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Home and homelessness in Ali's *Brick Lane* and Rhys' *Voyage in the Dark*

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In the fragmented, loosely stuck together and at the same time globalized connected world of the twentieth and twenty-first century, in which time flows away by wasting it on new media, and where anonymity reigns urbanization, the issue of home gains a new meaning: Home *could* be everywhere if you wish to choose, or sometimes home *must* be transferred to another country where life is safer due to political or racial persecution. Working and studying can easily be done in a foreign country, commuting to work is not unusual, and access to the whole world via the internet became part of and an important influence on everyday life. Before considering the issue of the wanting of homes, homelessness and at the same time of having many homes or none at all in modern and postmodern literature, it is important to think about how the term "home" should actually be defined. While doing research and working through *Brick Lane* and *Voyage in the Dark*, I decided that to me a home is not only the physical manifestation of the flat or house people live in. I suggest not to take only the precise geographical position into further consideration to define a home, but also the feelings and the inhabitant's point of view towards where that person lives, taking into account that a home can only be a home when you *like* to live there and - feel at home. For achieving this feeling of ease and satisfaction in the place where you live it is important to be clear of one's own identity on the whole and to identify with the surroundings, so that you in a way think that you fit in the country, town, street and/or culture.

Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* is a good example for a *Bildungsroman* where the development from strangeness to "homeness" of a character can be tracked during the unfolding of the plot. It starts with Nazneen's birth in East Pakistan and the reader learns that this is the character's home country as well as the fact that she will move to England. After arriving there, she seems to feel strange and not happy: She had been "sent away to London"¹ and "could spend another day alone", although she is married to Chanu, and she only sees negative and ugly things around her environment, which is restricted anyhow - a sign, a defecating dog, the bored look of the tattoo lady, and in the first six months, her first thought in the morning is that she would like to go back to Bangladesh.² At the beginning of the story, the main character obviously is the only person with that desire, for her husband, who has lived in Britain for several years, always praises the Western world. He does not pray as their religion requests³ and he stuffs his flat with furniture, books and hangings on the walls, to show his imaginary fortune.⁴ Nazneen makes

¹Ali, Monica: *Brick Lane*, p. 18

²ibid., p. 18-19

³ibid., p. 41

⁴ibid., p. 20-21

efforts to cope with her new situation by uttering the wish to learn some English in order to get along better in the society she has been thrown in, but she sticks to her role as a suppressed Bengali wife and does not take it in her own hand when Chanu does not react. Even after one and a half decades she has only picked up some English phrases by chance and learned most of the vocabulary from her daughters.⁵ By the time her husband has made up his mind to take his family back to Bangladesh, Nazneen seems to have settled down mentally in her present place to live - her first thought is that she would be with her sister Hasia again, her second thought is that Shahana would never forgive her if they went,⁶ but she still calls Bangladesh "our country"⁷, and so does Chanu⁸. Still, she has a yearning for the village she grew up in, but she struggles with her memories and realizes how she starts to forget it.⁹ From her sister's letters she learns that her home country undergoes a conversion due to globalization: Some rickshaws carry the picture of Britney Spears, and everyone in Bangladesh loves the song "Barbie Girl", a sign for westernization,¹⁰ like the westernization Nazneen experiences simultaneously, drinking tea like the British cliché requests and wondering if they would take their tea cups with them to Dhaka,¹¹ but also thinking that she would never understand "the world out there" to which Karim is her only connection.¹² She starts questioning if life were really that wonderful in her home country, expressed by her terse remark "It may be written down,"[...] "But I do not believe it." when Chanu shows her a newspaper which says that Bangladeshis are the happiest nation in the world.¹³ Her attitude towards the world she lives in for several years now changed as well. Being fascinated by ice-skating - a symbol for the freedom and simplicity the Western world may promise - when she was younger, she begs his husband to turn off the TV fifteen years later, for she notices only "the false smiles, the made-up faces, the demented illusion of freedom chasing around their enclosure."¹⁴ She starts having the suspicion that Dhaka would not provide a home to her, wondering: "*And would we sit like this and would it feel just the same and would everything be the same just in a different place?*"¹⁵ Nazneen realizes that it needs more than a geographic position to locate a home - it must also go well with the feelings belonging to it, and

⁵ibid., p. 194

⁶ibid., p. 183

⁷ibid., p. 212

⁸ibid., p. 370

⁹ibid., p. 217

¹⁰ibid., p. 221, p. 225

¹¹ibid., p. 230

¹²ibid., p. 232

¹³ibid., p. 350

¹⁴ibid., p. 364

¹⁵ibid., p. 372

while reflecting on that topic, she obviously does not feel like Chanu makes her feel at home, she rather feels uncomfortable spending the next years with him. Her husband notices her doubts, pressing her that she would not be a good sister to Hasina if she did not look forward to moving to Bangladesh: 'But of course you want to go. [...] What kind of sister would you be if you did not? Of course you do want to go.'¹⁶ But she is already trapped in an inner conflict and she tries to find a solution for it. "She had wanted to go. But now she did not know. The children would suffer; Chanu would face fresh agonies of disappointment; and she was not the girl from the village any more."¹⁷ She is the girl from the city now. Her self-esteem grows, and she decides for herself that *she* would be the one who decided what would happen to her.¹⁸ At this point, the awareness of her own identity goes hand in hand with her idea of a home. She has got self-confidence, and she decides where to be at home. Not being self-confident makes her doubt to be able to find a home for herself and the children - "What would she decide? What did she want? [...] Perhaps it would be best to go to Dhaka."¹⁹ It would be the easiest, most convenient way, but it would be the most terrible one, and she knows that. Regarding the mug with the picture of a cottage on it, she knows that she would "visit" the "real" England which she has never seen during all the years that she has lived in the country.²⁰

The two girls Shahana and Bibi do not have any problems with England and its culture; they clearly prefer it to the Eastern culture which their father wants to drum into them. Yet they suffer from a kind of rootlessness, evoked of their parents' foreign origin. As a result, the sisters - especially Shahana - revolt against everything that has to do with Bangladesh and make disparaging remarks such as pointing out how horrible it would be to be 'married off in no time' [...] '[a]nd your husband will keep you locked up in a little smelly room and make you weave carpets all day long[,]'²¹ having 'to brush your teeth with a twig. They don't have toothbrushes.'²² They gather around the new suitcases "as at a graveside"²³, feeling like they would bury their identities.

Their father Chanu is quite an interesting character who goes through his own stages of development, but in reverse order to those which are experienced by his wife, and "almost

¹⁶ibid., p. 372

¹⁷ibid., p. 385

¹⁸ibid., p. 405

¹⁹ibid., p. 405

²⁰ibid., p. 438

²¹ibid., p. 395

²²ibid., p. 398

²³ibid., p. 423

always depicted as quixotic."²⁴ Kral points out that it takes Chanu some time to be aware that he has failed in his beloved modern world, symbolized by the cobwebs around the computer - where once an internet had been.²⁵ Another metaphor is the navigation computer for his taxi - the narrator calls it "a device that monitored traffic conditions and worked out alternative routes through the city" and seems to describe it a little helplessly from Chanu's point of view - that cost him much money but which he could never get to work.²⁶ Furthermore Kral mentions that the self-proclaimed westernized man lives parallel to the actual scene of the event, never having explored his adoptive home London and its cultural life, and paradoxically he acts and looks like a tourist, but not like a local citizen, when he finally does.²⁷ At the same time he tries to get rid of his religious roots by missing his prayers and drinking alcohol²⁸, pretending to his relatives in Bangladesh as if he earned much money and were successful.²⁹ He seems to be stuck between two cultures and tries to justify himself with the explanation that "[b]ack home, if you drink you risk to be an outcast. In London, if you don't drink you risk the same thing."³⁰ Only one moment later, he claims that his British environment is a "racist society" with "all the skinheads and drunks" that his son should not grow up in because it would spoil him and make him naughty.³¹ When Chanu complains to Mrs Azad about the "clash of cultures" and "of generations" as the tragedy that immigrants have to experience³², it becomes clear in what "dilemma of identifying with an unreal home and living in a new society perceived as alien"³³, as Cormack calls it, he put himself into. Gradually, as the years go by and his daughters get older, Chanu seems to change his mind: His awareness of Bengali tradition rises and it becomes important to him that his offspring gain this awareness as well, although they - especially Shahana - do not really want to. For instance, he forces them to learn Tagore's poem "My Golden Bengal" by heart and recite it in front of their father.³⁴ Besides, Chanu puts up the rule that the girls are not allowed to speak English at home, and sometimes he breaks his own rule³⁵ and must bear the consequences - and listen to his daughter correcting his grammar.³⁶ He lashes out against Christian books

²⁴Cormack, Alistair: Migration and the Politics of Narrative Form

²⁵Kral, Françoise: Shaky Ground and New Territorialities

²⁶Ali, Monica: Brick Lane, p. 318

²⁷Kral, Françoise: Shaky Ground and New Territorialities

²⁸Ali, Monica: Brick Lane, p. 110

²⁹ibid., p. 132

³⁰ibid., p. 110

³¹ibid., p. 111

³²ibid., p. 112-113

³³Cormack, Alistair: Migration and the Politics of Narrative Form

³⁴Ali, Monica: Brick Lane, p. 179

³⁵ibid., p. 193, p. 201

³⁶ibid., p. 201

who call Dark Ages what he calls "the Golden Age of Islam, the height of civilization"³⁷ and sets out which philosophies he is going to teach his daughters.³⁸ Considering this, it seems ambivalent when he has an outburst of rage because of the mosque school that Shahana and Bibi are supposed to go to.³⁹ He runs the institution down when he utters contemptuously : "Do they call it education? Rocking around like little parrots on a perch, reciting words they do not understand."⁴⁰ In this episode, he holds a Western education in higher regard than an Eastern one. Later, it is vice versa, as he states that "this is their [the British] only culture - playing darts and football and putting up pictures of naked women."⁴¹ He is more and more confused and looks forward to going "back home" where everything is in order, where he will 'really know what's what.'⁴²

While *Brick Lane* starts with a scenery that the reader recognizes to be a family's home, the recipient of *Voyage in the Dark* finds himself or herself thrown into a strange, inhospitable country, described from the I-narrator's point of view.⁴³ Anna explains that all English places look all alike to her, with the same order of the streets with the same names, and the same greyish colours of the environment.⁴⁴ She cannot feel at home anywhere in Britain because all the places she visits can be exchanged for each other, although she has been in England for only two years.⁴⁵ Yet she does not make any efforts to move back to the West Indies, where she was born and grew up, but floats around in the country with a "permanent address" at her stepmother's,⁴⁶ symbolizing that Hester is the only stable constant in her life, though not a very friendly one - she wants to get rid of the girl and send her back to some relatives of her deceased husband because she costs her money. Linett argues that the main character's restlessness and helplessness is based on a sexual trauma and claims that Rhys' fragmentary style of writing was "strategic and mimetic rather than symptomatic." According to her, the several rooms that Anna inhabits - especially the room at Ethel's - are metaphors for incidents, shut up in "half-hiding additional layers", that happened to her earlier. The intermezzos of

³⁷ibid., p. 215

³⁸ibid., p. 216

³⁹ibid., p. 197

⁴⁰ibid., p. 197

⁴¹ibid., p. 257

⁴²ibid., p. 464

⁴³Rhys, Jean: *Voyage in the Dark*, p. 7

⁴⁴ibid., p. 8

⁴⁵ibid., p. 12

⁴⁶ibid., p. 13

fragments of memories, which evoke a feeling of homelessness and homesickness, often occur during memories or experiences of sex.⁴⁷ So this supposed buried trauma might be a reason for Anna's inability to settle down somewhere and be happy.

The issue of being cold is mentioned quite often in Rhys' work. Anna describes the room in Judd Street with a "cold, close smell. It was like being in a small, dark box."⁴⁸ Her place being "by the door in the draught. It always was. A damned shame."⁴⁹ Whenever she feels lonely and poor, the narrator mentions Anna's hands or the room she is in being cold. On the other hand, the memories of the Caribbean place where she has lived several years are always accompanied by an emphasis of how warm or even hot the weather was there. She struggles with finding an identity she can cope with, for she always wanted to be black, because "[b]eing black is warm and gay, being white is cold and sad[,]"⁵⁰ and she hated "being white and getting like Hester."⁵¹ During her childhood, she adored her coloured friend Francine, but she does not show any deeper feelings towards her white stepmother, her only close relative. The sense of home can be equated with either being a black, happy person, and a friendly weather with warm temperatures; those being the pillars on which Anna can build a real home, although she admits to herself that this beautiful place in her mind is "wild, and a bit sad sometimes."⁵² and that the sun can be sad too, "but in a different way from the sadness of cold places, quite different."⁵³ Nevertheless, Anna goes on living this self-destructive life, sometimes being aware that it is no good to her⁵⁴, but most of the time she does not spend any thoughts about her situation or how she might change it to feel comfortable and less lonely. Once she makes an attempt to plan to leave London when she gets fifteen pounds from a man, but she has no idea where to go,⁵⁵ she still thinks that all places and rooms are exactly alike.⁵⁶

⁴⁷Linett, Maren: 'New Words, New Everything': Fragmentation and Trauma in Jean Rhys

⁴⁸Rhys, Jean: *Voyage in the Dark*, p. 22

⁴⁹ibid., p. 15

⁵⁰ibid., p. 27

⁵¹ibid., p. 62

⁵²ibid., p. 47

⁵³ibid., p. 49

⁵⁴ibid., p. 64

⁵⁵ibid., p. 136

⁵⁶ibid., p. 152

The two works discussed in this essay are good examples of modern and postmodern writing in which the main figures suffer from a longing to a home and having several homes at the same time. Both the characters of *Brick Lane* and Anna Morgan of *Voyage in the Dark* live in a transit between a place they want to call a home and the place they really live in at present, but the two ideas of places do not coincide for either of them. They are taken away from their home countries where they spent their childhood, and to some extent all characters idealize this half-forgotten place in their dreams and memories. They feel unhappy where they live, and yet they accept their fate and persevere in the current situation for years, albeit Nazneen and Chanu get active towards the end of the plot, and Anna remains passive. In spite of their precarious position, everybody gets along quite well with his or her environment, feeling more or less at home where they are, and none of them seems to have a clue if everything would really turn out to get better if they would move away.

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