

The Metaphor of Home in Sea Fiction

Shahrukh Khan

M.Phil. Research Scholar
Mahatma Gandhi Central University
East Champaran, Bihar

Abstract

This paper, “The Metaphor of Home in Sea Fiction,” offers an interdisciplinary study of the relationship between sea and land, in general, and the idea of home embedded within, in particular. The chief aim of this paper is to present sea literature not only as an adventurous or travel writing genre, rather a metaphorical representation of the human life that is always in flux. The sea fiction portrays how the ocean and sea – a space that was literally outside the law of the land – challenged not only the centrality of land to its traditional conceptualizations of a static home but also the very concept of a land-based nation-state, a land-based politics, and the debates around it. Moreover, the twentieth and twenty-first-century sea fiction and criticism also contributed to a larger discourse surrounding the land, ideology, and the dialectic of home. These diverse facets of sea influenced shore-based reform movements cantered on overturning the lens through which we have always seen the sea as a blank space. Besides, this study will investigate some key texts, which is, of course, a prototype of travel writing as well as sea literature, in the light of Foucault's ideas of 'heterotopia' and Bhabha's 'hybridity'. Many research works on the concept of travel literature associated with colonial and post-colonial times, the identity of self, nationalist discourses, freedom, World Wars, ethnic and racial segregation are there, but exploring the notion of travel in sea literature has been hardly dealt in detail. At the end of this paper, I hope to answer, metaphorically, why the traditional idea of home has changed in the era of globalization and digital humanities, which is equally applicable for both water and non-water literature.

Keywords: Home, Space, Sea Literature, Ocean Literature, Heterotopia

Introduction

The reputation of innovative technologies to the culture and literature of the contemporary world is a theme that lingers to considerable critical interest. However, the primary emphasis on technologies such as the phonograph, railway, cinema, and airways disclose that this attention is overwhelmingly land-based. Even in our literary works, we use modern ways of transportation as the backdrop of the plot. Science fiction, thus, primarily deals with an alien invasion, different aircraft, airplanes, etc. These are all the prevailing traits of the current posthuman literature, with the situation shifting more towards a mechanical way of looking at human beings rather than a natural entity. In search of the experience, we have lost our innocence. We are no more concerned about moral values; instead, we are concerned about our desires and how to fulfil them. Having said that, this paper seeks to understand the traditional way of transport, that is, voyage via sea. This paper tries to shift the focal point from land to sea by examining the social and cultural repercussions.

Odysseus sets sail with his men at the start of the Western Narrative, risking his life and facing enormous obstacles on his way back to Ithaca. To return to Ithaca, he has explored unknown territories using his knowledge of the area. When we are not at home, we become restless. Odysseus is an example of a hero who overcame adversity to return home. His descendants paved the way for modern fiction, which began in the first quarter of the eighteenth century and is still mobile, especially with colonial expansions and journeys to unknown lands. Odysseus was aware or somewhat confident about his home, and that is why he strived so much without yielding. The old English poetry also begins with either depicting the sea or using the sea as a backdrop. The most famous example is "Beowulf." Beowulf's adventurous stories are interwoven along with the sea. In old English poetry or stories, the sea has been portrayed negatively. The journey is terrifying and embarked upon with unwillingness. In Auden's words, a journey 'is a necessary evil, a crossing of that which separates or estranges.' For instance, in the Old English poem 'The Seafarer' (975), the sailor is a character to be pitied. Nevertheless, the links of the sea can never be entirely negative, for the sea is a domain of adventure and quest and the cause of new things and renewal.

In Richard Hakluyt's *The Principal Navigations, Voyages, Traffiques, and Discoveries of the English Nation* (1584), he worked on a compilation of ships' logs and economic intelligence. It tells the story of English exploration and discovery, including stories of Cabot's finding of Hudson Bay, Drake's invasion on Cadiz, and the fight of the Revenge under Sir Richard Grenville. Possibly the most fascinating aspect of Hakluyt's collection of writings is how the stress modifies from a mysterious and unknown world beyond the seas to a world that is, gradually, known, travelled, and mapped.

We have then the modern descendants of Odysseus at the beginning of the eighteenth century, the famous Robinson Crusoe. Defoe's *Life and Strange Surprising Adventure of Robinson Crusoe of York' Mariner* (1719) is a story of a mariner who has survived on a desolate island for twenty-eight years. After the shipwreck, he made that island his home and never lost hope. His practical knowledge of the sea enables him to adapt to harsh situations, but he has found the land. Odysseus is also the precursor to the American James Fenimore Cooper, the writer of *The Pilot* (1824) and *The Red Rover* (1827). Odysseus's descendants also comprise adventurous heroes in popular fiction written by Robert Louis Stevenson, C.S. Forester, Jules Verne, and Patrick O'Brian, among many others.

The protagonists in sea literature generally use their skills to survive amidst the cruel sea, a kind of world "abandoned by God" (Cohen 2). They suffer the agony of "transcendental homelessness" (2). In the case of Pi, they fight with nature, the life-threatening storms, deadly calms, sharks, shipwrecks, and the carnivorous island. Apart from adventure and fantastical journey into the unknown, the sea literature also explores the psychology of a person, which is evident in the novels such as Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952) and Joseph Conrad's *Heart Darkness* (1899). Man's inner psychological conflict has been revealed in these works. In the *Heart of Darkness*, we have the idea of the invasion of others' territory in order to secure our home, which is very much the colonial idea. Kurtz, in this novella, went so deep in the colony that he has almost internalized the very culture of the colonized as if it is the colony that is now his real home. This journey is not only a journey via water but also a journey within the self, a sense of realization of the atrocities of colonialism. This idea of colonialism begins with the sea literature itself. If ships and the sea routes had never been invented and explored, history would not have been so complicated. Conrad's vocation as a writer overlaps with the close of

an era, the period of British naval control of the world that prolonged from 1815 to 1914; it was a period when the Royal Navy's major purpose was to service the maintenance of peace. A similar period can also be viewed as the great era of the novel.

From Homer to Daniel Defoe, Shakespeare to Jonathan Swift, each uses the sea as a backdrop in some way. The sea is used as a setting in many of Shakespeare's plays, including *The Tempest*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Hamlet*, and others. Shakespeare's knowledge of nautical craft is evident, and it contributes significantly to the implausibility of his characters and settings. He depicted the sea as a realm of possibilities, where ordinary rules could be reshaped through witchcraft or stagecraft. Nonetheless, the defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588 influenced Elizabethan playwrights. This also emphasizes England's superiority over Spain. After the defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588, Britain has always regarded itself as a sea power rather than a land power. The navy's recent victories under Nelson had improved a national sense of a genius for the seas in the first half of the nineteenth century.

According to William Hamilton, in *Moby Dick*, the sea seems to mean almost everything. It is the home of both the voracious sharks and whale mothers. It has a tranquillity that can "nearly cure Ahab's monomania it is also darkness and death" (Hamilton 01). This same idea of home in the sea for the sea animals is evident in Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island* (2019), in which the sea is the home for the many Dolphins. This idea of home for the sea animals broadly falls under the arena of Ecocriticism.

All these above-discussed texts are under the great umbrella term- travel literature. Nevertheless, deep down, all these texts carry connotative and denotative messages, that too via sea. Thus, the sea has been used as a medium and the provider of fluidity, flux, and mobility.

Boat as a Heterotopic Site

Foucault used the term heterotopia for the first time in the preface to *The Order of Things* in relation to a fictional Chinese encyclopaedia defined by Jorge Luis Borges. For me, the vanished worlds of the alpha-omega relationship are "zoo-heterotopias." As Foucault describes his idea of heterotopia, it is the area that encompasses 'a simultaneously mythic and

real contestation of the space in which we live'. This is how *Life of Pi* appears, simultaneously fantastical with the blend of reality. To believe in the story told by Pi, we have to see Pi's position "outside of all places." His position itself is vague, full of arbitrariness. According to the definition, heterotopia "is a concept" that "describes certain cultural, institutional and discursive spaces that are somehow 'other': disturbing, intense, incompatible, contradictory, or transforming. Heterotopias are worlds within worlds, mirroring and yet upsetting what is outside." It is difficult to define the moving home amidst the sea. In a general sense, we can only assume that this moving space is being set apart from what might contrastingly be understood as the 'usual' or the 'everyday'; a sense that heterotopia is another kind of space. It is perhaps quite the term's open-endedness that generates its attraction. Pi's temporal home is a "placeless place," a kind of utopia or a mirror. However, according to Foucault, this "placeless place" is also a heterotopia because even if a mirror is a utopic space, it does exist in reality, and so is the moving home of Pi.

Hilda Heynen criticizes Foucault for heterotopia's vagueness 'which continues to resonate in between liberation and oppression. She mentions Foucault's illustration of the heterotopic ship as a tricky site of adventure and imagination. For her, Foucault fails to distinguish the ship's role in the antiquity of racism, slavery, and oppression. This oppression can be seen until Pi comes to know that there is a tiger on the boat, and he tries to eliminate his rival somehow. He makes a list of plans to eliminate Richard Parker for the sake of his own life, but then he finally realizes that he is alive because of Richard Parker, and the oppression changes into cooperation. Indeed, a home is born out of cooperation. Pi feeds Richard Parker and, in return, finds a companion during his tragic journey.

Language and space both are indefinite in the case of this moving home: the former is incapable of controlling and containing the latter. They cannot share the same language, and at the same time, they cannot even register the exact space or location. The map is merely a limited representation; it is no longer reality. If utopias are the creation of language, heterotopias are manufactured and sustained in the fluctuating materialities of space where language pursues to enforce its order. Heterotopias, even if unrecognized and unregistered, do exist. It leads to a very complex, unstable topography of memory (and disremembering), where meaningful facts are connected with elapsed futures: an active intertwining of present, past, and future ordered in the intensities of the present. In such a moving space with limited

resources, it becomes hard to remember the incidents. To survive with a ferocious tiger on a small boat, Pi needs to train it, and this is what he does. He has used all sorts of semiotics along with 'behaviourism' in order to control and train Richard Parker.

Foucault's inscrutable final verdict in '*Of Other Spaces*' offers a parting image on the way that heterotopias are involved with the imagination when he goes on to say the ships as 'heterotopias par excellence' and the 'greatest reserve of the imagination. Foucault contends, 'In civilizations without boats, dreams dry up, espionage takes the place of adventure, and the police take the place of pirates' (9). Readers become reluctant travellers in the stream of illusions in which they directly realize the third space between wakefulness and fantasy.

Conclusion

The central themes of this paper revolve around sea literature, which has been portrayed as a fantastical journey into the sea filled with pirates and picaresque characters rather than being fully explored as a space. Sea fiction had already lost its lustre, rusted in the pang of the postmodern world. Another reason why sea fiction has been largely ignored is technological progress, which has almost completely ignored boats and ships as a traditional mode of thought. Ships and boats fell behind in the race when the fastest mode of transportation became available in the postmodern world. This is why, in the age of science fiction, no one pays attention to sea fiction. However, Professor Steven Mentz brings it back to life by introducing the arena of Blue Humanities.

Sea literature is a subgenre of travel literature that explores a variety of important concepts rather than just taking an exciting journey into the sea. It not only refutes the landlocked assumption, but it also metaphorically depicts a man's journey into the unknown, a journey within himself, a psychological journey. This is also evident in the novel *Life of Pi*, which depicts men's struggle against nature in general and their tormented psychological and physical battles. Nevertheless, in the end, they triumph through some sort of revelation. Several fields are concurrently shifting their focus from land to sea. Offshore archaeology has revealed previously undiscovered prehistoric sites lost to rising sea levels. Anthropology, born on islands, now studies the oceans between them. Maritime history is increasingly focused with life on the ocean itself. It is gradually blending with marine biology and natural

history. Studies of certain fish and marine animals are beginning to fill a gap in environmental history. Our recent research has focused on the history of ocean currents, tides, and even waves, phenomena assumed to be everlasting like the “eternal sea”.

This study proposes that it may be significant to observe cautiously the notion of ‘home’, and its association to movement, before labelling people as alienated or homeless. In its orthodox usage, home has a two-fold meaning: first, it can refer to a site where everyday life is lived, often enclosed by close family, and second, it can mean a place related with an idea of belonging, of ‘feeling at home’. These dual meanings of home are, ideally, likely to overlap, so that one feels at home in the physical site where one lives. To conclude, the aim of this study has been to acquire the leading and frequent ideas of home in selected novel discussed here. The study has its own limitation because it chiefly talks about the notion of home in sea fiction and that too in a particular kind of situation. It aims to yield a conclusive interdisciplinary method to the study of home.

References

- Martel, Yann. *Life of Pi*. Canongate. 2002.
- Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. Routledge, 2010.
- Blunt, Alison and Robyn Dowling. *Home*. Routledge, 2006.
- Burton, Antoinette M. *Dwelling in the Archive: Women Writing House, Home, and History in Late Colonial India*. Oxford University Press, 2003.
- Chapman, Tony and Jennifer Lorna Hockey. “The Ideal Home as It Is Imagined and as It Is Lived.” *Ideal Homes? Social Change and Domestic Life*, Routledge, 2008, pp. 1–13.
- Choudhury, Bibhash. *English Social and Cultural History: An Introductory Guide and Glossary*. Prentice-Hall of India, 2005, pp. 217–220.
- Cohen, Margaret. *The Novel and the Sea*, Princeton University Press, 2010, pp. 1–14.
- Conrad, Joseph. *Heart of Darkness*. Edited by Robert Hampson and Owen Knowles, Penguin Classics, 2007.
- Defoe, Daniel. *Robinson Crusoe*. Penguin Classics. 2003.
- Dehaene, Michiel, and Lieven de Cauter. *Heterotopia and the City: Public Space in a Post-civil Society*, Routledge, 2015.
- Dovey, Kimberly. “Home and Homelessness.” *Home Environments*, edited by Irwin Altman and Carol M. Werner, Springer US, 1985, pp. 33–64, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4899-2266-3_2.

- Foucault, Michel. "Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias." *Rethinking Architecture: A Reader in Cultural Theory*. Edited by Neil Leach, Routledge, 1984.
- Fredericksen, Erik. "Robinson Crusoe." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, January 5th 2014. Web. April 21st 2020.
- Gallchoir, Cliona Ó. "Modernity, Gender, and the Nation in Joseph O'Connor's 'Star of the Sea.'" *Irish University Review*, vol. 43, no. 2, Edinburgh University Press, 2013, pp. 344–62, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24576851>.
- Ghosh, Amitav. *Gun Island*. John Murray, 2020.
- Hakluyt, Richard, and Jack Beeching. *Voyages and Discoveries: The Principal Navigations, Voyages, Traffiques and Discoveries of the English Nation*. Penguin Books, 1987.
- Hamilton, William. "Melville and the Sea." *Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism*, edited by Jessica Menzo and Russel Whitaker, vol. 104, Gale, 2002. *Gale Literature Criticism*, link.gale.com/apps/doc/KCSWNM071340298/LCO?u=aliahuni&sid=bookmark-LCO&xid=df3d87e8. Accessed December 8th 2021. Originally published in *Soundings*, vol. 62, no. 4, Winter 1979, pp. 417-429.
- Hemingway, Ernest. *The Old Man and the Sea*. Om Books International, 2015.
- Kemp, Peter. *The Oxford Companion to Ships and the Sea*. Oxford University Press, 1992.
- Knight, Kelvin T. "Placeless Places: Resolving the Paradox of Foucault's Heterotopia." *Textual Practice*, vol. 31, no. 1, 2016, pp. 141–158., doi:10.1080/0950236x.2016.1156151.
- Lawlor, Leonard. "Jacques Derrida." *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, Stanford University, July 30th 2019, plato.stanford.edu/entries/derrida/.
- Lawrence, William Witherle. "Hamlet's Sea-Voyage." Trudeau, Lawrence J. *Shakespearean Criticism*, vol. 162, Gale, 2015. *Gale Literature Criticism*, link.gale.com/apps/doc/KKLFYV124624965/LCO?u=aliahuni&sid=bookmark-LCO&xid=2541b81e. Accessed December 8th 2021. Originally published in *PMLA*, vol. 59, no. 1, 1944, pp. 45-70.
- Lee, Ang. *Life of Pi*. Fox 2000 Pictures, 2012.
- Mallett, Shelley. "Understanding Home: A Critical Review of the Literature." *The Sociological Review*, vol. 52, no. 1, 1 Feb. 2004, pp. 62–89., doi:10.1111/j.1467-954x.2004.00442.x.
- Ouyang, Wen-Chin. "Utopias, Dystopias and Heterotopias: The Spatiality of Human Experience and Literary Expression." *Middle Eastern Literatures*, vol. 15, no. 3, 2012, pp. 227–231., doi:10.1080/1475262x.2012.726572.
- Palladino, Mariangela, and John Miller. *The Globalization of Space: Foucault and Heterotopia*. Pickering & Chatto, 2015.
- Sanders, Andrew. *The Short Oxford History of English Literature*. Oxford University Press, 2004.

- Scherer René. *Utopis Nomades*, Les Presses Du Reel, 2009.
- Swift, Jonathan. *Gulliver's Travels*. Penguin Publishing Group, 2003.
- Synge, J.M. *Riders to the Sea*, 2019, www.gutenberg.org/files/994/994-h/994-h.htm.
- Taylor, Chloë. "Foucault and Critical Animal Studies: Genealogies of Agricultural Power." *Philosophy Compass*, vol. 8, no. 6, June 6th 2013, pp. 539–551., doi:10.1111/phc3.12046.
- Tucker, Aviezer. "In Search of Home." *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, vol. 11, no. 2, 1994, pp. 181–187., doi:10.1111/j.1468-5930.1994.tb00107.x.
- Whitlock, Nathan. "Review of the Life of Pi." *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, edited by Tom Burns and Jeffrey W. Hunter, vol. 192, Gale, 2005. *Gale Literature Criticism*, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/DHSLRP177222580/LCO?u=aliahuni&sid=LCO&xid=28258ff7>. Accessed June 28th 2020. Originally published in *Quill & Quire*, vol. 67, no. 8, Aug. 2001, pp. 22-23.