

## Is She an Indian/Anglo-Indian Writer? Locating the Indian / Anglo-Indian Self in the Short Stories of Margaret Deefholts

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### Abstract

Even though the British rule ended in 1947, it led to the," [evolution of] a heterodox community who [lived to] speak the father's tongue and [to] eat the mother's salt" (Sealy 23). According to Deefholts, "Anglo-Indians, left in a twilight zone of uncertainty, felt a bitter sense of betrayal – and dismay at the fact that Britain made no effort to offer her swarthier sons any hospitality in the land where their forefathers had been born"(192). As per E.F.Oaten, "... Anglo-Indian Literature, therefore, is for the most part, merely English Literature strongly marked by Indian colour (5). Subsequently, the works conditioned on the above said definition and attitude are expected to portray a negative image of India for a non-native reader.

On the contrary, the analyses of Deefholts' short stories produce a different picture for the native and the non-native reader. Devoid of all bitterness and hostility, her stories create a different version of India, not regulated by time and space. Along with the analysis of the above said portrayal, this study also aims to expose the continuum of the Indian/Anglo-Indian self which is evident in the works of a writer of Anglo-Indian descent.

**KEYWORDS:** Anglo-Indian Literature, History, India, Culture, Identity

Although in independent India, the Anglo-Indian community is constitutionally recognized as one of India's six minorities, the community continues to occupy a contentious position within the discourse of Indian national identity and thus has historically been regarded as "unhomed" in India when in fact India is the homeland of the community. In The 'Home' in Homeland, Thembisa Waetjen writes about the idea of unhomeliness, describing it in these terms, "Unhomeliness' is not explicitly homelessness but rather a state of exile, of being removed from a place of belonging . . ." (662). A large Anglo-Indian diaspora was the result of the condition of unhomeliness experienced in India. Today, there are approximately 300,000

Anglo-Indians living outside India concentrated mainly in Canada, New Zealand, England and Australia.

The term "Anglo-Indian" has become an umbrella term applied to two distinct groups of people: those persons who have two parents of European descent – "previously known as "Domiciled European" (Gist and Wright 2) – and those 'mixed race' persons being of both Indian and European ancestry. However, the definition fails to encompass the identity of persons who have Indian fathers and British mothers, thus effectively branding these people as 'unidentified subjects' in the definitional terms laid down by the Constitution.

As per Margaret Deefholts:

The Anglo-Indians were more “Anglo” than “Indian”. Their mother-tongue was English and so was their religious upbringing, as were their customs and traditions. While most of them married within their own Anglo-Indian circle, there were many who continued to marry expatriate Englishmen. Very few, if any, married Indians. The same rigid social barriers that the British existed between themselves and the Anglo-Indians also existed to isolate the Anglo-Indians from the vast majority of Indians. (191)

Even though the terms, ‘sense’ and ‘identity’ work on different levels, they are of great importance to a writer/artist of any descent. As per Meenakshi Mukerjee:

The process of creative self-realization [and the creation of ] an identity is a part of the essential business of an artist...A sense of nationality can grow out of the discovery of identity and it is important that this should happen frequently, if one is to establish a tradition that is both distinctive and rooted. (1)

Deefholts’ short story “Those were the Days...” begins with an Anglo-Indian reunion at Toronto. As the short story shifts between the past and the present of the narrator, the reader gets a glimpse of the trepidations and fears faced by the Anglo-Indians who lived in the pre/post-independent India. As the story moves on, the narrator Marjorie presents India in a very affirmative modus, but Bill, her friend rather sticks to saying, “Well, I didn’t trust those dhoti-wearing Congress-wallahs” (103). With a total colonial perspective, Bill underscores his demeanor by describing Calcutta as being, “[c]rowded and filthy, with beggars swarming all over the sidewalks” (103).

Subsequently, the story divides the characters into two: the Anglo-Indians who love India and the others who do not. Apart from Bill, the latter group consists of Marjorie’s uncle George too. George nurtures angsts towards considering Jana Gana Mana as the national anthem instead of ‘God Save the King’. On the contrary, the members of the former group include Marjorie’s father with a very benevolent stance concerning the Indians, her mother who considers the Indian saree to be a very graceful outfit, Bill’s wife, Ethel who felt that, “Calcutta was such a lively city in those days. The Grand Hotel on Chowringhee, Flurys on Park Street. Socials at the Rangers’ Club...then going to Nizams afterwards and eating kati kebabs on grimy little plates” (106) and Marjorie herself who retorts back at a classmate’s comments regarding her to be a member of England, “Mohini, I am not, and never will be a foreigner in India. I was born here and so was my family for many generations. India is my country just as it is yours” (109).

To flaunt the virtuous and altruistic relationships that can occur between Indians and Anglo-Indians, the author makes Marjorie get married to Romesh Sengupta,” after the whirl of two weddings-the first, a lavish, traditional Bengali wedding in Calcutta...the second a quiet Church ceremony in Mussoorie”(110-111).

In Deefholts’ short fiction “Be-Longing,” she discusses the apprehensions, uncertainties and uneasiness of an Anglo-Indian mother who has been transplanted to another foreign land, Canada. The mother character is an old widow with a shaven head who wears white mourning sari, broken bangles and no jewellery. The very image of this mother reflects the idea that she follows Indian traditions and rituals even though she is an Anglo-Indian. Later in the story, we again witness the same mother being transplanted to Canada with her youngest son Dinesh. But in this foreign land also, she struggles and wrangles to identify herself. She turns nostalgic about India realizing that she cannot sit under the shade of old mango tree sipping a cup of hot, milky, sweet cha smelling cardamoms and will never again watch the crimson flame of-the-forest trees shouting against the strong

blue sky or the smell of the monsoon- wet warm earth. "... the hot dry loo-wind that blows across the village and how it burned my nostrils into dusty fire. And how I would watch the full moon as it rose up, blood-red at first and then later when it was high in the sky, how it shone like a big silver thali" ("Be-Longing" 14).

Deefholts' memories come alive as she recalls the various elements of her life in India. Her desire to live these experiences again – through aesthetic recollection and even literally – is obvious. Perhaps the most powerful line of the poem "Homesickness" is Deefholts' exclamation that "India is my blood, my bones" (22). In this passionate statement the reader can see that, from an Anglo-Indian perspective, 'India' is not only a physical, exterior experience but that 'living India' is internalized so that it becomes the very core of Anglo-Indian identity in an emotional and spiritual sense. The detailing of such deep feeling is instrumental to forging the ties between the Anglo-Indian community and their Indian homeland. The nostalgic mode enables this connection to be established as it constructs a specifically Anglo-Indian history.

In expressing a longing for India, through the recollection of personal relationships and sensory experiences between the Community and India, the bond between identity and place is cemented. The process of writing about one's 'home' in a nostalgic mode is central to establishing these bonds, as this type of writing produces a culturally specific history. Home brings together memory and longing. The concept of 'home' can never be fully recovered, but has to be reclaimed and rewritten. As the experience of nostalgia unveils feelings, associations, and ways of living that are a part of the Community's memory, Anglo-Indians can claim their rightful place in Indian history through the production of their own history.

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