

Existential Mobility, Nostalgia and Narration: Unwrapping a family journal's account on escape from Japanese air raids in Burma in the years 1941-1942

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The Asian Conference on Arts & Humanities 2021
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

“The 20th century even more than any age before is the age of the refugee” (Tinker 1975) and simultaneously works on migration seem incomplete without looking into the migrant experiences. In fact, to study migration more holistically would mean to conduct objective analysis of migrant's lived experiences. Migrant narratives owing to its interactive quality engulf the audience in a sensory participation, which metanarratives of migration would fail to do. These subversive narratives challenge the dominant discourses which are exclusionary in nature and hence have been seen to rise in popularity amongst the marginalized classes who's voice have been suppressed by the hegemonic narratives. However, the challenge posed to the dominant discourses done through improvisation in narration and such improvised empowerment is aided by the role played by memory politics. The paper attempts to critically engage with my family's journal of their migration from Burma into Dacca in the years 1941 and 1942 to escape Japanese air raids during World War II. However, what is interesting to know is that the journal was not written during the migration process but was written 70 years later. The author, Gayatri Gupta (born Gayatri Bose), who happens to be my father's aunt, was only eight years old during the migration. However, it was only in around the early 2000s did she pen down her memories of the migration, thereby throwing light on the role that nostalgia and recollection play in the exercise of agency and selfhood.

Keywords: Family History, Memory Politics, Empowerment, Narratives in Recovery

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Introduction

The paper offers a historically deductive analysis of an epoch in South Asia's migration history in the light of theories arising out the fields of Anthropology of Mobility. The theoretical concepts will be analysed from the point of view of New Mobilities Paradigm and Mobility freedom and the concepts behind well-being. Intrinsic to this thought is the idea of immobility and how immobility is not only socially produced but also self-imposed. The paper investigates existential mobility and nostalgia and how memories of such a "difficult past" affected the way in which the narrator, Gayatri Bose narrated not only events of the migration but also how her personal self, understood and comprehended events as they occurred. Last but not the least, the paper focuses on the importance of Oral History as a method in studying migrant experiences and how the journal serves as a source for a not much documented for migration from Burma into India.

The Question that the paper attempts to answer is:

What role did nostalgia play in the narration of the story of migration for the Bose family?

Mobility Politics, Narration and Empowerment

The very idea of mobility centres around mobile bodies, embodied experiences and the knowledge that this movement produces, in both a local and a trans- national context. Mobility or movement is always affected by an external stimuli like tourism, communication, education, job hunting, migration, war/ political violence¹. The contemporary period is characterised by a wide array of mobilities and thus, mobility studies has become of paramount importance primarily in addressing issues of mobility justice and mobility capabilities (Sheller 2014)

Immobility is associated with mobility. In fact according to Sheller, mobility freedom is "unevenly distributed, generating different kinds of mobility injustice"² and that "a sovereignly free person has the power to restrict the freedom of others" (Patterson 1991) leading to people having "uneven and unequal access to mobility"³. The exercise of sovereign freedom of mobility, as Sheller argues was always seen to be at the cost of other's immobility and such was effected by the increased racialization of spaces. In connection to mobility freedom, one must also understand that one person's mobility is at the cost of another person's immobility (Sheller 2008, 2014).

To connect mobility with capability was to address mobility from the ethical point of view. Such an ethical dimension was linked to the fusion of gender, mobility and capability and highlighted mobility from the point of view of social exclusion and discrimination and raised important theoretical questions concerning the very nature of mobility as capability (Kronlid 2008). However, according to Cresswell, mobility as capability arises from "uneven geographies of oppression"⁴ where a person's marginalized identity owing to his location in a marginalized community affects his ability to move.

Both Uteng and Sheller argue how capability in terms of mobility are socially produced and differentiated "along the lines of structural differences in society" like gender, class, race,

¹ Sheller, M 2014, p. 789

² Sheller, M 2008 p.26

³ Ibid., p. 28

⁴ Cresswell 2006, pp. 741-742

caste⁵. On similar lines, Cresswell talks about free and equal mobility being a myth “since we don’t all have access to the same road”⁶.

In Uteng’s analysis of social life Norway and immobility of non-western immigrants, it becomes apparent that the immigrants suffer social exclusion owing to lack of funds, leading them to not be in possession of a car, which for Hjorthol “is a personal, concrete and suitable symbol of modernity”⁷. Thus, although the immigrants were mobile, but the lack of funds and the resultant lack of car led them to be immobile making many places in Norway inaccessible. This was coupled with overtly priced taxis and ill connected public transport facilities. The exclusion brought about by such social mechanisms led to the immigrants being deemed ineligible for not only integrating into the Norwegian society but also the job market (Uteng 2006).

The journal narrates the story of how the Bose family felt privileged enough to get “access” to the European Route, where only the Irish government officials, rich Marwari business and engineers working with the Irish government had access to during the migration from Burma. The European Route was safer, had doctors and medical supplies in overnight camps, had food like rice, pulses, milk and baby food unlike the Indian route or the “Black Route” which was ill-equipped and unmanned, where, as Gargi Gupta says “Mother told me about deaths not related to illness but deaths due to murder, rape, migrants being mugged on the way, migrants dying due to starvation”. Such a social exclusion was seen to privilege the Bose family as my great great Grandfather and father of Gayatri Bose and Dipak Bose, who went by the name of Akhil Chandra Bose, had been a civil engineer, he worked with the Irish government in Burma, built highways and schools in Mandalay. The Irish government thus gave them a pass for the European route. The European Route was also known as the “White Route” and was reserved for the Anglo Indians, Europeans, employees of the government and the employees of the Burma Oil Company.

Mobility just like immobility is acted upon by external socio economic political factors. When mobility is influenced by factors which are socio-political, it leads to the phenomenon of forced mobility and often forced migration, where one is made to be increasingly mobile against his will. This happens especially in cases of war or even political violence. Such kinds of mobility comes under the broader understanding of existential mobility. “These forced mobilities are all the outcomes of the injustices of sovereign freedom of mobility, which not only prevents, controls, and channels the mobility of less powerful people, but also sometimes forces their mobility against their will”⁸. Sheller further highlights the historical events like slave trade, forced migration of refugees from their homes to distant land or even sex trade of trafficked women. Integral to forced migration is a sense of homelessness and nostalgia, which is regarded as a key characteristic of existential mobility (Pallasmaa J 2008). While existential mobility is often seen as a way of life in the contemporary age as people are, for instance for the “urban nomads”⁹ of the contemporary age, it is this very lifestyle characterized by up-rootedness, deems Pallasmaa, which is likely to have “dramatic consequences for our consciousness”¹⁰. Pallasmaa not only hints at how the increasingly mobile life marks a turn towards modernity but also he shows how the “modern hero is a flaneur, a globetrotter and an

⁵ Ibid., p. 442

⁶ Cresswell 2001, p. 19 cit in Uteng 2006, p. 442

⁷ Hjorthol 2002, p.146 cit in Uteng 2006, p.449

⁸ Sheller 2008, p. 29

⁹ Pallasmaa J 2008, p. 144

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 144

explorer”¹¹. This not only affects the consciousness, as he already argued but also alters the culture of the modern hero, for his culture ceases to dependent on “locality and historicity” but rather turns into an endless and restless flux of people, goods, knowledge and materials.

My grandfather, who had been just four years old during the migration from Burma to Dacca in 1942, has not led a sedentary life after his arrival in Dacca, in fact, his entire life took an increasingly mobile turn. Better known as Dipak Bose, his highly mobile and trans-national life was seen to influence his culture as well. With having spent only about 15 years in Dacca, he moved to Edinburgh, Scotland to pursue engineering, where he met his wife, Ellen. In 1966, they got married and moved to Vancouver and have been there since then. Dipak Bose hardly speaks Bengali anymore and that has integrated into the non-Indian life. His highly mobile life was seen to affect his Bengali-Burmese culture, being turned into an "endless and restless flux" and led him to adopt a Scottish Canadian life and thus, in the words of Octavio Paz a “tragic loss of roots”¹²

The migration process for the Bose family marked their surrender to modernity as it implied them to "forget" but at the same the state of homelessness led to nostalgia, which became the driving force behind narrative. It was this state of existential mobility coupled with the up rootedness from their “machine of dwelling”¹³ which also led to the realization of self and thereby marked the point of “confrontation”.

In context of mobility, the issue of immobility should not be overlooked as mentioned earlier for one leads to the other. But immobility is not always looked upon as being in relation to the other person’s mobility. Issues of homelessness and existential immobility have treated in the works of Annika Lems and Christine Moderbacher and Julia Sophia Schwarz. While the issue of existential immobility was identified to be self-imposed feeling of being “thrown back upon oneself”¹⁴, or being in a state of “complete existential standstill”¹⁵, whereby, the feeling of immobility is caused by a constant “feeling of entrapment”¹⁶, which was seen to cause a deeper feeling of *haimweh* or homelessness or the feeling of having no place to return to. While existential storytelling was deemed as existentially important in order to come to terms with hardship and displacement (Jackson 2002) as it provided the affected community with agency "in the context of disempowering circumstances" (Lems and Moderbacher 2016), it somehow also gave to the affect the faith that the world is well “within their grasp”¹⁷.

Integral to the study of oral history is the study of the role played my memory in the construction of the narrative and also the subsequent construction of identity. Identity is formed as a result of events of the past influencing the narrator in a number of ways, namely, trauma, self-realization, guilt, or even nostalgia and how affects his storytelling and thereby a re-assertion of his identity as being both present during the event and at the same time being unaware of how the event would influence his life. ‘Identities are not discovered, but rather

¹¹ Ibid., p. 145

¹² Pallasmaa, J 2008, p. 147

¹³ Le Corbusier, *Towards a New Architecture* (London and Bradford: Percy, Lund, Humphries and Co., 1959) cit in Pallasmaa, J 2008, p. 156

¹⁴ Lems and Moderbacher, 2016, p. 114

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 116

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 116

¹⁷ Jackson 2002 p. 17 cit in Lems and Moderbacher, 2016, p. 120

actively constructed by individuals¹⁸ and such an identity formation constitute the processes of reading and writing¹⁹

When it comes to narrating tales of life experiences of trauma and displacement from normalcy, often we find that the narrations are either lucid and intricately detailed or absolutely sketchy with focuses being laid on certain aspects. This discrepancy is predominantly due to the different ways in which experiences are recollected and dealt with. This is the role played by memory in recollecting experiences and narrating them. Robert Fivush in this case spoke about memory being of two types, namely Autobiographical and Episodic Memory. Robyn Fivush's argument about Autobiographical Memory and how that influences life narratives. Autobiographical memory is integrally related to episodic memory yet is different. For episodic memory relates to the memories of the self with regard to a particular event and is usually remembered in the sequence of occurrence. Autobiographical memory is seen to stem from episodic memory for it relates to the personal experiences of the subjective self of that episode and thereby the self being the explainer of the event, this is what Tulving (2002) referred to as "autonoetic consciousness".

In the case of my family's narration, the episodic memory would be the Japanese air raids and the resultant Great Trek from Burma into India, but the autobiographical memory would be how the smell of rotting bodies, remembrance of hunger and starvation and repeated emphasis on being homeless and the desperation for a shelter affected the narration of the event by Gayatri Gupta (the narrator) and Grandpa Ruby's hesitation to talk much about it.

Remembering is closely linked to memory and yet remembering is itself selective in nature, making Steven Brown and Paula Reavey to argue that remembering is a "reflective experience" and such a recovery of events is brought forth by the workings of memory. In fact, memory as Brown and Reavey argued, was seen to sit at the "crossroads of two directions in which experience extends: one axis stretches back towards the past and forward to an anticipated future; the other axis mobilises memory to inform our current actions in relation to the changing world around us."

Brown and Reavey, while talking about remembering the past, stress on "recollection" and the projects conducted by them amongst people who have trouble with some aspect of their past. They argued that of the most common aspect in all the interviews conducted had been the trouble associated with recollection. This is what Brown and Reavey described as "vital memories", for these memories are not only problematic and essential but also threatening and destabilizing. These memories, although troubling for the affected, are crucial for making sense of the self but also in the construction of narratives.

The act of remembering or conscious suppression of certain memories as a part of forgetting was put forward by William James as "stream of thought" wherein James argued how "the stream of thought flows on' the majority 'of its segments fall into the bottomless abyss of oblivion" and thus, as a part of recovery through the act of remembering, Brown and Reavey argued for "reflective acts" where the certain memories which have been suppressed and stored in the subconscious purposefully are resurfaced.

¹⁸ James 1994, p. 75 cit in King 2000, p. 7

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 7

The way narratives are constructed depend on the “work of recollection”²⁰. This recollection is characterized by a duality of “a general psychic and a textual mechanism” which becomes “central to the construction and reading of narrative”²¹. While memory and narration is often seen to co-exist, the recollection of remembering is brought about through perception²² and through “remembering of scenes ... a memory of scenes and episodes”²³. Dipak Bose, on asked, what he remembers most about the migration, replied that he only has “flashbacks” (Hacking 1995) of the pile of bodies and the smell, even after almost 76 years of the migration.

In fact, the role played by images in remembering the events, as seen in the journal, where not much details about the economic political factors, but a lot of what the narrator remembered was portrayed through the images which she recalled, while she wrote down the journal of her family’s migration. The images, which became the “real treasure” (Benjamin 1979) in the narration of the migration, was proof of the fact that 70 years later, “the images” were recovered by “digging” (Benjamin 1979)

The importance of the journal is primarily to understand the migrant experiences of the Indian exodus from Burma, which has not been well documented and how the journal itself can serve as an “oral testimony” and help in understanding the “complexity of the actual process of migration”²⁴. Oral history traditions which have studied migrations and migrant behaviour, have all observed the importance of social ties amongst the migrant communities. Such social relations or ties are manifold but are more dense amongst immediate family members, relatives, neighbours in the host country. Such dependence on familial support was also seen for the Bose family who after entering into Bangladesh in 1946, spent their initial few years at their relatives’ house. In fact, after their departure from Burma, to Bihar, Dacca or even western part of Bengal, they stayed at the houses of their immediate family members or relatives. This was due to shortage of funds coupled with the sense of alienation in the incoming society and as Gargi Gupta says, “familial support was something they needed to feel integrated again into society”

Hugh Tinker provides a brief overview of the Indian exodus from Burma in his study wherein he writes, “The last complete census (1931) had enumerated 1,017,825 Indians in Burma; of these, 617,521 had been born in India and still looked back to the motherland as home. After Japan’s entry into the war in South East Asia in December 1941, Rangoon was attacked from the air on 23rd December. This precipitated the first flight of Indians, though the mass exodus only began in February 1942. The military campaign lasted about four months, but the movement of the Indian refugees continued into June and July 1942. Before the fall of Rangoon, 70,000 Indians were evacuated by sea to India. In April and May 1942, 4,801 Indians were flown out of north Burma by air. Otherwise, the whole exodus took place overland, either via Arakan to Chittagong or via the Chindwin valley to Manipur, or — for the last stragglers — via the northern passes to Ledo and other termini in north Assam. The trek by land was undertaken by at least 400,000 refugees; the figure might have been 450,000, or more. When a camp census was carried out by the Indians Overseas Department of the Government of India, 393,735 “British Asiatics” were enumerated: though the department calculated that between

²⁰ Laplanche and Pontalis 1973, p. 114 cit in King 2000, pp. 20-21

²¹ Ibid., p. 21

²² Hacking 1995, p. 251 cit in King 2000, p. 26

²³ Hacking 1995, p. 253 cit in King 2000, p. 26

²⁴ Benmayor and Skotnes 1994, pp.13-14 cit in Thompson, Alistair 1999, p. 29

450,000 and 500,000 had arrived in India, many continuing straight on to their hometowns and villages without being checked on arrival.”²⁵

While the death toll was likely to be from 10,000 to 50,000 yet unaccounted for (Tinker 1979:3), my grandfather however argued that, not just in the Indian Route, but in the European Route too, on their way to Theingon, many migrants died out of a sudden outbreak of cholera on their boat and as Gayatri Bose narrates in the journal, “like wild fire, the epidemic spread amongst the flat-boat occupants and before we knew it our boat had stopped and one of the occupants of the flat boat was dragged out by his legs like a dead animal and taken to a far corner of the muddy river bank where he was left without cremation or burial”, but the existential quest of the Bose family only became apparent, as even amidst such a situation, Gayatri Gupta narrates, “the captain told us that this was not a time for mourning or for expressing sympathy”. By the end of their journey, almost 500 odd people were believed to have died of cholera by the time they reached Theingon and mass burials took place along the Chindwin River. By that time, the food and medicine supplies had run dangerously low, however, for a journey which could be completed in three days, it took them 20 days. Following the Rangoon air raids of 23rd and 25th December of 1941 and the subsequent fall of Rangoon in 1942, there had been no civilian services available to the Indians and all routes either by air or water had been cut off leading to travel by unchartered roads and waterways which included hill areas and often through dense jungles where elephants, tigers and leopards roamed freely. This is the route probably along the Irawaddy River and the jungles had probably been the jungle hills of Arakan which Tinker mentions in his account²⁶ but which the journal refers to as the Naga Hills.

Tinker also talks about how Indians were purposely made to not use the Prome road and thus were manipulated and lied to. This was also coupled with the Burmese government ordering for the closure of the Taungup route calling it dangerous and devoid of all the amenities. While Indians “waited in vain”²⁷ for the work which the Government promised to them, in Rangoon, the Burmese government also closed all escape routes for the Indians. “All except middle class Indians habitually travelled as deck passengers, so this sealed off the exit for all but the wealthy Indians.”²⁸

Conclusion

The journal does not elaborate much on the political dimensions of the migration as have been portrayed in the account of Hugh Tinker, as Tinker’s account overlooks the migrant’s lived experience. The journal accounts for the harrowing experiences of the Bose family as the journal reiterates nothing but everyday existentialist struggle for survival. The journal follows a story like narration and a chronological trajectory, yet not adhering much to the authenticity of time. There have not been much evidence of the dates and the intricate details of the migration, yet it does follow patterns of nostalgia and reminiscence of how things, which had been least anticipated then, turned out to be later, when the journal was penned down from memory. The journal was characterized by reiterated visitations to nostalgic memories of pre-war days of peace in Mandalay. While forgetting certain specific details of events might seemingly pose problems to the construction of narratives, yet this is seen to be a strong aspect

²⁵ Ibid., p.22

²⁶ Tinker 1975, p. 4

²⁷ Ibid., p. 5

²⁸ Ibid., p. 5

of oral history as seen from a study conducted on ageing veterans of the second world war conducted by Nick Hunt and Ian Robbins.

While I would have rather preferred to name this study as “stories on the move” so as to bring it under the canon of mobility studies, yet these stories were somehow seen to stuck in time and space, or rather stuck in an existential space. I specifically refer to the term “stuck” as these memories were not ready to be marketed for the larger audience and this was proven in the interviews I had with Ellen and Gargi. Ellen and Ruby (Dipak Bose) although married for almost 60 years, seldom shared stories of migration amongst themselves or even amongst their friend circles in Edinburgh or in Canada. In the interview, Ellen told me not to press Ruby’s memories too hard as he has tried to forget the experiences over time. Such a selective remembrance had been characterized by Bartlett as “how people can remember things that matter to them, but have trouble remembering information that is of little personal concern.”²⁹.

From the start of the journal, the narrator was seen to throw focus on how the narrator’s father, had been privileged enough, owing to his job with the government and education and a flourishing business before the war, to get for the family, the benefit of the “white route”. The narrator’s father was repeatedly stressed to have a lot of good connections and friendship networks which came of help during the migration process, especially during their arrival in Monywa in the second phase. The privilege of being a part of the European Route continued for most part of the journey for the Bose family, and privileges came in the form of accessibility to clean and fresh drinking water, food, medical services and make shift camps for sleeping at night. The European Route however was not free from danger, for the evacuees and any other traveller on this route faced wild animal attacks. Capability of being mobile was also in the form of linguistic capability which helped the Bose family in their transitions through places characterized by different cultures. However, the existential stuckedness in spite of privileges became a typical aspect of the narration.

“Narrative as oral art, as a means of dealing with the traumatic experience of war, has been suppressed by the cultural attitudes prevalent in our society through most of the century. Returning soldiers have been told to forget about the war, and civilians have often been unwilling to listen to veterans. In recent years the notion of telling one's story about the war has become more important to some ageing veteran” (Hunt and Robbins 1998). And just like that, Gayatri Gupta, at the age of 75 in circa 2000, thought of reliving the memories and penned down the journal.

²⁹ Hunt and Robbins 1998, p. 59

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