Encountering Space

Documenting the Topography of the Migrant Home

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“Home is no longer just one place. It is locations”- bell hooks¹

This paper was written with an interest to explore independent documentary filmmaking as an aesthetic practice in India and my own preoccupation with a certain kind of cinema that encounters the space of the home in the works of Southeast Asian filmmakers, particularly Supriyo Sen, Yasmine Kabir, and Nishit Saran. Through the use of confessions, dialogues with the filmmakers, electronic recordings, photographs and official documents, home as a space animates discussion about history, nation, gender, and sexuality; certain uncomfortable, lurking secrets begin to foreground newer narratives of private histories and interiorized struggles that are perhaps not a part of the wider public discourse. We thus land on psychological, physical, and filmic spaces within the metastructure of the home, and accessing each of them leads not only to a theoretical and methodological trespassing, but also to renewed spatial imaginations and ordering of social relations.

In India, the turn of the documentary from what started out as a modernist project of nation-building toward these subjectivities has not been an act of coincidence, but one marked by diversified flows of production, changes in social conditions of the nation and, to a large extent, women’s movements. My effort here is not so much to test the “independent” status of the documentary or the extent of its indexicality of truth, but rather to take the documentary as a vehicle of cultural production, knowledge, and interrogation, where the emergence of epistemological doubt occurs as a result of the awareness of the hegemonic aspects of the text.

A multi-layered and evocative cinematic travelogue, Way Back Home (dir. Supriyo Sen, 2003) is particularly useful for analysis in this scenario for multiple reasons. The film locates itself in a particular historical moment, i.e. the Partition of India, an event that ruptured the “psychobiography” of the nation. The director takes his parents back to their homeland in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) after almost fifty years of absence in the wake of the Partition of 1947. The film’s absolute reliance on the space of the home raises several questions about the nature of recording a home and the people within it. How is the home depicted visually? Who has the authority to record and preserve the identity of the home and its members? Specifically, in Way Back Home, where the director takes on the role of documenting family members, is the search for a lost home a collective search that the director
undertakes with his parents? And is it only through a collective search that we can move beyond the usual crisis of ethnographic documenting that has traditionally been haunted by a grossly oversimplified distinction between the self and the Other?

As Bhaskar Sarkar points out, partition narratives in Indian cinema have witnessed a complex shift from an initial resistance to act out cinematically to a subsequent emergence as strong discourses in a manner that almost typified the “return of the repressed.”

Way Back Home clearly falls towards the end of the spectrum. The parents project a heightened desire to reconstruct the past by acts of memorialization, nostalgic longings, and mourning. But fifty years hence, what kind of loss does this project expect to invoke? It is my contention that in its act of relying upon memory as a “visible evidence” of the past, the film begins to call attention to an equally important network of emotional flows that construct the home within the film. The loss is perhaps no longer just a physical loss, but the narrative begins to point towards a crisis in the representation of this loss—a point I will address toward the end of the paper.

Accents within the space of home

According to Hamid Naficy, a certain “accented” style pervades films of exilic and diasporic origin. The exilic accent must saturate the film with conditions of exile. These films are created in the interstices of social formations and cinematic practices. As a temporal and spatial setting, the space of the home, for Naficy is one of the most significant tropes that accented films encode, embody and imagine. “[It is an]…intensely charged place [signifying] deterritorialization more than reterritorialization.”

What kind of accented nature does the space of this particular film embody? At the very beginning itself, Way Back Home begins to challenge our understanding of domesticity and domestic stability. Sitting on a rickshaw, the director’s parents search for the familiar sites of their old homes. The jerky camera motion heightens the sense of destabilized territory in which the pair seems to be caught. The transformed geography and unfamiliar territory forces them to ask strangers at the roadside for directions to the home that they left behind. The film situates these two bodies as perpetual wanderers, forever traveling within the realms of memory. The camera always looks outward, mimicking the gaze of the migrant parent; it lingers over the Calcutta skyline, or points toward birds on a rooftop that give the
impression of a desire for flight and departure. The voiceover of the
director—a crucial element in the film—tells us that the story his parents are
about to narrate has long been forgotten, buried under the skyscrapers of the
city. According to the director, his parents and their stories act as agents of a
history that he has never been able to witness. This particular act of
mourning—of not being a witness to history, casts the director as a perpetual
“Other,” and the only way he can negotiate this status is through constant
questioning, self-doubt, and self-reflexivity. In order to bridge this gap
between the subject/object dichotomy, Michael Renov gestures towards
“domestic ethnography” as a fluid category of filmmaking, where the lives of
the artist and the subject are inextricably linked through communal or blood
ties, and hence this form of documentation implies a “consanguinity” and
“co(i)mplexion”. He further argues that domestic ethnography “enacts a
kind of participant observation that illuminates the familial other while
simultaneously refracting a self-image; indeed, the domestic ethnographic
subject exists only on condition of its constitutive relations with the
maker.” 10 And in fact, with regard to the current film under discussion, the
historical specificity of the domestic configuration acts as a precursor to the
film itself.

How does accented cinema reconcile itself to this particular kind of
ethnographic dialogue? Much of Way Back Home recounts the horror of “that
night,” when the secular fabric of the nation was brought under question.
Today, as the film tells us, there is no memorial that can aid the recollection
of the traumatic event. In a sense, then, the film and its maker begin to take
on the role of a chronicler, a register of cultural knowledge that maybe on the
brink of extinction. The director rarely frames his parents within the interior
spaces of the house such as the central courtyard, the kitchen, or the family
living room—spaces that are notionally associated as a centripetal force
of the Bengali family structure. And even in times when the camera returns to
the interior, the parents are framed in tight close-ups—evoking a sense of
claustrophobia, a permanent aspect of their status as refugees.

Deterritorialization through “nostalgic divide”

In Way Back Home, the parents’ narratives do not match up in their separate
accounts of violence, history, home, and exile. In this section, I propose that
memory and nostalgia, like the domestic sphere itself, are capable of
encoding highly differentiated gendered relations. The space of the home
becomes deterritorialized by constant tensions between the differing
accounts of nostalgia. And the range of visual signifiers through which nostalgia gets constructed maps a complex struggle on the part of the film to capture a singular home.

Svetlana Boym proposes two kinds of nostalgia that are helpful in this regard: “Restorative nostalgia puts emphasis on nostos and proposes to rebuild the lost home and patch up the memory gaps. Reflective nostalgia dwells in algia, in longing and loss, the imperfect process of remembrance. [...] Restorative nostalgia evokes national past and future; reflective nostalgia is more about individual and cultural memory.”

The contrasting elements within the parents’ narratives are important to consider in this context. In the film, the director’s mother returns to the feminized depiction of exile when she talks about the golden crops, harvest festivals, the abundance of natural beauty and Hindu-Muslim unity in her old village. The testimonial is aided by dramatic extra-diegetic sounds of blowing conch shells and women reveling in the annual festivities. This unfolding of the narrative within a unified space and time, without any rupturing or contamination of the natural order of things lends accented films an emphasis on territory, nature, and love. Naficy qualifies this as a normalized tendency within accented films through the Bakhtian notion of the “idyllic chronotope.”

In sharp contrast, the father’s narrative undercuts the idyllic quality of the mother’s story, and greets us instead with an intense montage of images that tap into a popular imagination of history and the Partition of 1947. The juxtaposition of his narrative with iconographic photographs of India’s freedom struggle paints the portrait of an overpowering, patriarchal figure, whose nationalist fervor resonates on the screen—constructing an example of what Boym would call “restorative nostalgia.” The figure of the father, photographs of mass riots and footage of Nehru’s historic speech on the eve of India’s independence, “restore” the nation at a point of time in history.

At a point when Supriyo’s father describes the horrors of that night and gives accounts of women being raped, the camera is possessed with only a reflective possibility—we see a white sari fluttering in the wind, against a cold brick wall, a sign of the nation widowed, the feminine ruptured. So while a whole range of visual signifiers are accumulated within the father’s account, they fluctuate between the “reflective” and the “restorative.” In the father’s testimonial itself, however, there is barely any recounting of a utopian childhood. Rather, we are privy to the helplessness experienced by a displaced body, who had to undertake the process of identity construction
yet again. And while there is a reverence for national leaders and the political struggle, the father still holds a deep condemnation for a national past that failed to take proactive measures for the displaced population.

The city of Calcutta, moreover, becomes a site of horror in the father’s narrative—a city teeming with poverty and burdened by bureaucracy and a scarcity of urban resources that were sought by migrant parents to build their new homes. How is this exterior space realized within the film? The film resorts to coloring the present city of Calcutta in black and white. It effaces the old, grainy images of the past and colors the present with a burden of the past gesturing towards a “present tenseness,” indicating that nothing much has changed for the refugee. The idea of a stable home remains a point of crisis and a distant dream in the ruthless city. Combined with the chronicle provided by the voiceover of the director, the idyllic is rendered beyond the limits of the father, whose testimonial can only memorialize the trauma of a nation. Thus, for the father, the home is the nation and the nation is the home, and each is coded not by feminine but masculine identity.

It is pertinent to explore the point to which the mother’s narrative reaches an expressive threshold in the enactment of reflective nostalgia. What recourse does the camera seek? The mother’s narrative centers on a constant lament about her lost older sister. At times, the camera cuts away to shots of dappled light pouring in through the window. The frame comprises of her silhouetted figure against a window, near a stairway. At times, the camera cuts away to shots of dappled light pouring in through the window, creating strange, abstract patterns on the floor. The musical tonality and the visualization create an expectation of impending drama or the revelation of unknown truths about the house. In keeping with Renov’s argument that “documentaries can be responsive to far less rational principles—erotic desire, horror, whimsy—than those encompassed by rhetoric or epistemology,” the architecture of the house becomes embedded with a psychical reality. But within the space of these two narratives, the “refracted self-image” of the filmmaker, the “self” that Renov articulates in his explication of domestic ethnography, comes closer to the “Other” when memory is enacted for the camera. It is a catalyst that accelerates the narratives of private histories but not before inscribing the maker as a “social self” to the extent that he pronounces his parents as the true martyrs of the Partition of 1947.

Interstitial spaces and homecoming
Above: The parents travel to their erstwhile home that now lies in Bangladesh.
Source: Way Back Home (2003); Photo courtesy: Supriyo Sen

A return to the old home is staged within the film which now lies in Bangladesh. Borders need to be crossed, and the overarching theme of homecoming acquires a signification of legality. The parents are filmed at three crucial interstitial points in their way back home: the border checkpoint, the railroad tracks that took them to India fifty years ago, and the seaport in Calcutta from which they travel back to Bangladesh. Further, Sen’s treatment of these spaces differs starkly from the long takes and lingering shots used before the parents’ return, during the period of imagination of the homeland. In fact, as the film tells us, the shots in Dhaka had to be filmed clandestinely because of the political turmoil in the country. The present identity configuration of the parents is problematic within a homeland, encased within a new set of spatial boundaries.
The idea of “homecoming” visualized through memory operates initially as a seductive longing, but the return itself does not lead to any liberation. Landmarks have changed and, thus, the site of the real home can only be marked by an approximation with clues gathered from bystanders. Through the use of fleeting interviews of people at the roadsides whose names never appear on the screen, the visual “documentation” of the film dislodges a stable accumulation and chronicle of reliable facts. The record of domestic ethnography normalizes the rupture of kinship structures within the migrant family and bears witness to a transformed, pluralized form of the family. The mother’s older sister Kamali didi has died and is survived by a daughter and granddaughter, both of whom are cast in a new order of relations. The filmmaker discovers an extension of his family on the other side of the border. There are no family photographs that bear testimony to this newly formed union and only the film can serve as prosthesis for the journey which has been undertaken.

Also, in the absence of ruins that bear the traces of the past, the wandering and migrant parents become sites of archaeological significance—they are the meeting grounds of the history, memory, and representation of a receding past. The tropes of homecoming have to be constantly reinvented and, in one such moment, Sen juxtaposes the image of his mother with that of Goddess Durga. In traditional Hindu mythology, Goddess Durga returns to
her father’s home from the Himalayas where she lives with her husband, Lord Shiva. Durga’s homecoming is a cause for celebration, but for the director’s mother, this “return” will probably be her last return—a final homecoming.

At moments when language fails and recounting is reduced to babble, the subjects flounder in search of an authentic past. Such a moment occurs when Sen’s mother learns about her sister’s death and it is the emotional ebbs that become the substitute for any other kind of evidence. At another point in the film, shots of the parents traveling from Calcutta to Bangladesh are accompanied by a song that evokes the search for a true homeland. What implications do these devices carry for realism in the documentary form? The personal struggle to understand the past perhaps laces the film with a melodramatic intent, in so far as melodrama, according to Peter Brooks, can be looked upon as a social enactment of the personal. For Brooks, the recourse of the melodramatic project to musical, gestural, and visual excess arises because of repressed states within social arrangements, and the family is one such space. However, this does not mean that melodrama is about the family or individual psychology. Instead, there is an exteriorization of conflict and psychic structures that produces a “melodrama of psychology,” and the family becomes a means to achieve that end. Thus, the epistemological projects of melodrama and realism have to acknowledge a split; while realism continuously searches for renewed means of authenticity, melodrama’s search is rendered through a loss, either inadmissible or repressed.

Therefore, in trying to locate the home between imagination and physicality, *Way Back Home* begins to tease the boundaries of fiction/non-fiction, as well as the genre subdivisions of nonfiction as well. Though the film uses all the familiar tropes of the genre, it becomes impossible to say whether the film is a video essay, an autobiographical journey, or a home video. This ambiguity points toward a certain lack of consistency in putting forth the “unrepresentable.” The “home” is as fleeting as the moment of migration, and the film has to constantly look for ways to reinvent representation, so much so that the boundaries between public and private histories, reflective and restorative nostalgia begin to overlap.

As the family returns from Bangladesh to Calcutta, the physical journey becomes metamorphosed into a more philosophical journey through slow motion shots, car headlights and dark roads woven with a poetic voiceover
by the filmmaker. The voiceover refers to Jibananda’s poetry, narrating the sorrow of the parents, which is symbolized by a return where the knowledge of the old home remains incomplete. The film relies on structures of feelings and repressed emotions, reiterating that a melodramatic gesture is indeed possible within the representative techniques of the documentary. It carves out a new web of connections by convincing the viewer of a new familial identity and constantly engaging with and shifting between an entire spectrum of visual evidences.

However, this movement and slippage between visual paradigms is not without a trap. In trying to lead us back to the general, the director’s voiceover tells us to use his parents’ experience as a lesson in history. The film does not return home to Calcutta, but instead taps into a rhetorical representation of the religious intolerance that India has witnessed in the recent past. But the largely essentialist model, constructed by images that circulated in popular media during the Gujarat riots, does little to present a rich texture of India and its people. There is a representational crisis at hand—a moment where, despite the struggle of personal memory to manifest itself, the hegemony of popular cultural memory shifts to the center, through the non-traditional means of the documentary.

Notes

2 Much of the work of these filmmakers is available through the channels of film festivals and non-profits that distribute documentaries, such as Magic Lantern Foundation in New Delhi. While Kabir and Sen concentrate on the space of the migrant home through their works, where migration encompasses the broadest possible meaning, Nishit Saran’s film Summer in my Veins (1999), is a “homevideo” approach for the director to reveal his homosexuality to his mother and the impending results from an AIDS test.
3 Given its history and genesis within the media environment of postcolonial India which was to serve the often correlated purposes of nation building and public diplomacy efforts, the documentary did typify certain aesthetics that gave an impression of objectivity and a sense of unflinching and unassailable truth of Indian history. Of course, over time this cocoon
of self assurance has been cracked open by films that gave a voice to minority identities—caste, gender and economic in particular. The period of the 90s saw a parallel development—the market for documentary film production expanded through the work of international donor agencies seeking to make inroads into India to carry out development work. Simultaneously, documentaries started facing competition from an aggressive satellite television culture- complete with reality TV shows, 24 hour news channels and televised debates. Though very little has been done to document these uneven developments, the term “independent” documentary is a much debatable term because of the above factors.


5 Ibid.

6 Michael Renov, The Subject of Documentary (Minneapolis: University of Minnessota, 2004). “Visible evidence” is a term most often used by Michael Renov in his explications.


8 Ibid., 169.

9 I call Way Back Home an accented film for several reasons. The film’s subjects are migrants who were forced to flee their homes due to the horrors of religious intolerance during the Partition of India in 1947. Also, independent documentary films in India are created in an interstitial space. They receive limited attention in comparison to Bollywood in terms of spectatorship and funding, and are distributed through alternative, non-profit networks. Lastly, many of the stylistic and formal practices within the film lend it a hybrid identity in a way that the text crosses generic boundaries and undermines the value of documentary realism.

10 Michael Renov, “Domestic Ethnography and the construction of the ‘Other Self,’” in Collecting Visible Evidence (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1999), 140-55.


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