

Homes Lost and Homes Found: The Gendered Displacement and Elusive Quest of the Colonial Women

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Abstract

*This paper interrogates colonial historiography that duly acknowledged the homecoming experiences of the colonial men to their respective nations and ignored their female counterparts. It aims at a gendered re-reading of colonial discourse and particularly focuses on the reconceptualisation of the idea of 'home' with reference to the colonial women. The paper draws upon Homi Bhabha's theory of 'unhomely' that considers home as a fluid concept that keeps on changing depending on various factors. The study involves textual analysis of the French author Marguerite Duras' autobiographical texts *The Lover* and *The Seawall* as primary sources. It tries to show how the 'metropole' (here France) which was earlier considered as home became a site of estrangement for the French colonial women. This paper gives voice to these women, their quest for a home and presents a nuanced perspective of their experiences that contradicts the mainstream narratives.*

Keywords: colonial historiography, homecoming, female repatriates, home, alternative narrative.

Introduction

The return of the colonial men is projected as a celebratory and heroic event in colonial historiography over the years. Whereas, the physical and emotional dislocation experienced by the colonial women who were also a part of the imperial system has been critically underexamined and unreported. Although scholars have lately engaged themselves in studying the gendered dimensions of the homecoming experiences, yet little attention has been given to how these women reconceptualised the idea of 'home' after a prolonged stay in the colonies. The critic Georgina Gowans in her article 'Gender, Imperialism and Domesticity: British women repatriated from India 1940-47' published in the year 2000, questioned the perception of domesticity from the colonial lens. She stated how the refusal to highlight these experiences of the white women ultimately meant the suppression of their voices which would have otherwise provided a nuanced view of repatriation. To understand the female repatriates and their views on their return to their homeland, interviews were conducted to get first-hand experiences. The interviews revealed how they despised the stereotypical image of them presented in the mainstream narratives and how their real-life experiences differed. The narratives in question defined Britain as a comforting space- a 'home,' while their return as a moment of celebration. An example of such narrative is the text *Raj: A Scrapbook of British India, 1877-1947* (1977)

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by Charles Allen. Allen, a British historian, wrote about the challenges that awaited the colonial men/women travelling to India. These narratives framed the idea of 'homecoming' (returning to Britain) as a joyous occasion. Allen cautioned the colonial men and women about the new land they were about to travel to as part of the colonial endeavour. He contributes to the prejudiced discourse on colonialism which romanticizes the complexities of colonialism and underscores the multifaceted nature of it.

The author Marie Paule-Ha in her text *French Women and the Empire: The Case of Indochina* (2014), states how along with the household guides, hostels were established in port cities to train the colonial women by designated matrons to prepare them on how to live in the colony. The colony was described as a difficult space where they were forced to forsake home comforts. Therefore, the French colonial women and men who ventured into the colony of Indochina arrived with preconceived notions shaped by the numerous guidebooks that claimed to provide insights into the region, preparing them for their journey into this new land. Such narratives also projected the homecoming experiences of the whites (both men and women) as a moment of happiness. However, on careful observation it came to light that the reality was rather complex. The notion of the metropole being 'home' and the narratives that projected a romanticised view of their 'homecoming' was disrupted.

Homi Bhabha in his acclaimed essay 'The World and the Home' (1992) introduces the term 'unhomely' and it was later elaborated in his text *The Location of Culture* (1994). 'Unhomely,' as stated by Bhabha does not refer to the state of homelessness, rather it refers to a feeling where 'home' no longer feels familiar, it feels like an alien space. Drawing on Bhabha's theory of 'unhomely' it has been observed that this feeling of uncanny displacement at home has also been felt by the numerous colonial women who went back to their homeland after spending a considerable amount of time in the colonies. The home as a 'fluid' concept can be established by analysing their experiences where their sense of home gets transformed. The institution of imperialism intrudes into their domestic space and hence upon repatriation the metropole looks unfamiliar.

In the paper 'Imperial Geographies of Home: British Domesticity in India, 1886-1925,' the writer Alison Blunt divulges how the idea of home is very much influenced by institutions like imperialism. She explicated how home can be viewed not only as a physical space but also a place having emotional and symbolic meaning. Blunt challenges the idea of home being a fixed entity and tries to establish it as a complex and fluid concept which often intersects with institutions like gender and colonialism. Again, Lorenzo Veracini (2010) in his text *Settler Colonialism* talks about this force displacement where the exogenous settlers are displaced from their current space and are found to be emotionally attached to the colonies. During their stay in the colonies, the colonial women enjoyed the power of racial privilege, control over the natives and the colonial home, but after they left the colony, they could not enjoy the same privileges in the metropole. Hence, there was always a sense of belongingness and attraction to the lost land where they somehow enjoyed a sense of independence and authority. Another critic Anne McClintock in her text *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (1995) states how imperialism also relied heavily on domestic ideologies to maintain the colonial hierarchy because the colonial home was considered as the microcosm of the empire. Hence, through everyday practices in the colonial home the colonial hierarchies were established between the natives and the white women residing there. These women maintained an authority which they did not receive in the metropole and hence they suffered from identity crisis.

In the post-colonial context, especially in the context of white women, we have seen how the concept of home is 'dismantled', 'destabilised' and 'reconstructed.' For these women the 'original home' were the homes they left behind to perform their colonial duties. But with

time, the idea of 'home' shifts from merely a physical space where one is born or brought up. The home where they were born now became a place of memory and therefore when they returned, they could sense the emotions with which they left it. Now, the 'original home' becomes alien and disoriented. It has been observed that a growing body of scholarship has acknowledged the presence of the colonial women as an important part of the imperial project, yet their experiences during their stay in the colonies and after they returned to their respective homeland remains underworked. How these women later reconceptualised the idea of 'home' needs to be studied to gain a fresh perspective on the experiences of the female repatriates. This paper tries to argue how the European women redefined and reweighed the experiences after they returned to the metropole. For this purpose, this paper will analyse select texts by Marguerite Duras who was known for writing about the experiences of the French women who went to Indochina as part of the imperial project.

Discussion

The French author Marguerite Duras (1914-1996) wrote a few notable works on Indochina that reflected the lives of many French women who went to Indochina as part of the colonial project. Duras was herself born in French Indochina and therefore we can see a profound connection to this land as well as snippets from her life in her works. From Duras' biographical detail mentioned in 'Duras and Indochina: Postcolonial Perspectives' by Julia Waters and *The Lover: Wartime Notebooks; Practicalities* (2017) by Marguerite Duras, it was revealed that their family were not passive bystanders of the colonial project, rather they were also a part of its functionaries because of the fact that her mother was a teacher in French Indochina where the mission was to train/civilize the colonised ones in the name of cultural uplift. But it is also to be noted that her family became a victim of economic precariousness in the colony itself when Duras' mother brought a swampland being conned by the colonial agents. This placed Duras and her family in a liminal space because this situation stripped them off of the colonial privileges often enjoyed by the colonisers. Both the texts to be discussed here are considered as auto-fiction given that it largely shows connection to the author's life. Lorenzo Veracini's theory of 'Settler Colonialism' is applicable in Duras' context as well because Duras made a literary return to Indochina because she was emotionally attached to the lost land and hence decided to pen down everything she experienced in that land. We must look at Duras' texts from a bifurcated lens because she not only projects her longing for the 'lost space' (the colony) but also interrogates the racial privilege that contradicts her experience in Indochina.

The author Marie-Paule Ha in her text *French Woman and the Empire: The Case of Indochina* (2014) examines the narratives of numerous French women who lived in the colony of Indochina from a young age or were born there. The Indochina which was portrayed in the literature and cinema by the French stands in contrast to the narratives of these women. In Duras's Indochina, the characters can be seen trying to find a sense of identity in the colony. At first, they grapple with the constant clash between their colonial heritage and their lifestyle in the foreign land. This was however emblematic of the broader experiences of the numerous other French women who were staying in the colony of Indochina. A close reading of Duras's autobiographical text will present a nuanced understanding of the concept of 'home' in a colonial context; especially the concept of 'home' in relation to the French women.

Duras's autobiographical text *The Lover* (*L'Amant*, 1984) and *The Seawall* (1950) were all connected because of the plot that had continuity with one another. A few dissimilarities can be seen in the sense that in the text *The Lover*, the protagonist tried to maintain a distance from the natives and maintain her French identity. She wanted to put French value at a high pedestal. However, in the text *The Seawall*, this attitude changes and the protagonist developed a sense

of belongingness for the colonial land including its ideals and values. In both the text it was seen that the protagonists' relationship with the indigenous people and the colony became more complex and nuanced. In these texts, it was seen how the impending departure from the colonial land brought an intense affection for the land which was once seen as a foreign space. A careful reading of these texts highlights the tension experienced by the women repatriates who had to finally leave the colonial land/home under various circumstances and go back to the land which did not look like home anymore.

Coming to the text *The Lover*, here the protagonist is a French lady who used to stay in Indochina before and narrates her experience in the colonial land when she visits the colony for the first time as a fifteen-year-old. She says,

So, I'm fifteen and a half. It's on a ferry crossing the Mekong River. The image lasts all the way across. I'm fifteen and a half, there are no seasons in that part of the world, we have just the one season, hot, monotonous, we're in the long hot girdle of the earth, with no spring, no renewal. (5)

The way the colonial land was introduced by the girl to the reader shows her early consciousness about the new place where it was difficult for her to fit in the beginning. The fact that the land has only one season signifies the alienation, difficulty and monotony faced by her because of the cultural as well spatial displacement. Lorenzo Veracini in *Settler Colonialism* argues how there is a gradual shift in the psyche of these new settlers where the foreign land eventually turns into a home through sustained inhabitation. At first the colony functions as an 'anti-home' that is devoid of comfort and familiarity. Therefore, she feels out of place when she first lands in Indochina. Like the other white children, the girl could not afford to have an extravagant lifestyle because of the family's economic position. Her mother used to work in a school with a very meagre salary which could not give them the life they deserved as 'whites.' The girl even decided to conceal her mother's profession because teaching was considered to be a lowly profession during that time. Their position was just like the natives and this was also mentioned in J Kimberley J's 'Andrée Viollis in Indochina: The Objective and Picturesque Truth about French Colonialism' where it was stated how the critic Andrée Viollis in her text *Indochina S.O.S* (1935) where she compares the poor white women to the indigenous people who are equally deprived of a better life.

It is also worth mentioning that the girl was bullied and assaulted by her elder brother at home. This dysfunctional family setup shows that the home she lived in was not a place of comfort for her. McClintock in her text *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (1995) stated how the colonial home was considered as the microcosm of the empire and hence it was necessary for the whites to present the colonial home as the quintessential colonial space and also maintain the colonial hierarchy. However, in the text *The Lover* Duras exposes the cracks within this ideology by bringing the reference of the brother's mistreatment towards his family and the mother who had to borrow money from a native and invert the colonial hierarchy.

Again, despite the stark age differences and belonging to a racially stratified society, the 15-year-old falls in love with a Chinese millionaire and begins her clandestine affair that soon became the talk of the town. The girl knew that her racial status would not allow her to have a relationship with a native who is also much older to her. But her poor background blurred this difference and made her inferior to the native man. The girl was more attracted to the luxury the man offered her than her racial superiority. She started visiting his apartment often and was physically involved with him. The apartment became a safe space for her where she received all the comfort she expected as a white woman residing in the colony. As mentioned before, the critic Alison Blunt in her paper 'Imperial Geographies of Home: British Domesticity in India, 1886-1925' discusses home as an emotional space rather than a mere physical space. For

the French girl, the Chinese man's apartment becomes a surrogate home where she finds the emotional comfort that she was seeking in her own home. This shows the elusive quest of the whites for a better and comfortable life; it was a quest for the promise that was once assured to them by the authorities and failing which they found comfort even in a native's home. The false promise about the colonial home made by the colonial authorities was materialised only through her lover. This was common during those days among the poor whites who in order to have a safe space in the colony fell for the rich natives who would sometimes provide them a home too (in case he married the woman). In the case of the girl, it was evident when she said- "Never again shall I travel in a native bus. From now on I'll have a limousine to take me to the high school and back from there to the boarding school. I shall dine in the most elegant places in town...." (26)

In the mainstream narratives, the whites are projected as the ones who live a luxury life in the colonies. The mother of the girl never stopped the latter from meeting the Chinese man with the hope of gaining something in return. The white female body which has been a site of colonial prestige has been reduced to a mere means to gain access to a world which the family craved in the colony. Though he was a native, yet the girl and her family were ratified as people who were socially inferior to him. Their racial superiority did not give them power. The mother's implicit encouragement of the relationship for material gain reveals that the colonial home itself was built on transactions rather than the stable domestic ideology. The dynamics in the relationship of the girl and her lover changes when the latter confesses about his engagement with a woman of his caste. This is when she starts developing attachment for the man because she knew she was going to lose him eventually. The familiar comfort of 'home' that the man gave her was about to end soon. It was observed that the growing love of the protagonist ran parallelly with her growing love for the colonial land. The love for the Chinese man serves as a metaphor for her evolving love for Indochina which is evident in the ending lines of the text when she left Saigon. This gradual emotional shift is what Lorenzo Veracini talks about in his theory of 'Settler Colonialism'. The lover here becomes a symbol representing Indochina. The disappearance of the lover and the land signify her loss for something which she craved desperately yet failed to achieve it. This departure from the colony intensifies her emotional attachment for the land which converts from a foreign land into 'home.' She experiences the emotional attachment to the land only at the time of her departure from Indochina to France. The place which was once alien, now becomes a 'lost home' for her. Homi Bhabha talks about this through the concept of 'unhomely' where factors like displacement, migration etc changes/ shifts the concept of home and it becomes a space where multiple meanings emerge. For the colonial women 'home' became fluid, it was not restricted to a fixed place after they spent a considerable amount of time in the colonies.

The homecoming experiences of the colonial women has been written by the author and critic Inderpal Grewal in her text *Home and Harem: Nation, Gender, Empire, and the Cultures of Travel* (1996). Grewal focused on how the 'homecoming experiences' of the men and women were different. In context to the colonial men, the colonies were seen as a land of exile. However, it is to be noted here that the homecoming experiences of the women were rather a very complex phenomenon. The colonial women suffered from a sense of alienation and felt very disoriented on returning to their native land. Their experiences of returning to the native land challenged the simplistic male centric narratives of 'homecoming.' Their accounts revealed that the homecoming experiences involved a complex negotiation of identities in places that has fundamentally changed. Since the women's experiences were marginalized in the colonial discourses of the time, these issues never got highlighted in the mainstream narratives. A similar predicament can be seen among the French women too who once settled in Indochina and later found it difficult to go back to their native land. A similar sense of displacement

and alienation was felt by them too on returning to their homeland. This is projected well by Marguerite Duras through her texts. Duras through her text expresses the precarity of the poor white women and highlights the internal trauma most women undergo in order to meet the colonial standard. Their quest for a better 'space', a home, becomes elusive and in the process, they often lose their identity. If we consider Veracini's theory of settler colonialism as well as Homi Bhabha's concept of 'unhomely' it can be stated that the quest becomes more intense during their moment of repatriation. It is then they realise the 'anti home' i.e. the colony actually becomes their home due to the years of emotional investment on that land. This is seen in *The Lover's* last scene; the girl experienced a sense of loss when the ship starts moving. Duras ends the text with the lines

It is frightening. It is always frightening at this point. Everything. That one might never see this thankless land again. That one might forget this monsoon sky... the strange tragedy of "going away", of "leaving forever." (211)

The girl's final displacement (also Duras's own) from Indochina and returning to the metropole (France), shows that her quest for the lost home still remains elusive. Unlike the men, the women's journey back home was not celebratory, rather it signified another dislocation because the metropole now becomes a site of exile for these women.

Another text of Duras that discusses the elusive quest of the colonial women is the text *The Seawall*. Set in the 1930s, the novel talks about the life of a French widow (known as Maa in the story) who resided in the colony of Indochina along with her two children Joseph and Sussane. Like the text *The Lover*, the plot of *The Seawall* is also inspired by Duras and her mother's life in Indochina. The plot of *The Seawall* revolves around a mother (known as Maa) who buys a plot of land from the cadastral agents only to realize that they sold her a swampland. The whole story revolves around the mother's desperate attempt to restore the land from the sea. Like other white women, the mother too wanted a stable position in the colony and hence she decided to buy land for plantation. The sea however acted as a force that destabilised her motive. To save the land from the sea she decides to build a seawall. In this attempt to build the seawall, the mother meets various corrupt colonial officials. These officers exploited their positions of power for their selfish motives and oppressed not only the natives but also the whites (like the mother) who were not in a privileged state. The cadastral agents duped the mother by making her purchase a swampland in French Indochina. The mother purchased the land only to realise that she had to spend all her money to build dikes to save the crops. The mother penned down these frustrations in the form of letters to the unscrupulous officials. She said

Where, alas, is all the money I earned, that I saved, penny by penny, in order to buy this land? Where is the money now? It is in your pockets which are already heavy with gold. You are thieves. And just as those dead children cannot be brought back, so my money, my youth- they can never be recovered. (234)

The mother represented all the poor whites in a colony who dreamt of better lives in the colony but fell victim to the deceptiveness of the colonial officials. She falls into the trap laid by corrupt bureaucrats and suffers miserably. The trauma experienced by her is evident in the following lines-

...since the crumbling of the seawalls, she was a sick woman- dangerously sick, the doctor said. She had already had three epileptic attacks and all three, according to the doctor might have been her death... (117)

The catastrophic collapse of the dike signified the destruction of her hopes of having a better life in the colony. This episode impacts her mentally as well as physically to the extent that she started having epileptic attacks that turn out to be fatal. If we look at the mother's situation from Lorenzo Veracini's theory, it can be stated that the mother intended to be a permanent settler in the land being emotionally attached to it. Unlike the colonial officers her motive was not to

extract any benefit from the land, rather she wanted to be a part of it by settling there forever along with her children. At times, she apologised to her children for not being able to provide them a better life. The idea of creating a safe haven/home for the children was so intense that her resentment towards the authorities were reflected in every letter she wrote. In one such letter she wrote

...perhaps, before dying, I might want to see your dead bodies thrown to the stray dogs of the plain... I might say to the peasants: If any of you wants to give me one last pleasure before I die, let me kill the three cadastral agents of Kam. (232)

Even after all this her desire to have a stable life in the colony remained intact and therefore, she devised a technique to bring financial stability to the family. She started looking for a wealthy husband for her daughter Suzanne to rise above the social ladder and gain economic security. The oppressive colonial system made her life so miserable that she was willing to even compromise her daughter's life. She was stuck in the grip of a corrupt colonial system where she had limited options to improve her livelihood in the colony and therefore, she realised that it was the last shot. The colonial home as the microcosm of the empire as mentioned by Anne McClintock in *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* was once again challenged by Duras through this text because in the 'home' referred to here, the whites were as marginalised as the natives. And this is evident when the mother's desperation led her daughter Suzanne to fall in the trap of a wealthy Chinese man without caring for her honour (the 'white prestige' which was very important to maintain in the colony). The Chinese man became aware about the class difference between him and Suzanne and started exploiting her in exchange for expensive gifts. The mother's last hope to improve their condition got shattered when M. Joe leaves Suzanne with a fake diamond ring and never returns. Like the mother, Suzanne's idea of having a safe haven/home with the Chinese man is also wrecked. The mother finally resigns herself to the fate that the institution of colonialism offers no space for the white women repatriates who travelled to the colonies as part of the colonial project. The mother writes her final letter to the authorities from her deathbed. The letter showed her condemnation and hatred for the system as well. She wrote: "I know your villainy and the villainy of your predecessors and of those who will follow you, the infamy of the government itself" (230).

The critic Lorenzo Veracini in his book *Settler Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview* (2010) talks about the settler colonial theory where the colonisers occupy land of the colonised people and exert power over them. In the text *The Seawall* we have observed that this power was slapped not only on the natives but also on the poor whites who were left with no option in the foreign land. Towards the end it was shown how that land devours (symbolic) the mother whose only aim was to have a comfortable 'space' in the land (Indochina/ the colony).

Conclusion

Drawing upon Homi Bhabha's theory of 'unhomely', it was observed in both the texts that the concept of 'home' was never a fixed entity for the colonial women. They never experienced the sense of belonging in the homes they were trying to create. Both the girl as well as the mother struggled to find comfort in a space that proved to be fragile, unstable and unfixed. Though they were trying to establish themselves in the colony, the protagonists felt affinity for the land only when they were leaving it. In *The Seawall* the mother didn't get the chance to return to her homeland or experience the feeling of home in Indochina. So, her quest remained unfulfilled. On the other hand, the protagonist of *The Lover* experienced repatriation but remained emotionally 'unhomed.' The complexities of colonial identity are highlighted well through the texts where it is proved that one's sense of home is very much shaped by their emotional affinity to the land. Both the texts addressed the loopholes of colonial historiography by highlighting these issues. By analysing Duras' texts and by drawing on other sources related

to the colonial women's experience of leaving the colonies, it can be said that the celebratory 'homecoming' narratives that romanticised the return to the native land as a moment of happiness were misleading. The paper finally gives voice to the colonial women who present a counter narrative on colonialism. It also sheds light on numerous other male centric narratives produced by the colonisers that failed to capture the truth involving repatriation experiences of the women. These narratives failed to capture the actual experiences of the women. Neither of the protagonist's conflict with the idea of 'home' is resolved. While the protagonist of *The Lover* remains emotionally detached from the metropole, the mother from *The Seawall* was denied the repatriation experience altogether.

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