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EXPLORING THE MYRIAD LAYERS OF 'HOME' IN DHRUBA HAZARIKA'S A  
*BOWSTRING WINTER*

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**Abstract:**

*The issues of home, homecoming, homelessness, belonging, the impossibility of coming and making home are important issues in the modern society. The issues of home and homelessness, quest for home and homecoming and related issues such as location and dislocation, cultural and political marginalization and identity are overwhelmingly present. The present paper attempts to examine the problematic of home and belonging in Dhruba Hazarika's novel A Bowstring Winter (2006). One is at home when one inhabits a cognitive environment in which one can undertake the routines of daily life and through which one finds one's identity best mediated—and homeless when such a cognitive environment is eschewed. The present paper locates the idea that home is a physical or non physical place or situation with which one identifies and where one is and feels unconditionally accepted. The present work is based on textual explication and theoretical analysis regarding the ideas of home and belonging. The quest for a place in which the self feels at home, comfortable and secure, and its closely embedded issues like location and dislocation, belonging and marginalization, alienation and identity—central to the problematic of home—have pervaded postcolonial literature, criticism, and theory. The proposed work examines A Bowstring Winter and looks into these issues which are crucial in the context of the Northeast.*

**Keywords:** Home, Identity, Belonging, Homelessness, Northeast, etc.

The world is constantly in flux, and the life or human existence are never stable. The traditional idea of a fixed and physical centre called 'home' is now lost to the modern world where so many people live in perpetual motion due to the migratory processes. Home is "always somewhere else. Home is both 'here' and 'there' or somewhere in between. Sometimes, it is nowhere" (Gomez-Pena, 10). Whether one feels to be at home, depends largely on the degree of acceptance of the person by the society, and how far willing the person is to get himself or herself integrated into that society and to accept, abide and enjoy its norms, values and cultures.

Dhruba Hazarika is the beholder of a literature that is in it a store house of exile, revenge, anger and murder. His *A Bowstring Winter* (2006) is a novel that explores the many-sided issues of racial and individual identities and home and belonging. The people in the novel seek to find their own sense of belonging and to come to terms with themselves and their social milieu. Their individual and social identities seem to depend upon the degree of significance they find and give to the place and people around them. People's lives become meaningful when they find things and places to which they find attachment. The novel presents a very dynamic idea of home by



implying that 'home' is not always a physical space but can also be an imagined concept of the mind.

*A Bowstring Winter* depicts the lived experiences of a group of people and their rootedness in a particular place. Hazarika's refreshingly original narrative depicts certain enduring truths about human life. Here we find the complex relationships between humans and their sensitive approach to the problem and their sensitive approach to the problem of violence and its after-effects. But this violence is not of a kind of militant insurgency as we often find in the other fictional writings from the Northeast region. The violence occurs here due to the personal struggles between peoples. While tracing the course of these struggles, the novel reveals the need to search for one's roots. Dhruba Hazarika in his novel explores trauma and dilemma experienced by individuals due to personal conflicts and clashes of various kinds but even through the complexities of these personal conflicts, the novelist manages well to portray real issues pertinent to the lives of the Khasi people. The novel describes anxieties which threaten to engulf the identities of various persons and in the process reveals wounds that run deep in the human psyche. The novel is supposed to explore themes of multiple identities in an ethnic world where the idea of 'home' casts a heavy amount of influence upon these identities.

Neruda, while speaking about his poetry, observes that the "frontier regions sank their roots into my poetry and these roots have never been able to wrench themselves out. My life is a long pilgrimage that is always turning on itself, always returning to the woods in the south, to the forest lost home" (Neruda, 25). *A Bowstring Winter* reflects the same kind of rootedness. The novel speaks about roots of various kinds: the roots of land, the roots of culture, the roots of times, and the roots of a past that is 'lost.' All these roots operate deeply into the psyche of the characters and constitute a web of different identities where the overwhelming presence of 'roots' is always visible. Hazarika's novel brings out the ethnic fault lines that divide the peoples and communities of the region into conflicting factions. The novel mostly deals with the undercurrents of conflicts within the Khasi community itself as well as its negotiations with the effects of change and modernity in their racial home. In *A Bowstring Winter*, we see subtle explorations of the ethnic fault-lines that divide tribals from the non-tribals in the hill state of Meghalaya. Various characters in the novel carry different notions of home and they are all trying to come to terms with the problems of a secure identity, both ethnic and personal in their own ways. While some characters resent the encroachment of outsiders and forces of change into traditional tribal lives, others are accepting this change, and trying to renew connections to their tribal roots.

The ethnically oriented identitarian movements and man oeuvres have resulted in repeated redrawing of boundaries. Lines of identity are rigidly drawn in the psyche of the people as hostility among various tribes and communities, and resentment towards outsiders is quite strong. In recent times, a large body of writings, both novels and poetry, has emerged from Meghalaya written by both indigenous and non-native writers that deal with the fraught questions of ethnicity, migrancy, and borders and boundaries. Writers and poets like Siddhartha Deb, Anjum Hasan, Nabanita Kanungo and Daisy Hasan write about the exilic condition, and sense of precarity and anxiety felt by the people of Sylheti refugee descendant in Meghalaya, people who have suffered migration as well as life-long stigma of being outsiders in a land full of ethnic, cartographic, psychological and religious borders. Literary works of indigenous writers and poets such as Desmond Kharmawphlang, Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih, Esther Syiem, Janice Pariat etc. Give us the other side of the story and their writings share a deep sense of cultural loss which came with the intrusion of the territory by many outside elements. For a long time, the indigenous tribal



people had to endure contempt and outright ridicule from the people from greater India. At the same time, parochial and chauvinistic postures of dominant nationalities, and appropriation of lands and resources by people from Bangladesh made them insecure about their own survival, and they gradually took to the path of ethnic assertion and self-preservation. In their writings we see a different concept of 'home' and 'rootedness'—the local Khasi people's perceptions of a racial home which they believe to have been disfigured by the outsiders. Dhruba Hazarika's novel shows how these different ideas of 'home' and 'belonging' collide with each other. The novel provides significant insights into the ethnic and psychological boundaries and the undercurrents of suspicions, distrusts among the local Khasi people brought out by their feelings that the traditional life-worlds of the Khasi society (especially in Shillong) has been infringed upon by 'outsiders' and unwanted changes have been wrought by modernity.

Theorists have pointed out the close connections between place and identity. Theoretical literature on 'place', 'home' and 'identity' have examined that some places satisfy some people's deeply felt need of social and psychological well-being. Some places symbolize 'home', 'safety', 'belongingness' for some people. but, at the same time, literature on 'place' and 'home' has also revealed the dynamics of conflicts involved in those ideas; 'home' is, very often, a place of conflicts, a contested place with different claims on it by other groups. The political economy of home-places needs to be understood for a fuller understanding of the experiences and meaning of home and homelessness. Dhruba Hazarika in his novel tackles the issues of home-making, homecoming, and the dynamics of place and identity in connection with the quest of a group of people, who are, in many ways, remain at the margins of their society. Homi Bhabha uses the term 'unhomely' to refer to the "estranging sense of the relocation of the home in an unhallowed place" (Hazarika, 70). By 'unholomy' Bhabha does not mean 'homelessness' but a creepy feeling that deprives people of the warmth and comfort associated with the term 'home.' The present novel speaks about people who feel their ideas of home and sense of belonging has been precarious or threatened.

Home is characterized as a place that we have to leave in the service of a new self and the place we feel compelled to return to, even though the return is necessarily incomplete. The stable idea of home is associated with a stable identity and "identities are never unified and, in late modern times, increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiply constructed across different, often interesting and antagonistic discourses, practices and positions. They are subject to a radical historicization, and are constantly in the process of change and transformation" (Hall, 65). The making of home as well as identification is a construction, a process never completed-always "in process." This thing reveals that in order to be able to possess a secure sense of identity, one needs social recognition and other sources of identification.

In *A Bowstring Winter*, characters like Dor Kharkongor and James are very much at home in their culture and place. They show no anxiety of homelessness or fear of being deprived of a home. It is only John Dkhar, who, being a part of that culture, remain for the most part, an outsider, trying to return, to enter. Home represents both the place from which we set out and to which we return, at least in spirit. In *A Bowstring Winter*, John Dkhar, born in Shillong, growing up elsewhere, comes back to Shillong, and at last, in his slow walk towards Jenny's house, we can see him as finally returning to the cultural heritage whose pull and attraction he cannot resist. In this novel, identity is dealt with in both ways, personal and communal. The first reading projects the novel as one where the characters are involved in personal feelings and personal clashes. It offers a human world with follies and weaknesses, sins and realizations. John Dkhar moves from



place to place, never at home even in his own state of Meghalaya. During the first part of the novel, he remains an outsider from his own community due to his long absence from Shillong. 'Dkhar' is a word which is used for the foreigners by the Khasi people. John Dkhar, though a native from Shillong, suggests that he cannot be at home in Shillong by the very title he possesses. The world of the novel reveals the inherent loneliness of men, especially men who have experienced ontological anxieties regarding one's place in the world, not being rooted, and always haunted by the fear of not being at home and having some kind of stable markers of identity. John is taken into the core group at Kaizang Restaurant, and is treated almost as a son by Dor Kharkongor, John very often experiences the feeling that, no matter what, he is still an outsider, a rootless person with no strong racial ties to the native land.

John Dkhar, is what Homi K. Bhabha calls an 'unhomely' one—people who have remained unmapped onto the mainstream. People like these have remained outside the system--these are the marginalized hybrids who are not only betwixt and between, but also have no home within the system. John is a refined, educated, cultured person, but he is a loner. His solitary and rootless existence soon gets attached to a group of people—James Kharlukhi, Charlie, and Dor Kharkongor--and these people will soon introduce him to a world of violence and murder. He also comes in contact with a woman—Jennifer D' Santos---companion to James, whose love for John can only lead to tragedy.

In *A Bowstring Winter*, Jenny, the love interest of John, is a person who has suffered many displacements, and is finally at home. Her family has moved around and there is restlessness at her heart which is due to personal as well as social reasons. In the novel, we have many passages describing houses, homes, rooms, and dwelling places. The reader is given access to John's lonely and restless existence in his room in Delhi. His room in Shillong is described by the writer in a way which tells us a lot about his inner state of mind. Jenny's house and its colours are described by the writer at crucial moments in the novel. The cosy, sensuous inside of Restaurant Kaizang is described and this place is a microcosm of the larger Khasi world outside.

A very significant thing to be noted is the frequent descriptions of houses and rooms throughout narrative. This is deliberate on the part of the author because he is trying to underline the issue of home and belonging by foregrounding the spatiality of the concept of 'home.' Home is the place where "one discovers new ways of seeing reality, frontiers of difference" (Hooks, 56). We have the detailed description of the room where John Dkhar stays in Shillong: "It was a quiet room, pale white in colour. The walls, though now bereft of the sparkle that existed when neat and clean....The bed, with its quiet and blanket spilling onto the floor, lent the room an air of crumpled comfort" (Hazarika, 16). A sense of cosiness and homeliness is evoked by these lines that express an intense longing in the soul of John Dkhar. Later we find lines like "even though he had not been in Shillong long, the room had become a part of him, much like a ring worn for many years now grooved into one's finger" (Hazarika, 69) which convey the sense of home and belongingness in John Dkhar.

Jennifer's house in Nongrim Hills is lovingly and evocatively depicted. While reaching Jennifer's house, John Dkhar feels a strong longing for a lost home. This lost home exists in his memory. This image of a 'home' haunts him. At the sight of Jennifer's house, his memory of a home is triggered upon. The drawing room is described as cosy with long curtains falling to the floor and the wooden boards. He could savour "the smell of smoke from pinewood and of another whose origin lay in the kitchen. The ambience brought back memories of another house, one that he could only faintly recollect his childhood home. He sighs nostalgically for a lost world, a world

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that now existed only in his mind” (Hazarika, 81). Haunted by the idea of a home, he “took in the almost feminine charm of the room” (Hazarika, 82). When John Dkhar was with Jennifer in her home, he thought of his childhood home and then of his room in the hostel in Delhi. This is reflective of John Dkhar’s sense of belongingness and idea of a home. John Dkhar cannot feel at rest and the memory of his childhood home keeps haunting him all the time. He often thinks about his room in Delhi. This experience is subversive to his idea of a happy home. Yet, in Delhi also he wanted to belong but he couldn’t. He felt the difference from the other mainland students. Sanjib Baruah’s observation becomes relevant here, “There are a large number of students from the region in Delhi, Bangalore, Mumbai, Pune, Kolkata and other cities. A disturbingly large number of them tell stories about their experiences of being racially labelled” (Baruah, 40). He could not belong anywhere, neither to his past nor his present.

By the very presence in Jenny’s house, John for a fleeting moment feels the warm certainty of a home and homecoming----a sense of connection to his past and present. He realizes how eagerly he longs for this connection and roots in a place that he can call his own. He looks for these moments of epiphany when he can feel deep inside that he can belong to this place. He feels it in the company of Bah Kharkongor. At Kharkongor’s house, John Dkhar could feel the cosiness of the room, which he was given for the night. Towards the midnight, John Dkhar dreamt that “he was sleeping in his small hostel room in Delhi with Jennifer by his side” (Hazarika, 194). This juxtaposition of the past and the present is a part of John Dkhar’s identity. He wants to belong to Shillong but cannot discard the memory of the days in Delhi and when he was in Delhi he wanted desperately his rootedness in Shillong.

Viewed analytically, each and every character is an exile and lives with a prevailing sense of homelessness. With Bah Kharkongor it is the loss of his old days’; with John Dkhar it is the deep sense of being a non-Khasi. John Dkhar is a character split between the two worlds—one of the past, never docile to him, another, the present, which he can never understand fully. John Dkhar is segmented and often repressed with the memories of the past and the painful breaking away from his very own Shillong. John Dkhar’s condition makes it clear that sometimes the place where one is born may not always feel to be home; for that matter, the place where one lives also is not home unless one gets deeply integrated in it and finds inner roots there. ‘Home’ is found when the seeker finds in his or her mind the satisfaction of being where he truly desired to belong, and John Dkhar was unable to do that—earlier in Delhi and now in his birthplace. His sense of identity remained uncertain and confused because in his mind he keeps shuffling between Delhi and Shillong. While in Delhi, he attempts to reconnect with the ‘home’ that he has left behind in Shillong. But while back in Shillong after a long period of absence, he cannot find the ‘home’ that has existed in his mind throughout the years. John Dkhar often mixes thoughts in Delhi with his present days in Shillong. Both images from Delhi and Shillong jumble up in his mind. This juxtaposition of thoughts is reflective of the split in John Dkhar’s identity. While, sleeping under the open sky of Shillong, Dkhar thinks how he slept in the open years ago during a trek in the Garhwal hills with his friends from Delhi. And now, as the shed threw up a yellowish light, cutting through the pines and lighting up the ceiling, he grants through the heart of every city in the plains” (Hazarika, 310). His very own Shillong appears to be a new piece of land to him, and he tries his best to connect to this new place with the help of the things and people around him: the Kaizang restaurant, the company of James Shullai Kharlukhi, Bah Kharkongor and others, the love of Jennifer etc. His home is a state of mind, an inner space, and not the actual physical territory he resides at.

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Tillotama Mishra observes that an intense sense of awareness of the cultural loss and recovery that came with the negotiation with other cultures is a recurrent feature of the literature of the seven North-eastern states” (xiii). This observation is true about Dhruba Hazarika’s narrative in *A Bowstring Winter*. Bah Kharkongor could not take the presence of outsiders in Shillong very easily. While getting an opportunity, he expressed his disregard for the outsiders. While narrating his meeting with Charlie in the New India restaurant to John Dkhar, Bah Kharkongor also describes that there were “many people there. Mostly dkhars. Even now you will find mostly dkhars there, the Marwaris from Police Bazaar and the Bengalis from Jail Road and Laban and the Assamese from Bishnupur” (Hazarika, 220). This observation of Bah Kharkongor gives a clear impression of the fact that how the half of Shillong is occupied by outsiders.

The very name “Shillong” throws a mesmerizing effect. Shilling is spoken about or imagined by the outsiders as an idyllic place of romance, pine-trees, and beautiful girls in jainsem, beautiful hills, and a happy abode of perfect bliss. Shilling is a tourist centre and it is regarded as the ‘Scotland of the East’, and also as the rock/music capital of India. The gay and carefree side of Shillong always makes one blind to the rough side of the land where so many visible and invisible borders between people exist and they make for a constant atmosphere of tension. Conflictual elements also exist in this land. Weak economic infrastructure, heavy dependence upon jhum cultivation, aimlessness of the youths, no scope for the native khasis in business and other areas due to the overpopulation of Bengali, Marwari, and Assamese people mar the land. The native Khasi people are always in search of a perpetual identity of their own.

Bah Kharkongor did not like the name Cherrapunji because it sounds too foreign. He prefers the previous name Sohra to Cherrapunji. He remarks, “I shall not call it by that name any more. Sohra is a much better name for the place that is the wet place in the whole world. That is a true Khasi name. These bloody buggers English, they have made it Cherrapunji! Just imagine!” (Hazarika, 203). Bah Kharkongor hates the way modernity has crept into the traditional life of Shillong. As a staunch traditionalist he refuses to accept this. He remarks, “This name Sohra is so much more musical than the one called Cherra. Ah, this English, they have even eaten into our names. But let it be so. For, to change is much in the nature of all things. Even with names” (Hazarika, 234). Though Bah Kharkongor is disgusted with the changes but still he knows that he has to live with these changes because the past cannot be retained back and these changes cannot be undone. The “new forms of identity will inevitably be constructed upon new patterns of hostility. Differences of religion and culture will provide the needed template for the clashes to come” (Huntington, 48). Jan Mohamed observes, “the valorisation of heterogeneity and heterotopic site of homelessness poses severe problems, for it tends to complicate the demands of and desire for identification and solidarity with the group” (Jan, 96). Dhruba Hazarika’s *A Bowstring Winter* (2006) focuses attention on the interactive past. Connectivity, interactivity and positionality are the correlative characteristics of the attachment to ‘place.’ Awareness is a passive but perceptive approach to living and space that makes possible the living. The self needs to reconfigure itself as history has brought about a change and in the process of reconfiguration there is a return to the idea of the past. The past memories constantly interact with identity and meaning that go through an endless process of change.



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