

**NOSTALGIC MURMURS IN HABIB TANVIR'S *A BROKEN BRIDGE:*
*DREAMING THE REALITY***

Naresh Patel

Research Scholar,
Department of English,
S.G.G.Govt. College,
Banswara (Raj.) India.

Abstract

*When one talks about theatre as a movement in India, one cannot fail to mention the name of the great theatre legend Habib Tanvir. He was not only a playwright, director, actor, poet and singer but also a great visionary who changed the face and pace of contemporary Indian stage. Throughout his artistic voyage Tanvir consistently endeavoured to build broken bridges between the rural and urban, between the haves and have-nots, between the high art and low art thus cutting across the boundaries of class, culture, language and region through his dramaturgy. The present paper makes a humble attempt to explore the theme of nostalgia in Habib Tanvir's only English play *A Broken Bridge: Dreaming the Reality*. The play articulates the immigrant's nostalgia and longing for a home far away. It's an intense portrayal of the dilemma of being torn between the anguished feeling of being stuck in a foreign land and a strong desire to return to the original home. The paper seeks to trace the nostalgic murmurs of the expatriate people, particularly south Asians in the West thereby reflecting upon the socio-cultural dynamics working in the play in the form of a tortured dream, the pain, anxieties and hopes of a life in a foreign culture where times, places and identities are often mixed up and confused.*

Keywords: *Indian theatre, Habib Tanvir, Broken Bridge, Nostalgia, Expatriate, Culture, Identity.*

**NOSTALGIC MURMURS IN HABIB TANVIR'S *A BROKEN BRIDGE:*
*DREAMING THE REALITY***

- Naresh Patel

Tanvir's dramaturgy is a powerful reflection of modern sensibilities and of modern concerns. Tanvir was rightly called a citizen of the world as he soaked up influences all over the world indiscriminately and reflected them in his own innovative and unique style thus creating a indigenous contemporary idiom.

Tanvir's versatile dynamism and his smooth and free play with language gave him wide recognition on the American stage with his only English play titled *A Broken Bridge: Dreaming the Reality* (1995) published for the first time in 2010 and deserves a special mention. The title of the play is quite suggestive as Tanvir spent his lifetime experimenting and evolving building and rebuilding broken bridges that crumbled long ago between the traditional and the modern. He desired to use his medium for something more than art's sake. The play falls in line and in spite of being in English never loses its musical appeal as well as thematic quality. *A Broken Bridge* deals with the theme of nostalgia in relation to South Asians in the West. The play doesn't suggest hint at any specific nationality. It articulates the immigrant's longing for a home faraway. "Everywhere I went; I experienced this alienation [...] all the immigrants seem anguished by this feeling of being stuck in a land where they had not wanted to settle down" (Tanvir qtd. in Times of India).

Through the play Habib Saab showed his protest against the injudicious homogenization across the borders.

The play is an outcome of inter-cultural project in collaboration with The Chicago Actors' Ensemble during Tanvir's visit to the United States.

It is written in the form of a long lasting, tortured dream of a man who has been in the US for many years but continues to harbor a strong desire to return to his original homeland. Chris the protagonist who left home with a sack of salt (symbol of ancestral

poverty) and a golden grandfather clock (symbol of his ancestral wealth) has recurrent dreams of his father calling him back to his native land.

The play begins with a prologue where a Shaman (a figure symbolic of people's belief in supernatural powers) talks to the protagonist Chris reminding him of his home and his father.

Have you ever felt the cry of your land,
Heard your land a crying?
Have you ever spent a sleepless night
Feeling like an orphan child, like an orphan child? (160)

It reflects the pain of the family left behind who constantly nurture the dream of being united with the ones who have settled in the foreign lands.

Shaman (speaking as the father) You are rich now!

Chris: Yes father

Shaman: And you have come home?

Chris: Well...what's wrong with this place? I come after a long time and what do I see? The fields all waste, the house garden ruined...everyone staring at me like I was a ghost. (160)

Freud in his theory of dreams considered dreams to be key hole into our unconscious mind where fears, desires and emotions exists that we suppress in some form or another to hide from conscious thought. In other words we don't want to know about them so they get driven into the recesses of the subconscious.

Here dreams being the only means of communication between the unconscious and the conscious, the symbols project at the buried desires and emotions. Chris has been living an apparently settled life for more than 20 years in US but the nostalgic murmurs reverberates throughout the play in terms of alienation, identity crisis, up rootedness and cultural pulls.

The play starts where Chris enters in a new home with his wife Kate and plans to make their new world with new hopes in US. They start arranging their things but when it comes to the arranging of bed Chris says he

can't sleep facing south. It is his superstitions. During the arrangement, Chris clings to a sack of salt and an old dead clock which he got with him when he came to the U.S. Kate asks him to remove both old things from their new home but Chris denies. And he hangs the sack of salt in the centre of a new home as a mark of his attachment to the ancestral past.

"Chris: ...you must have some association with the past. You can't forget the past altogether and start afresh, can you?"(165)

The two major symbols – a sack of salt given to him by his father and a dead clock keep him connected to his past and his own culture and his constant clinging to them even at the cost of his life, depicts the sense of belongingness and personal attachments which are hard to break. His escape into the world of dreams is a way towards wish fulfillment.

He is always in state of shifts and pulls of material world of success and comforts, and the emotional world of lost connections and roots. When Kate tells Chris that America is his country also but he still feels so alienated and detached after spending more than 20 years in America. Kate reminds Chris about the problem of his country where "there are no opportunities for talent back home, there are not enough jobs, there is corruption all around, the roads are bad, transportation difficult, hygiene conditions are awful, the food is adulterated, there's too much bureaucracy, selfishness, jealousy, poverty, squalor, and God knows what else. Why, then why in the name of heaven would you still want to go home?"(165)

"Chris: ... I don't feel at home here."(165)

Chorus: Home sweet home!

Oh to be able go home again!

To eat the food your mother cooked.

To wear the clothes you want to wear.

And to sing, to sing home sweet home.

To speak the tongue you want to speak

To yell, demonstrate, take out processions

To shout the slogan, "Down with all religions".

To be home with all things around,
Home, sweet Home! (183)

His attachments with these things keep reminding him of his good old days as well as the miseries and poverty. They are also symbolic of his permanent departure from his homeland.

Chris: ...Because he didn't believe I would ever want to go back. No one comes back from America son, he (father) said". (191)

Chris' unsettled state of mind keeps pushing him in a world of tortured dreams. As they bring on the surface suppressed nostalgic longings.

Have you ever felt an alien heart
Throbbing in your breast?
A heart forlorn and woebegone
Far away from home?
Have you ever sensed in your deepest soul
The strange pain of emptiness
As if you're drained of all your life
Far away from home?(208)

Tanvir in a Brechtian mode fuses the narrative with songs and speeches which give a touch of difference and enhances the feel and depth of the play. The songs are intrinsic part of the narrative and convey not only the main thought but also comment on the action of the play.

Chorus: I asked my father the meaning of life
And he merely said strife
On the word "strife" I turned from my father
On a road that had no end.(206)

Chris, although a successful businessman, who owes a sawmill (in partnership with his friend Fred) experiences distance and detachment. The workers of his mill raise their voice against their masters by raising slogans to send out the foreigners from their land.

Chris' wife Kate, seeing the growing tension advises Chris to sell out his factory and move back to his own country. It is ironical that in spite of the protest and rejection by the local people, Chris cannot entertain the idea of retreat. The sense of nostalgia gets overshadowed by the materialistic desires of the glittering world. He keeps dreaming about the reality of his life that he doesn't belong to the place. But the lucrative present holds him back.

The play further projects the irony of the contemporary world where war on one hand causes destruction of masses and materials and on the other hand commercial gains and profit.

“Chris: Oh! Oh, that means boom. We can't go now Fred.

We can make money more quickly, don't you see? We certainly can't go now”. (191)

People climb the ladder of material success by exploiting the helpless and needy and lost. Through the suggestive use of song, the playwright injects the hardcore reality of human ambitions and greed.

“Chorus: Buying and selling, buying and selling
The world moves on buying and selling
...what do you sell, what do you buy
You buy for need and beyond need
And when you sell, you sell a bit of yourself
You can't buy back yourself!
Ever!
... Progress and poverty... contracted together
To go together hand in hand
Till death do them part” (189-90)

In yet another dream sequence, Chris re-enters with Fred's body on his back. He comes upon a river in spate and just as he gets to the bridge, it breaks. Chris jumps back in time. The bridge is finally broken and washed away. Chris throws Fred's body into the river

and it floats away. He makes a new bridge over the river and finally by crossing the river, he comes to his father's house.

"Chorus:...The broken bridge, the broken bridge, the broken bridge is in the way.

I'll throw across the river a brand new bridge,

A brand new bridge, a brand new bridge,

A bridge to stand the test of time

For I've got to go to my destination,

Beyond the bridge is broken,

Beyond the broken bridge".(197)

In the floating world the aggressive forces push him from all sides, longing to hang on to old ties but caught in the world he ultimately chose, not the one he desired for, the one he left behind. In an uncertain land with his nostalgic murmurs he fluctuates between the past and the present which never merge.

The haunting presence of home and anguish of individual loss keep hovering around.

"Both exile and home is here, within the new homeland" (Parmeswaran 2003:107)

The play reflects the feeling of nostalgia for the homeland left behind mingled with fear in a strange land. There is a search for continuity and 'ancestral impulse', an effort to look for the roots. Although there is an attempt of adaptation and adjustment but not without the concern to maintain their original culture and identity hence the immigrants away from the families fluctuate between crisis and reconstruction. Their physical alienation from homeland means that they can not regain the lost and this creates invisible and "imaginary homelands"(Rushdie 1991:10). The sense of nostalgia, loss and duty together form the ground for protagonist's sense of cultural, geographical and emotional displacement and give him a plural identity. We do make loud proclaims about a global village but we are still far away from the harsh realities of our so called cultured and civilized world where feelings of otherness dominates our head and heart.

The introductory as well as concluding songs convey the pain and the anguish, anxieties and hopes of a life in a foreign culture far away from home.

“Have you ever heard the stars at night
Stories long forgotten
Dimly back to mind’s horizon
Far away from home?
An orphan child, an orphan child,
An orphan child, an orphan child,
Far away from home?”(209)

The play ends with an open question leaving the protagonist in a state of dilemma that why he could not go back to his roots in spite of his acute sense of pain and nostalgia. The play stimulates one’s sense of reason and creates a keen awareness about the condition of immigrants who feel emotionally strangled and still remain physically tied up to the materialistic world. Finally, Chris could not bridge the broken bridge that was crumbled long back but Tanvir succeeded in bridging the broken bridge between the West and the East through this play.

Works Cited

Benjamin, Walter. *Understanding Brecht*. Trans. Anna Bostock. London: Verso, 1983. Print.

Tanvir, Habib. *A Broken Bridge*. New Delhi: SAHMAT, 2010. Print.

Parmeswaran, Uma. “Home is where your feet are, and may your heart be there too”. *Writers of the Indian Diaspora*. Ed. Jasbir Jain. New Delhi: Rawat Publications, 2003. 107. Print.

Malick, Javed. “Heard your land a-crying?” *The Telegraph* 8 Sep. 1995, n.pag. Print.

Kazmi, Nikhat. “Only the original survive” *Times of India* 10 Dec. 1995, n.pag. Print.