

IDENTITY AND SELFHOOD IN THE METAPHORS OF TRAVEL AND MOVEMENT IN KINCAID, RUSHDIE, AND ANZALDUA

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Abstract:

Postcolonial writers such as Kincaid, Rushdie, and Anzaldua have often written on ideas such as home, identity, imagination and exile. Their writings have created (and re-created) the physical and imaginary landscapes of the nation (and imagination) for their readers; engaging them with the fluidity of travel and movement, interconnecting and visceral metaphors that bind and unify their compelling narration with moments of truth and conviction. This paper seeks to discuss how the metaphors of travel and movement validate the notion of identity and selfhood in the novels of the three writers.

Keywords: Identity, selfhood, travel, movement, postcolonial

The metaphors of travel and movement have a dominant presence in the works of Jamaica Kincaid, Salman Rushdie, and Gloria Anzaldua. Their travel writings never cease to amaze postcolonial readers with their forthcoming, intimate, provocative and powerful style of writing. It is a characteristic that has enabled them to explore the issues of identity, the quest for selfhood, home, exile, and other social and economic issues from a relative distance but yet sharply focused on issues prevalent in our culture today. It is through their writings which embody these features of movement and travel that they have transcended various 'boundaries' of culture, state, and the physical mind while breaking rigid structures of hegemonic discourse.

Their discourse is more often than not focused on the idea of the homeland and its multi-layered themes of identity, and the search for a sense of belonging. Written in the era of globalization where no physical boundaries of a nation could shield itself from the impending tides of progress; many nations who have experienced the tyranny of colonialism begin their soul-searching process of establishing their identity. The era of post-colonialism saw many colonized nations reforming, reshaping and redefining their national boundaries, culture and identity. It is to formulate a new nation free from the yoke of colonialism because the tyranny of colonialism saw the displacement of many communities across the globe. From the diasporic, displaced, and oppressed, tales such as the Chicanos in Gloria Anzaldua's *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* unfold. In her book, Gloria Anzaldua speaks of the static and physical boundaries that exist at the Texas-U.S. Southwest/Mexican Border. Anzaldua then shifts her focus to various borderlands such as 'the psychological borderlands, sexual borderlands, and the spiritual borderlands' where '[...] two or more cultures edge each other, where people of

different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy' (Anzaldua 1987: preface).

In *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Anzaldua refers to the various spatial landscapes that exist between U.S. and Mexico. The idea of 'movement' is felt when she describes the borderlands as a place of hybridity, where various cultural elements fuse together to create a new chapter for humankind. She describes 'Living on borders and in margins, keeping intact one's shifting and multiple identity and integrity, is like trying to swim in a new element, an "alien" element' (Anzaldua 1987, preface). The water element with its swift movement is further seen in the fourth paragraph of the preface when she speaks of the book as being a part of her existence. It is a preoccupation of herself with other turmoil and oppositions that she writes about the border people:

[...] the struggle of that self amidst adversity and violation; with the confluence of primordial images; with the unique positionings consciousness takes of these confluent streams: and with my almost instinctive urge to communicate, to speak, to write about life on the borders, life in the shadows.

(Anzaldua 1987: preface)

This fluidity or 'confluent streams' of images, of the past and present cascades into her description. Writing about these events has made her come to terms with her past, to be truly alive and to be finally free like 'the fleeting images of the soul in fantasy.' In the following paragraph, the metaphors of movement is still utilized with the 'switching of "codes"' between various languages of her people from the past to the present that reflects the fluidity of languages in the *Borderlands*. Anzaldua conceives in her book a whole barrage of images that continues to overrun the entire text. Her country has been torn apart by what she calls a '1,950 mile-long open wound, dividing a "pueblo", a culture, running down the length of my body, staking fence rods in my flesh... This is my home, this thin edge of barbwire' (Anzaldua 1987: 2-3) This emotional portrayal with vivid images of mutilation describes the borderlands as a place of intense suffering for the author as well as for her people. To Anzaldua, borders are paramount in her text and she talks about moving across them and transgressing them. In her view, such borders causes fear in her community and it is unnatural to place borders that will uproot the people. Her use of multiple languages that seem to flow with her poem describes the vastness of the multiple cultures that cannot be fenced in because to Anzaldua: [...] 'the skin of the earth is seamless, The sea cannot be fenced [...]' (Anzaldua 1987: 3).

Through her poem, she describes the unnaturalness of fixed borders that inhibit the freedom of her people who suffer tremendously from being uprooted from their ancestral grounds. Anzaldua's narration focuses on the borderland community who shuttles from Mexico to Texas facing great peril and oppression such as being 'raped, maimed, strangled, gassed, shot' (Anzaldua 1987: 3). She gives a factually based, historical point of view of the U.S. Southwest states that originally belonged to the native Chicanos (Mexican-Americans). Her narration covers in great depth, the movement through history of the earliest inhabitants of the Americas, from the Chicanos that had settled in Texas since 35000 B.C. to the present generation of Chicanos. The insertion of various snippets of story with the multiplicity of languages from Castilian Spanish, North American dialects, Tex-Mex, Nahuatl and a mélange of all of this seeks to justify the fluidity of her narration that takes into account the various cultures in the borderlands.

Anzaldua's narration moves along various historical facts including some stories from her childhood. From the Spanish conquest to the Battle of the Alamo, Anzaldua narrates the diasporic brutal conditions of her people from the past to the present. The movement of her narration

includes various historical details from the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo between the Mexicans and Americans to the early history of Anglo Agribusiness corporations exploiting native Mexican and Indian landowners of their land. Chicanos, Tejanos, native Indians, Mexicanos and many more ethnic tribes have been made illegal migrants in their own lands. Anzaldua uses the metaphor of movement through a chronological narration of history; moving back and forth in time and even using incidents from her own past such as when her grandmother lost all her cattle and land to the Americans: 'my grandmother lost all her cattle, they stole her land' (Anzaldua 1987:8). From her sequential narration, she highlights the sufferings of her people that remain a timeless tale of woe that prevails to the present. She seeks to justify, in reality the treatment of the colonials who had rampaged, ransacked and looted the land of her people over several generations. The present reality is still unchanged when Anzaldua's father, a minor sharecropper had to till his land at a loss while paying foreign corporations every month for their loans. 'Sometimes we earned less than we owed, but always the corporations fared well' (Anzaldua 1987: 9).

For Anzaldua, her people have been moving around, seeking a home for themselves for centuries; the movement of her people from one continent to another is a way of life, a never-ending odyssey. Due to economic problems in Mexico, the journey to the historical/mythological Aztlan begins with ten million Mexican people without documents returning to the Southwest. It is a cycle of movement that resumes, a movement and a journey that Anzaldua describes as '[...] a tradition of migration, a tradition of long walks' (Anzaldua 1987:11). Due to economic struggles, many have risked everything to enter the Southwest illegally but are no match for the border patrol guards with their high technological gadgetry such as nightvision and electronic sensing devices. Many are caught and returned to the border only to return repeatedly.

Thus, such economic refugees, having sold everything to pay for the passage into the Southwest are further trapped in the cycles of oppression and violence. Being constantly exploited for having no proper documents, they endure a silent suffering in a land that was once their own. Anzaldua highlights the quest of her people, though 'trembling with fear, yet filled with courage, a courage born out of desperation' (Anzaldua 1987:11) to seek greener pastures and to eke out a living for their future generations. From the movement in her narration, the fluidity of her thoughts in her poetry and chronology of historical events highlights her people's cause to constantly return to the home of their ancestors and to reclaim what was once theirs. The borderlands are a liminal space that constantly evolves. It is a place that preserves the identity of her people and where various cultures merge and transform into new ones and new life springs from the old. The new 'mestiza' then comes forth and optimism springs anew for a new chapter of life to begin in the borderlands.

Salman Rushdie's essay, *Imaginary Homelands* is another example of a writer utilizing the metaphors of movement and travel. The imagination and memory are key elements used by Anzaldua and Rushdie to bridge their past while making a connection to the present. In *Imaginary Homelands*, Rushdie makes a trip to Bombay, his old city and upon looking at a phone directory, discovers much to his surprise, his father's name still printed in it. This movement to his past gives him a feeling of nostalgia and a reaffirmation of his old memories: 'It was an eerie feeling. I felt as if I were being claimed, or informed that the facts of my faraway life were illusions, and that this continuity was the reality' (Rushdie 1991:9).

Rushdie moves back in time, constantly relying on his memory 'to restore the past' (Rushdie 1991:10) into its present form, in full colour. In Rushdie's essay, travel and movement are both empirical and imaginative; in his travel back to Bombay, Rushdie is also metaphorically traveling back in time. He does so twice, in his physical travel to his birthplace and another in the traveling of his mind to his past. The distant travels that he makes are also indirectly to seek his identity from a place that was once his birthplace. Stuart Hall writes of identity as '[...] a

construction, a process never completed-always in “process”. It is not determined in the sense that it can always be “won” or “lost”, sustained or abandoned’ (Hall 1996:2). In a way, to claim one’s own identity after so long a departure is never an easy task. There is always a sense of incompleteness in defining the identity of one’s own because according to Bauman: ‘Identity is a critical projection of what is demanded and/ or sought upon what is; or more exactly still, an oblique assertion of the inadequacy or incompleteness of the latter’ (Bauman 1996:18).

Similarly, even the interpretation or the imagining of a distant homeland such as Bombay for Rushdie is to be undertaken cautiously and that this reimagining of a home will never be complete and accurate. Even the travel back to Bombay will hold the same results. A sense of incompleteness prevails once again as Rushdie notes:

But if we do look back, we must also do so in the knowledge- which gives rise to profound uncertainties that our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or village, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind.

(Rushdie, 1991: 10)

Rushdie relies on his memory and his imagination to write about India. What he writes is merely a single version from all the countless versions available. As a writer, he tries to depict India as imaginatively as possible. In his book, *Midnight's Children*, he portrays the narrator Saleem making mistakes in his narration because of his fragmentary vision and fallible memory. Rushdie’s point is that one should not have a fixed version of his/her homeland because the definition of a homeland differs from individual to individual. Therefore, home for the displaced and diasporic individual is not static. There is no single, fixed, definition of a homeland. Home can be anywhere for writers like Rushdie and Gloria Anzaldúa. The metaphors of movement and travel is used by Rushdie in his travels of the mind, memory and imagination to justify that home for the diasporic writer and individuals is a state of mind, and it exists even in the realm of imagination.

Iain Chambers in *Migrancy, Culture and Identity* discusses the idea of home as being mobile and unrooted.

It means to conceive of dwelling as a mobile habitat, as a mode of inhabiting time and space not as though they were fixed and closed structures, but as providing the critical provocation of an opening whose questioning presence reverberates in the movement of the languages that constitute our sense of identity, place and belonging. There is no place, language or tradition that can claim this role.

(Chambers, 1994: 4)

Similarly, to perceive the past with an absolute certainty is impossible. Like the idea of the home as a place that is unfixed, the past is always blurred by one’s fallible memory that distorts reality. Here, Rushdie cites the metaphor of the movement towards the cinema screen. ‘The movement towards the cinema screen is a metaphor through time towards the present, and the book itself, as it nears contemporary events, quite deliberately loses deep perspective, becomes more “partial”’ (Rushdie, 1991:13). What he writes then can never be a hundred percent accurate portrayal, like Saleem, Rushdie is also prone to what Milan Kundera describes as: ‘The struggle of man against power, is the struggle of memory against forgetting’ (Rushdie, 1991:14). The fluidity of the human memory is cut short by its limited power to transcend the vacuum of time that surrounds it. Thus, writers such as Rushdie, in his quest for selfhood, is a writer who tries to write about his long forgotten homeland. He will thus be facing this challenge, a deflating

memory that obscures his past memories.

Through travel and movement, the human mind is incapable of transgressing this growing void. Thus for Indian writers who write from abroad, the onus then should be on the quality of the literary work. Although they are separated from their homelands by distance, time, culture and their association with the West, the movement away from home could be a positive experience. New perspectives could be formulated because of the distance, making them perceive the unthinkable. Rushdie uses the metaphor of movement and travel, shuttling back and forth through time, using the human imagination to perceive the fluidity of the notion of homeland, and demonstrating the limitation of human memory as it travels to the past. All of this leads to the diversity of thinking advocated by Rushdie. One cannot have a fixed mindset on various issues such as the definition of a homeland, the interpretation of historical events, English being the language of the colonials and the non-existence of a world outside one's own community.

It is an open mindedness that one should have without the adoption of 'a ghetto mentality' (Rushdie 1991: 19). Writing from abroad does not limit one's view on certain issues but in fact only enriches it with one's kaleidoscope of angles and subjectivity. Rushdie focuses on the idea of the past and home; on coming into grips by exiled individuals who constantly struggle with the issues of belonging and identity. According to Rushdie, there are no fixed answers to these questions; the idea of a home should be fluid with no fixed definitions. Similarly, Rushdie does not write for a target audience but for a wide readership, once again re-emphasizing his diversity of themes that cater to a wide global audience.

In Jamaica Kincaid's short story, *A Small Place*, we are taken to the tiny island of Antigua, her homeland. The island itself is only twelve miles long and nine miles wide, an extremely small that is besieged by what Kincaid calls '[...] human rubbish from Europe [...]' (Kincaid 1998:80). Now an independent country, the republic of Antigua is still reeling from years of British colonial rule, its aftermath can still be seen in the present. The novel highlights Jamaica Kincaid's point of view, the brutality of colonialism and its capacity to uproot and displace an entire race, forcing it into submission and slavery. Ania Loomba describes colonialism as '[...] the conquest and control of other people's land and goods' (Loomba 1998:2), while Peter Childs and Patrick Williams in *An Introduction to Post-Colonial Theory* explains colonialism as '[...] the settling of communities from one country in another, needs distinguishing from imperialism, the extension and expansion of trade and commerce under the protection of political, legal, and military controls' (Childs and Williams 1997:227).

In the story, Kincaid provides the classic tale of colonialism in a backdrop of a tiny island where events are magnified (to a certain extent), for the benefit of the reader. She uses the metaphors of movement and travel to narrate her tale in a matter-of-fact style to her readers who now are made to be a tourist visiting the island of Antigua. She starts by using the motif of travel, and the reader who is now a tourist has just landed at the 'V.C. Bird International Airport'

If you go to Antigua as a tourist, this is what you will see. If you come by aeroplane, you will land at the V.C. Bird International Airport. Vere Cornwall (V.C.) Bird is the Prime Minister of Antigua. You may be the sort of tourist who would wonder why a Prime Minister would want an airport named after him-why not a school, why not a hospital, why not some great public monument?

(Kincaid 1998: 3)

The reader visits Antigua as a tourist and is ushered into a cab; from then onwards Jamaica Kincaid takes us from place to place, a sort of a sightseeing trip around Antigua. She narrates from one physical place to another in her beloved homeland. Kincaid comes across as a diasporic

writer who confronts the ghost of the past to write in a very bitter and sarcastic way the effects of colonization on her beloved island. Even in the beginning, we are 'greeted' by sarcasm as the author questions the naming of the national airport as the V.C. Bird International Airport. We are left to ponder on her questions and slowly; she becomes the unofficial tour guide of Antigua, highlighting certain aspects or facts unknown to us.

Kincaid cleverly utilizes irony in the many snippets of interconnected stories for the reader. She provides an overall history of Antigua that, in her view, is overrun by corruption, pollution, poverty and rampant manipulation of resources by the presence of foreign multinational corporations. Kincaid's irony is fitted into the many folds of her short story. In the beginning of the narration, Kincaid clearly highlights the double standards of the island's authorities in the treatment of locals and tourists that begin right from the point of entry into the island.

You disembark from your plane. You go through customs. Since you are a tourist, a North American or European-to be frank, white - and not an Antiguan black returning from Antigua from Europe and North America with cardboard boxes of much needed cheap clothes and food for the relatives, you move through customs swiftly, you move through customs with ease. Tour bags are not searched.

(Kincaid 1998: 5)

Kincaid narrates these small excerpts with simplicity of language and manner. She provides all the additional information to elaborate her point of the rampant corruption on the island. In her narration, she also highlights the oppression of her people by Antiguan. Those who hold power in the government, the Prime Minister, cabinet ministers and so on willingly abuse their power in the open. Kincaid gives yet another example of how loans are available for the purchase of Japanese cars but not houses because '[...] the two main car dealerships in Antigua are owned in part or outright by ministers in the government' (Kincaid 1998:7).

Her narration gives us a glimpse of her home, a place she believes to be obliterated by the greed of mankind. The legacy of colonialism continues in its many forms on the island. Her movement in narration and travels often stops and continues in many of her favourite haunts during her childhood days in Antigua. Among her favourite places is the public library of which Kincaid describes as 'The library is one of those splendid old buildings from colonial times, and the sign telling of the repairs is a splendid old sign from colonial times' (Kincaid 1998:9). Kincaid's reminiscence of her good old times proves that she misses her homeland, her journeys to her past brings forth the many 'demons' from her past as well as her cherished memories. Her present memory of Antigua however, is one of pain and sorrow. Kincaid now describes her people as living in a vicious cycle of misery and poverty: 'They are too poor to escape the reality of their lives; and they are too poor to escape to live properly in the place where they live, which is very place you, the tourist want to go- [...]' (Kincaid 1998: 19).

Kincaid laments on the loss of her island as a place that has now lost its appeal. Her childhood memories are now taken away from her as she blames the English colonials for their role in the slave trade and the plundering of Antigua's resources throughout the centuries. Through Kincaid's representation of past events, she manages to chart the course of events from the past to the present, linking both time frames and creating a fluidity that follows the pace of the story. From her memories, she gives a few examples of foreigners who exploit and degrade locals. These are intimate shards of memories from her past that well speaks of the vividness of her mind. She remembers the dentist from Czechoslovakia, the racist teacher from Northern Ireland and the Mill Reef Club that would only admit black Antiguan as servants. The onset of colonialism and post-colonialism saw the island becoming a reflection of England itself. Many of the streets were named after what Kincaid calls 'English maritime criminals', the laws of Antigua are English laws, the official language and even some the major banks such as

the Barclays Bank are the remnants of the dark days of colonialism. The establishment that now stands in Antigua remains a stigma in Kincaid's mind that she can never forget. 'Do you ever try to understand why people like me cannot get over the past, cannot forgive and forget? There is the Barclays bank. The Barclay brothers are dead. The human beings who to them were only commodities are dead' (Kincaid, 1998: 26).

Much of Kincaid's thoughts and ideas on colonialism are deeply embedded in the story. The readers are made to 'move' with her memories of Antigua as she remembers some events of the past such as the visit of British royalty to the island. Kincaid makes us follow her flow of thoughts as she charts her memories accordingly. 'How well I remember that all of Antigua turned out to see this Princess person, how every building that she would enter was repaired and painted so that it looked brand-new [...]' (Kincaid 1998:33). The story shifts accordingly, the reader who was a tourist is now taken on a historical tour of Antigua. Kincaid's travel is also a physical travel which also includes a movement from past to present as her text underlines the importance of the return journey. Kincaid at times fills the story with her own monologue, from explaining to the reader the various exploits of corrupt officials to the vast pollution of Antigua's vast resources, she includes thoughts of her own, such as her personal response to the English colonialists:

But nothing can erase my rage-not an apology, not a large sum of money, not the death of the criminal-for this wrong can never be made right, and only the impossible can make me still: can a way be found to make what happened not have happened?

(Kincaid 1998: 32)

Kincaid also voices her dissent at the former colonial culture by condemning it for the stagnation and decay it has brought to the island. Her writings show her disillusionment of her loss of Antigua. Antigua is not a place like it once was and she redirects her bitterness, of her lost identity and selfhood toward the colonials who has taken everything away from her people.

Have you wondered why it is that all we seem to have learned from you is how to corrupt our societies and how to be tyrants? You will have to accept that this is all mostly your fault. You came. You took things that were not yours...You murdered people. You imprisoned people. You robbed people [...]

(Kincaid 1998: 35)

Kincaid, in relating to the past aims to exemplify her feelings of loss of her beloved homeland. Antigua itself is a small peaceful island that is marred by colonialism that has shredded away the roots of her people. This displacement of identity and uprootedness from their original homelands has caused all the people of Antigua to lose their sense of identity. Kincaid laments on this:

'[...] the people in a small place cannot see themselves in a larger picture, they cannot see that they might be part of a chain of something, anything...The people in a small place cannot give an exact account, a complete account of events (small though they may be). This cannot be held against them; an exact account, a complete, of anything, anywhere, is not possible'

(Kincaid 1998: 53)

Unlike Salman Rushdie's *Imaginary Homelands*, the people of Antigua could not conceive their homeland at all. Torn from their own dimension due to the effects of slavery, their liminal space is non-existent. There is a loss of time for the people of Antigua. 'To the people in a small

space, the division of Time into the Past, the Present, and the Future does not exist' (Kincaid 1998: 54). Kincaid's narrative could be similar to what Homi K. Bhabha defines as the 'narratives of historical reconstruction', which:

[...] reject such myths of social transformation, communal memory may seek its meanings through a sense of causality shared with psychoanalysis, that negotiates the recurrence of the image of the past while keeping open the question of the future. The importance of such retroaction lies in its ability to reinscribe the past, reactivate it, relocate it, resignify it. More significant, it commits our understanding of the past, and our reinterpretation of the future, to an ethics of 'survival' that allows us to work through the present.

(Bhabha 1996: 59)

Unfortunately, Bhabha's advocacy is by dampened the weak governance of the Antiguan government who, in Kincaid's view, had deserted the plight of her people to the point that they now experience a double colonization and a never-ending loss of selfhood. Kincaid's narration aims to recapture the tranquility of the past, the innocence of her people when they were slaves who were 'noble' and 'exalted' (Kincaid 1998:81). Her narrative looks at the past to understand Antigua's present sad predicament but unfortunately, Kincaid concludes that the present is no different to the colonial past, the people of Antigua are still enslaved by another colonial power in the form of the present government. To Kincaid, the island of Antigua remains beautiful even up to the present day; though the beauty looks unreal, it is the same 'nine miles wide by twelve miles long' small island discovered by Christopher Columbus in 1493. What has changed are only the people who are now no longer 'noble' and 'exalted slaves' but are listless and powerless to shape their own future without clinging on to the past history of colonialism.

Salman Rushdie, Jamaica Kincaid and Gloria Anzaldua are writers with a difference. Kincaid and Anzaldua's works highlight the diasporic people of the twentieth and twenty-first century that are voiceless and unrepresented in today's global society. Rushdie's writing meanwhile explores the elements of travel and movement that are used to journey across multiple cultural, mental, national and literary landscapes. Rushdie, Kincaid and Anzaldua's works pave the way for the recognition of the plight of the diasporic, the 'forgotten' and the marginalized. The fluidity of movement and travel is seen in Kincaid's narrative movement from the past to present, Anzaldua's chronological and historical narrative and Rushdie's use of the human imagination as a way of seeking the homeland of the mind. Thus, such literary perspectives unite displaced people of cross-cultural societies who are in the never-ending search for a home. The authors, through their works demonstrate how the literary dimensions of movement and travel are possible mediums of reconciliation for individuals searching for their respective 'homeland.'

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