...) help[s] the mind to intensify its own sense of itself by dramatizing the distance and the difference between what is close to it and what is far away" (*Orientalism* 58).

Besides this epistemological perception of space, Said calls to attention the fact that cultural and geospatial lenses contribute to our attributing spaces a certain degree of familiarity. Like in Lowenthal's explanation, a foreign and distant object will always resemble (more or less) something familiar because of this category of thought which one may call "familiarization" and which "allows one to see new things (...) as a version of a previously known thing" (58). Psychologist and psychoanalysts would recognize that this category emerges out of the mind's capacity of dealing with frustration of hazard. If a foreign space operates through threats (it is unknown therefore dangerous), we compare it and eventually endow it with familiar characteristics in order to subdue its dangers. Yet, the comparison with an actual place that happens in the mind renders space placeless. Several transformations of spaces ensue.

The sick child brings the spaces of his imagination inside his room in order to escape enclosure. Death itself is another type of escape. Rabindranath Tagore follows the cyclical philosophy according to which death is a return home, to a space he equates with an ocean, where life can start again: "the individual life comes back to the bosom of this ocean [of truth to which all life returns] (...) like jets of water from a fountain which rise and fall and come back home again" (Introduction 22). So is Amal's life meant to follow this trajectory, so that in death he can actually return "home." Tagore employs the call home or the call of death through metaphors. Amal expresses his desire to "dip [his] feet" in "so many winding streams" (29). The return to the originating ocean offers him liberation as water symbolizes not what Bachelard would call an Ophelic desire, but rather the soul's migration towards rebirth. At another point, Amal speaks of wanting to cross over the hills (28), which again symbolizes a potential death. The hills stand tall, explains Madhav, as if to forbid passing, for the return home is not without obstacles. It seems rather that nature itself prohibits such an act before its time. "Stone (...) piled upon stone to form such a large heap" (28) prevents or delays passing, "forbidding [one] to go beyond them" (28).

This geography, where mountains limit the place in the horizon, operates another enclosure, like the house and the room itself, describing the most ample of the concentric circles. Although outside is beyond the limits of the house, when restricted by wall-like structures, the outside itself becomes and inside. No matter where he is, Amal is locked in, with its limited window view, limited experience, and an imagination limited by death. Yet Amal's geography is one scattered with forms that facilitate journeys, be they roads or rivers. The call for the open road is then the call to mobility: the call of the curd seller or "the cry of the hawk shrieking high up in the sky" (31). When Thakurda tells Amal that "there is nothing in mountain or ocean that frightens [him]" (41), he widens again the experience of death as opening up new possibilities and journeys. Probably this understanding makes Amal declare "Now everything is open, I can see all the stars shining on the far side of darkness" (49).

Amal's lack of knowledge also holds him back, because he has never even read a book: "I have not read a single book, so I guess I don't know anything" (27). His inability to read creates an obstacle when the Raja's letter eventually reaches his house,

and Amal admits he cannot read the letter by himself. "Everything is close to me" (36) gains a different meaning. But Tagore believes in the purity of spirit, in innocence that helps one transcend the mundane. Amal exclaims "Everything is closed to me except this window" (36), which allows another interpretation of Amal's lack of earthly knowledge, of the knowledge of perversion. Rather his innocence helps him read the blank letter with Thakurda's help and receive the Raja's liberating message. Innocence turns into vision as Amal gets inspired by the Fakir, a crazy man who, in his insanity, may in fact grasp the truth. It may be this very innocence which aids him in his escape from the series of concentric circles described above.

The means of Amal's spiritual escape is a bodily felt tiredness which lulls him to sleep. "I'm so tired of staying here" (33) Amal says, as if the here, this placeless space of a house which does not mean home to him is the reason of his fatigue. As Amal becomes more and more tired -- "Why I feel sleepy so often, I don't know. But I've been sitting up a long time and I can't sit any longer; my back is aching" (39).

Tagore's project is widened by its reception, particularly abroad. In different translations, the intended meaning of the play's gesture has been interpreted as an act against the British rule. W. B. Yeats in his translation of *The Post Office*, names the Raja, the King, thus referring to the King of England. Amal's death becomes significant politically and not only spiritually as Tagore seems to have intended it. It then appears obvious that the interpretation of locality proposes a crucial understanding of the two texts. Locality produces different sites of conflict and alienation. Reaching the places of longing either through imagination or in reality fails to produce fulfillment because imagination triggers the awareness of intangibility; even though Amal receives the Raja's letter, the empty page does not save the child from actual death; he will never become one of the Raja's postmen, will never be able to visit other villages, and will never experience in actuality the joy of selling curd. The character cannot ultimately escape an inherent sense of nostalgia which the confinement to the boundaries of the home facilitates.

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