

SPATIO-TEMPORAL CONJUNCTIONS IN NEIL BISSOONDATH'S A CASUAL BRUTALITY

Ms. R. Annie Karunya Bagyam
Assistant Professor of English
Bishop Heber College
Trichy -620017
&
Dr. Catherin Edward
Associate Professor of English
Holy Cross College
Trichy -620002

Abstract

Immigrants from one nation to another usually experience difficulty in adapting to the new space and time due to various differences between the home country and the host country. When an immigrant is able to relate the new place and live in the present without any longing for the past, he /she experiences spatio- temporal conjunction. This paper is an attempt to explore the different factors which facilitate the immigrant protagonist, Raj from Casaquemadain Neil Bissoondath's A Casual Brutality to be in oneness with the new Canadian setting.

Keywords: Migration – Spatio –temporal disjunction – Alienation –Displacement – Racial Inclusion –Anonymity – Vocation- Rationality- Spatio –temporal conjunction

When a person is able to accept and adapt to a place, and is able to concentrate on the reality of the present situation, he/ she becomes one with the space and time as well as lives without any anxiety. Normally, when a person moves from one country to another he/she experiences spatio –temporal disjunction due to thenovel/ unexpected experience in the new place and the nostalgia for the old. Migrants in general find it difficult to adhere with the new space and time due to the difference in culture, language, food, time zone between the native land and host country “The dialectics of place and displacement is always a feature of post-colonial societies whether these have been created by a process of settlement, intervention or a mixture of the two” (Ashcroft 9). Neil Bissoonth's A Casual Brutality, “illustrate a fundamental concern with displacement, exile, despair, and the ethnic discontent” (BirbalSingh 137) but the protagonist Raj enjoys spatio-temporal conjunction when he migrated to Canada as a medical student by celebrating anonymity.

Raj was an orphan brought up by his grandparents in Casaquemda and he moved on to

Canada for his higher studies. He was received in Canada by Kayso, a fellow Caribbean and in his initial days in Canada, Raj stayed in the house owned by Mrs. Perroquet, a French Canadian for twenty – five dollars a week. He was appalled at the first sight of Mrs. Perroquet. She was small and hunched, but he found the room favourable “Small but tidy, with a bed, a chest of drawers and a desk with a reading lamp mounted on the wall above ... and the room had a comfortable feel to it” (195). Mrs. Perroquet showed hospitality and she opened up details about her family and Raj was even uncomfortable with her easy familiarity and he got accustomed to the place. Raj had his own restrictions when he wrote a letter to his uncle Grappler in the Casaquemada. He remarks: “I wrote about Kayso, but not about his return. I described my room, but omitted the view. I told him of Mrs. Perroquet, but did not mention Andy. It was instinctive. To hold back: it was a kind of respect” (198). Raj’s maturity is shown in his gesture of retaining secrets to avoid offending or disturbing others. It also proves his effort to project a clear image of Canada, to justify his decision to choose Canada. Even, the people of Shamsi community in M.G Vassanji’s *No New Land* always discussed how things worsened in their birthland to justify their decision of migrating to Canada.

Canada is a post colonial nation with many immigrants and ethnic groups and “with its vast empty spaces and its largely unknown lakes seems a strange land even to Canadians themselves” (Vevania 7). But Raj gradually became familiar and self reliant on the landmarks of Canada “My confidence grew. I worried less about the street names. Began seeing the city with less fearful eyes, noticed now the different languages, the colours and the dress, the microcosms of the world, that carved for themselves little neighbourhood niches in the city. A certain voyeurism came naturally to me- being in it, but not of it was how I was most comfortable” (199). Anonymity gives one freedom to follow one’s heart as he/she has no pressure to satisfy others. Raj enjoyed being himself without pretension due to his anonymity in Canada. In a place where no recommendation is required to acquire the essential needs, when everything is orderly and when one has a vocation to follow, being a stranger is bliss. Raj observes: “In this way, slipping smoothly into study, discovering slowly the joys of anonymity, coveting the lack of community, I created my own comfort in the bright and bustling city” (200). Books are a great source of companion. Since Raj was able to delve into books, he enjoyed being anonymous.

Six weeks after his entry into Canada, Kayso called him to inform about his departure to Casaquemada. His Casaquemadan language and accent irritated Raj. Normally when a migrant is intrigued with the language of birth country he/she will be happy. But Raj is exceptional for he doesn’t want to breed familiarity. Raj, indeed practiced the American “melting pot” where one has to shun all the differences and merge with the native culture. When enquired by Mrs. Perroquet he referred to Kayso as an acquaintance and not even as his friend. Later that day when he retired to his room, he taped a maple leaf which he picked earlier to a blank paper and wrote the date and ‘Toronto’. He was able to reconcile with the

new life. He was aware of the nature around “at the rapid interplay of clouds, at the freshening of the air, the rustling of the trees, the brittle crinkling of dried leaves underfoot on the sidewalk. At this display of a nature that was not static, of a nature that was spectacle in its inconstancy”(201). Raj was able to relate with nature. That night Raj felt asleep happily by thinking that Mrs. Perroquet is the only person he knew in Toronto. When Mrs. Perroquet observed about his reserved nature and asked Raj whether he was homesick, he responded ““Not really””(203). And he explains “If I said little, it was because I had little to say. I had no desire to speak of Casaquemada. Today and tomorrow were too important to me; dwelling on yesterday could but hinder. If my thoughts went backward at all, it was to my grandparents, to Grappler, to the intensely personal. Instead, I was preoccupied by my studies” (203). Raj was at ease with the new space because he was able to sever ties with his past; he was able to maintain distance from his past, for it was an unimpressive one. The only bonding he had with Casaquemada was his close relations but he did not miss them as he had limited time to think about them in his pursuit of medicine. It is believed that “an idle mind is a devil’s workshop” and as Raj was always preoccupied with his studies he had no room for depression and so he was successful in connecting with the new place. Furthermore, Raj was able to accommodate himself in the new space due to his foresight in appreciating the goodness prevailing in the Canadian situation. He observes: “Newspapers boxes: it amazed me that people didn’t steal from them. The unlittered streets: it amused me to see people stuffing candy wrappers into their pockets or purses... Traffic signals: the obedience they commanded from pedestrians was stunning” (203). Raj even went to the extent of testing the Canadians’ patience for their keenness in helping others with directions. Weather was a running theme in Canada and when Raj realized that his jacket was insufficient for him to withstand cold he acquired a winter coat, gloves, boots. He analyses: “This small, necessary gesture, the procurement of accoutrements useless in the previous life but vital in the new, helped alleviate my need, slight but potent for the familiar... It was like discovering familiarity in the unfamiliar; it was like a step forward” (205). Thus a person becomes more confident when he/ she accommodates himself/ herself to the demands of the existing climatic condition. One should show readiness to change attire, as clinging on to the past practices will not come in handy in the new situation. Then, Raj developed a bond with Mrs. Perroquet when her first son Andy visited the place and exhibited violent threats in the night. Raj was awake in the bed and Mrs. Perroquet persuaded Andy to leave claiming that Raj was sleeping. The next morning they spoke nothing about Andy’s visit “she knew I knew, and I knew she knew: we shared a secret. And in this silence there was bond” (209).

When Mrs. Perroquet parted to spend her Christmas holidays with her younger son Joey and his wife Raj was left alone and he records “I delighted in it: in this air that was only mine to breathe, in this silence that was only mine to disturb” (267). Though Raj was nostalgic of Christmas in Casaquemada and had the fear of losing himself in anonymity in Canada, he was analytical enough and thought “There is always a price to pay. Anonymity and its joys,

anonymity and its price. I was in small, but significant measure comforted” (268). Raj had unintentionally avoided the Kensington market to rebuke Kayso’s projection of it “as a balm for homesickness” (267) when he was in Canada. Raj examines “My own struggle with this longing for the safe and the familiar had been surprisingly brief” (267). After his first Christmas in Toronto, Raj started receiving a series of letters from Kayso in Casaquemada. He attached a twenty dollar bill and directed Raj to take photos of Kensington Market and to mail the negatives. Though Raj felt despair he obliged. He recounts: “I had not come to Toronto to find Casaquemada, or to play the role of the ethnic, deracinated and costumed, drawing around himself the defensive postures of the land left behind” (273). Raj considered the display of third world exoticism as a trap for the individual. He did not want to replicate the past rather he synchronized with the host culture and this facilitated Raj to relish spatio-temporal conjunction in Canada.

Then, Raj was forced to leave Mrs. Perroquet’s apartment by her sons, he moved on to a third -floor flat which was vast and dark but nothing deterred his enthusiasm. Raj’s landlords were a voluminous Chinese family and the apartment smelled like a Chinese restaurant, but Raj assimilated. On the first day, Mr. Harbans a tenant in the second floor volunteered to assist Raj in shifting his belongings. Raj furnished his flat and procured his basic amenities from the neighbourhood shops and he was pleased to see the walls of his flat “The walls I left bear, their clean expansiveness pleased me” (282). Mr. Harbans displayed increasing familiarity everyday and Raj was hesitant to reciprocate. Though his flat was within the distance of the university, it was in the midst of multicultural enclave. “It was the kind of area in which ethnic eyes sought other, similar ethnic eyes... I sniffed a defensive racism, the threat of mental ghetto” (283). Raj was shrewd enough to resist all cordialities by appearing indifferent and this helped to adhere to the mainstream culture of Canada.

Though Raj was suspicious of Mr. Harban’s geniality, still he accepted him and gave him company. Mr. Harbans was from British Guinea and when he claimed that things were easier in home, Raj countered him by asking “how”. Mr. Harbans was not able to justify it. He replied: ““You know, I know some other Wes’ Indians up here, and everybody always saying life was better back home, but nobody ever going back, ‘cept for holidays. But is the first time somebody ask me how it better”” (285). Raj applied his reason and said ““The grass is always greener”” (285). Though Raj thought about his grandfather that day, in general Raj is a man who doesn’t give any room for emotions or sentiment. In spite of hearing the sad story of Harbans, Raj was unperturbed when he learnt that Harbans was vacated by the Immigration Officers due to lack of documents. Raj is practical and tactful and his rationality paves way for harmonizing with the new environment in Canada. People came and went from Harbans flat and they remained distant and Raj was engulfed in his study and he made it as a protective shell. At school though he made acquaintances, as it was inevitable he evaded familiarity “I learnt nothing of these people, revealed nothing of myself. They would remain faces to me, features without names, without backgrounds” (295).

Then, Raj had bitter experience when he visited the asylum “Pleasure Dome” to see ailing Mrs. Perroquet and after that he initiated his trips to the Riviera whenever he needed to relax and comments: “It was in the anonymity of its darkness that I felt safest” (296). During his third year of medical studies, except for the dream of his parents’ death Raj enjoyed a peaceful life. He records: “It remained a comfortable world, I content in it, living quietly in my flat” (333). He responded to the letters from his grandfather, enjoyed his routine of studying, sleeping on Friday afternoons etc. Dimitrios Kostas was Raj’s closest acquaintance at school and he invited him to his home one Saturday, but Raj rejected it for he considered it as an intrusion on the weekend. And Dimitrios understood. Raj went to the Riviera and gave vent for his arrogance. His anonymity in Riviera eroded slowly and he became familiar with waitress Janet. and he elucidated his preference to the Canadian climate “It’s cold outside, you put on a coat, you go out. It’s hot and humid outside, you stay inside and sweat. Heat limits me, winter doesn’t” (340). He also elaborated on his likings in Canada. He defended the Canadian smell: “‘it’s fresh, clean smell-’... ‘it’s always there, you just have to be aware of it. Even in the humidity, in July or August, you can sniff it just under the heaviness” (314). Raj not only accommodated to the Canadian ambience but he also adored it and that augmented his oneness with Canada. Raj felt at ease in the Riviera. He normally positioned himself in seat against a wall avoiding the middle and openness. He took liberty with Jan and asked her “how many tissues did you stuff down your bra today” (344). Even Raj acknowledged it as arrogance; he could never think of indulging in such talks in Casaquemada. He was able to throw away all his inhibitions because of the atmosphere in Riviera. Raj was pleased with Jan “because she worked at the Riviera, keeping to herself what other women here minutely revealed” (344). When Jan invited him to her house he opted for it. “The difference between Jan’s invitation and Dimitrios-Kostas was this: it was safe. School was inevitable; the Riviera was... easily replaceable”(345). Raj considered going to Jan’s house because he can detach any time if he felt confined. He wanted everything to be under his control. He wanted to be independent and exercised free will. Raj went to Jan’s house on a cold and windy night and there he met a few youngsters and Jan’s boyfriend Jim was one among them. Jan introduced Raj to Jim claiming that she met him at the Robarts library. Raj lost his anonymity in Jan’s place by staying with her in the night. Though he tried his best to move away that night from Jan’s house, the weather and Jan brought a toll in Raj’s life. He knew Jan and from then on lost all the hold he had over his life. After his tryst with Jan in her house, he avoided Riviera for a month but he could not sever his relationship with Jan for she was pregnant and claimed Raj to be the father. Raj conceded to marry, Jan underwent a miscarriage and everything drifted apart leading to spatio-temporal disjunction. Raj was happy, when their son was born he named him Rohan Devin after the name of his favourite cricketer and his own father. He records: “I left the hospital a couple of hours later feeling curiously satisfied. Even pleased” (411). Raj got a sense of purpose, he enjoyed his son’s birth and experienced spatio-temporal conjunction, but it was

short-lived due to the strain in the relationship with Jan.

Thus, through Raj's experience in Canada, it is evident that he was able to enjoy the Canadian setting in the early days as he had avocation to follow; he could delve into books - the best source of companion; he remembered the truth in the proverb 'grass is greener' and he gave preference to rationality than sentimentality. Above all, he realized the pleasures of anonymity: its lack of commitment to anyone and this made him to embrace and thrive in the new land till he gained familiarity.

Works Cited:

- Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin. *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-colonial Literatures*. Routledge, 2001.
- Birbalsingh, Frank. "Indo-Caribbean Canadian Fiction." *Floating the Borderes: New Contexts in Canadian Criticism*, edited by Nurjehan Aziz. TSAR, 1999, pp.136-139
- Bissoondath, Neil. *A Casual Brutality*. Scribner, 2003.
- Vevaina, Coomi S. *Re/Membering Selves: Alienation and Survival in the Novels of Margaret Atwood and Margaret Laurence*. Creative Books, 1996.