

# No Country for Old Men: Representing the Dilemmas of Old Age and Migration in Rishi Reddi's "Justice Shiva Ram Murthy" and "Bangles"

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*Abstract*— The spreading of familial ties across the globe has highlighted a range of questions about the family structure and the impact of migration especially on older people. Their involuntarily movement leaves many a consequences as they find it pretty much difficult to cope with the socio-cultural changes one has to undergo. In this sudden change of practice, with ever new essence of land and people, they feel uncomfortable and, in a way, get disrupted with their belief system. Sometimes, it comes with the price of sacrificing their homely happiness into this late years of life before an illusionary vision of paradise on the other side of the sea. The dichotomy for the aged people lies into the caregiving notion of East and the West's respective familial ties. While one is a collective society where people live into the large family bondage, the other is individualistic in its outlook taking care of their own themselves. The dialectics of home and migration of elderly people creates a complex meaning of family and familiarity. This happens as being with family they lack their familiar space. A selection of Rishi Reddy's two short stories from the collection "Karma and Other Stories" bring us the life of two migrants into the opportunities of the West in their late age and get perennially mixed up into the new world order.

*Keywords*— Home, migration, negotiation, old age, socio-cultural change.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Migration is undeniably accompanied by some unavoidable disorientation to the person who migrates. It creates an involuntary remoteness between the places where one was born and where one gets relocated. This difference causes fragmentation in belongingness and identity. Aanchal Malhotra argues that the process of migration leads people to "somewhere in between the original city of residence, [where one] would lay their essence strangely malleable" (Malhotra, 2019). Moreover, in the case of elderly people, this relocation in a new space with new surrounding become more complex. Their involuntarily movement leaves many a consequence as the elderly people find it pretty much difficult to cope with the socio-cultural changes. Here migration is not the individual's decision to leave their home rather it is decided by and enacted upon with less consent to the migrant person. In this sudden change of practice, with

ever new essence of land and people, they feel uncomfortable and, in a way, get disrupted with their belief system. Sometimes, it comes with the price of sacrificing their homely happiness into this late years of life before an illusionary vision of paradise on the other side of the sea where their children have settled down. Therefore, the present study tries to define the conflicts faced by the elderly people in migration with reference to Rishi Reddy's short stories "Justice Shiva Ram Murthy" and "Bangles".

## II. RISHI REDDY: A VOICE IN EMERGENCE

Rishi Reddy is comparably a new name in diasporic literature. She is an Indo-American writer who has born in Hyderabad and migrated to the United Kingdom, now settling in United States. Her father's work brought her to different places across the world. As a young girl, she had moved to London, Philadelphia and Los Angeles. This

continual uprooting from one place to another gives Reddi the feeling of unsettledness in life that she herself encountered. Her interest in literature lies core to that upturn and she took delight in Greek and Norse mythology as well as in Hindu legends of gods and goddess. In spite of her parents' sturdy urging to go to the medical school, she graduated in English from Swarthmore College in 1988. Later she studied Law and earned a JD (Juris Doctor) at Northeastern University. But her impulse for creative writing didn't subsume and she got enrolled in Boston University's Creative Writing program and later in many such other programmes. Her career in law inspired many of her stories, for example, the Brij Sharma 2001 lawsuit against McDonald's for purportedly putting beef fat in vegetarian French fries initiated the motive for the story "Justice Shiva Ram Murthy". This story is incorporated in Michael Chabon's *The Best American Short Stories* (2011) as well as broadcasted in NPR's "Selected Stories".

Reddi is the author of *Karma and Other Stories*, a short story collection which have won the 2008 PEN New England Prize for fiction. This story collection intimately deals with the lives of Indian-American people. It provides a new aspect to the writing of fiction with transnational issues as it brings diverse sides of migration and its consequences. In a very innovative way, she problematise the situation and conflicts faced by the people living as diaspora. The home and other sensibilities as well as the dichotomy of belonging has been represented in this collection. Here different generations of people are characterised with their own outlook towards migration and settlement. The cultural difference and the spatial conflict faced by the migrants are also portrayed. *Karma and Other Stories* contains eight stories altogether and every story engages a new dimension of either migration, or space or identity. Instead of reflecting on the nostalgic looking back towards home, Reddi's writing focuses on the experiences of migrants in the hostland. The stories mainly engage with the Indian diaspora settled mostly in Boston and Massachusetts. Incidentally most of the characters in these stories are speaking in Telugu, which is also Reddi's mother tongue. Thus, the stories have a fine balance between traditional Indian culture and contemporary western life.

### III. MIGRATION AND ITS CONSEQUENCES TO THE ELDERLY PEOPLE

The spreading of familial ties across the globe has highlighted a range of questions about the family structure and the impact of migration especially on the older people.

People who had moved for economic and other reasons in their early ages generally had less concern to return to their home country. With their settling down in the host country into the opportunities, there is almost always a negotiation of responsibilities for the extended family bondage. Therefore, the old age migration often takes the form of an obligatory migration because of their urge to live with the children. The 'Families and Migration: Older People from South Asia' report points out that, "older people move back to their natal communities or migrate to new countries on retirement. Migrants may continue to visit their natal countries and communities regularly until constrained by impairments associated with advancing age" (Burholt & Wenger, 2003). Old people as a minor population among the migrants receive less attention into the enquiry. This is mostly because they are less in number and they often make an irregular visit to the host country. Even in many cases they are being cared less into the new social strata. The dichotomy for the aged people lies into the caregiving notion of East and the West's respective familial ties. While one is a collective society where people live into the large family bondage the other is individualistic in its outlook taking care of their own themselves. Burholt and Wenger opines "in order for social policy to respond appropriately to needs, greater understanding is required of the patterns of informal support for older people, associated with these ethnic groups" (Burholt & Wenger, 2003).

Moreover, migration across continents seriously hamper the home-making procedure of elderly people, who are uprooted from their home to settle with their children abroad. The dialectics of home and migration of elderly people creates a complex meaning of family and familiarity. This happens as part of being with the family and lack their familiar space. This interdisciplinary area of investigation incorporates diverse groups of people as Warnes and Williams mentions "there are several distinguishable categories of 'older migrants' ... The most evident—affluent retirement migrants...like all international migrants, they are also taking risks, by moving to countries with different languages, customs, institutions, and social welfare and health-care policies" (2007). Post retirement migration isn't a permanent migration but a back and forth migration between their home and the country of destination. The reason behind this migration mainly denotes the urge to be with the children and cultivates the notion of extended family in the South-Asian culture. The discussion on the relation between home and the process of migration as experienced by the old age people confront the renegotiation of socio-cultural identities within the domestic sphere. In the case

of elderly women, however, the complication takes a bitter turn as Gardner mentions, “whose husbands have died and who have adult sons in Britain, the decision concerning whether or not to join them is one in which they have far more control” (2002) and thus it is not a voluntary migration but a situational one. In the majority of cases, therefore, an illusion of being at home is created where the actual essence is left behind.

The two stories selected for the study concentrates on the problems of elderly people in a foreign country. By not keeping in touch with their parents nor by occasionally going back to the home country, it lies a peremptory duty to the older people to visit their children who have settled in abroad for very many reasons. Some visits are just for meeting their children, where some are for providing help as an elder into their household duties. In most of the cases, they pay a visit of long duration of time to take care of their grandchildren in fulfilling their duty towards the younger ones. Thus, it is true that “experiencing old age is never an isolated phenomenon. The life histories of older people are intricately intertwined with the histories of their families, communities, nations as well as global trends” (Mehta & Singh, 2008). In this sense, the plight of the old people in migration cannot be secluded.

#### **IV. “JUSTICE SHIVA RAM MURTHY”: THE VOCAL JUDGE INTO THE FALLACY OF UPROOTEDNESS**

Rishi Reddi’s short story “Justice Shiva Ram Murthy” is a fascinating and insightful depiction of the displaced immigrants in the USA. Reddi effectively applies the first-person narrative technique to explore the point of view of the main character. The conflict narrated in the story from the subjective lens exposes the firmness of cultural belief among the immigrants. A sense of displacement and rootlessness in the protagonist, Shiva Ram Murthy is the main concern of the story. Shiva Ram Murthy, a retired Indian judge has migrated to the US from India, where his previous higher rank in the service is mentioned as the former Hyderabad High Court justice. He is an independent man as one can find him in the opening-

I had been living in the U.S. for three months. Already I had opened my own bank account, obtained a law library card, and successfully settled the living arrangements with my daughter, Kirti, and her American husband. (Reddi, 2007).

He also faces some unfortunate incidents in this new country where everything is unusual to him. Even with the language of communication, he feels everybody speaks

their different English, thus some misunderstandings and series of arguments occur between Murthy and others throughout the story. In the story there are mainly two conflicts, firstly Murthy’s confrontation with the restaurant manager at the Mexican fast-food joint as they serve beef to him instead of bean and secondly with the American lawyer who is reluctant to take the case of the above mentioned ‘harassment’ for Shiva as she necessarily finds her client’s case a shallow one. The first conflict with the Mexican fast-food court is resolved as Shiva take the lawyer’s advice, to write a complaint letter to the restaurant owner, and receives an apology in reply. However, the disagreement with the American lawyer is never resolved because he isn’t much gratified with American law or living, always considering him as the other or an alien. Both the incidents are a reflection of a larger issue the story hits, which for the protagonist relegates the inability to adapt the new culture as well as the country.

Into the first incident Shiva ponders if this incident at the food court with Shiva have had taken place in India, he would not have to prove his point- “it is against the customs of my faith to eat beef... I have never, never, eaten beef in my life, before this incident. It has never passed my lips. I am a Brahmin, you see” (Reddi, 2007). For him, a place as well as the habits and customs of its people becomes much more important in some other place in assertion as there are chances of ignoring his voice and therefore his identity. Thus, the setting is crucial in this short-story as alteration of place promotes an entirely different meaning to the existence or at least imposes different dimensions to its being.

The characterization of Shiva Ram Murthy throughout the story is constant and his attitude towards the foreign land and its people are more or less the same. This consciously composed personality of this old man not only thus points out the rootedness of migrants towards their homeland but more importantly projects the problem of accepting and adopting certain other practices in old age. The things he practised throughout his life cannot all of a sudden become a very trivial matter for him shattering his own identity. Reddy points out this by contrasting him with his friend Manmohan (called Manu in the entire story) who had migrated long ago and had adopted various practices of his host country. Murthy contradicts with his only friend Manu of an incident, as he says, “Manu told me later that as I pronounced these words, a little bit of saliva came from my mouth and landed on the girl’s sleeve. I do not agree” (Reddi, 2007). This is in reference to the restaurant mishap where the manager cum bartender took the order from them but mistook the order as Shiva’s

pronunciation of 'bean' to 'beef' got slightly carried away. There are several instances of contradiction between them where Murthy did not agree with Manu's ideas of the adoption of 'foreign' practices.

Shiva is self-centred cynic as he talks about Manu having no values. Contradictorily Manu always stands with him, having helped Murthy to find a lawyer and even goes with him to meet the lawyer. Manu is the only friend in this new place with whom Shiva can share his agonies and despairs, but instead he says of Manu vociferously that he is "without any friends, without anyone to understand him and keep him company" (Reddi, 2007). These characteristics of hubristic personality is the reason for the conflict in the story. The miscommunication occurred between the restaurant staff and Shiva and later between him and the lawyer made Shiva think that the westerners are generally of rude behaviour. The only friend Shiva has is his childhood friend Manmohan who has the common sharing of motherland with him,

We are the same age, we are both Murthys of the Brahmin caste, and grew up in the same neighbourhood of Mozamjahi Market in the old days when it was still a very nice neighbourhood of Hyderabad. We have the misfortune to be widowers and now we both live with our respective children. (Reddi, 2007)

The first-person narration of the story allows the reader to understand the point of view of the main character. The anxiety and distress of old Shiva Murthy is presented in his own voice as in one junction he says-

I did not want to tell him that I could not see the small lettering clearly. I had not visited the eye doctor, although my daughter had been insisting on it. I was getting tired of her constant worry about me. Everything in U.S. had been tiring to me in the previous few weeks—the people, the weather, the food. Thank God my wife did not have to go through this experience also. She may not have been able to adjust as well as I had been doing. (Reddi, 2007)

Once a well-respected judicial officer in his hometown Hyderabad and now in oblivion in this new city causes Shiva a great discomfort. Conversing onto the situation of adjustment in old age faced by Murthy may sometimes appear as a tirade but there are certain understanding into the psyche of the aged people that has to be noted as "older people are often reluctant to seek assistance from their general practitioners" (Cordingley et al., 20001). As "older people see self-reliance as a virtue" (Cordingley et al., 20001) and tend to work accordingly, Shiva scolds Manu-

Not to worry. I have no need of your help. I see what type of help you give. If a mere clerk insults your religious customs, you do not care. If she tells your lifelong friend that he does not belong in this country, it is no concern of yours. (Reddi, 2007)

This kind of conversation between the two friends reflects Murthy's craving for his past as well as for his home in India. This longing for home becomes more prominent as Murthy remarks "America is a lonely place... We Indians must stick together" (Reddi, 2007).

Shiva's dominating, affluent and headstrong personality finds him often in clash with the person in front of him. He appears not to be an insecure guy who in his late age is widowed and staying with his daughter. Rather being in the job of serving as a justice, his outlook gets strengthened in the fallibility of others. He can't stand people with disintegration in moral as he judges his friend Manu with the habit of eating meat. There is a stringent manoeuvre in justice Shiva's relegation of conduct into the matter of daily lives. Often with old age people this matter of personal edginess could be seen but for justice Murthy it is much more ambiguous with his migration to the US.

#### V. "BANGLES": THE POSSESSION OF VALUE INTO A DEFICIENT WORLD

"Bangles" is the fourth story in the collection *Karma and Other Stories* and it narrates the tale of an elderly woman named Arundhati who has travelled to the United States to live with her son and daughter-in-law. The narrator of this story is Rukmini, a minor character from the second story of the collection namely "Lakshmi and the Librarian", a kind of prequel to the present story. The story reveals its main plot through the conversation of Rukmini and Arundhati. The title of this story "Bangles" refers to the jewellery worn in wrist mostly by women and also a sign (especially the golden bangles) of a married one which in the story's context is earlier possessed by Arundhati's grandmother who then gave it to her. Arundhati's reminiscence about her possession of bangles and the other jewellery further goes back to more than half a century when she internalises in herself as the narrator notes-

She loved her jewellery. It had been placed on her neck and arms and fingers on the day of her bride-making ceremony, fifty-three years ago, by her grandmothers, aunts, and older cousins, women who had journeyed before her through life. She would be a married woman now; she needed to wear the evidence of her status. (Reddi, 2007)

But this long possessed dearly past of her get collapsed all of a sudden as she faced change after her migration to the United States. However, the thought of giving up on her possession creates an emptiness in her mind which signals her traumatic loneliness into the experiences away from her home and her urge to return to her homeland.

Arundhati had come to Lexington, Massachusetts to live with her only son Venu after her husband's death. Venu lives with his wife Kamlesh and they have two daughters and a son. Arundhati remembers of an afternoon in the early days of her coming here in the US and how her son assisted her into the new locale. She can remember that sweet experience as she gets relieved into the thought of being taken care by her son earnestly-

Her son guided her through a dim hallway to a carpeted bedroom with matching drapes and bedspread. Everything was clean. Venu smiled and extended his arm, showing the size and luxury of the space. "This is your new room...this is your new city, new country, new life". (Reddi, 2007)

The most adored one among Arundhati's grandchildren are the youngest one named Rahul. Arundhati was in fact brimming with joy but "she was happy to see her granddaughters after four long years, but it was the grandson, the one who would carry on her husband's name, that she most longed for" (Reddi, 2007). Though she is very impressed to see her son's success and his well-settled life, she finds their daily routine uncanny as they do not regularly attend the temple. To her belief a happy life must entail some religious generosity in the daily course of life. However, she finds some fallibility in this new circumstances, particularly into the household activities. She is sceptical of her daughter-in-law who takes her son Rahul's misbehaviour lightly. The narrator records one such matter into typical mix of first and second person narration: "He jumped on the sofa where Arundhati slept, and woke her. "Nanamma wants to sleep, Rahul," Kamlesh said sweetly, but she did not lift her son to the floor" (Reddi, 2007). Arundhati later found Kamlesh unable to take a proper care of Rahul as it was expected of her to attain the needs of the children. As the story progresses one can find that Arundhati becomes more engaged in the household duties of taking care of the children and especially of Rahul. The reader get to see Arundhati's typical mannerisms and her notion of conduct in the traditional Indian household enabling her to criticise the indoor practicalities of an Indian family that situates itself in the flexible social circumstances of the West.

Rukmini, the narratorial voice as well as a character into the story is a distant relative, who eventually becomes Arundhati's friend. Arundhati does not share most of the family matters with Rukmini as she believes it is unethical and unjust to disclose the family problems to an outsider. However, Arundhati contradictorily finds a kind of solace in this foreign land conversing with Rukmini. They go together in the cultural functions, as Venu does not have time to attend them. Arundhati gradually becomes separated into the familial enterprise that Venu and his wife cultivated. She now has none to talk to nor anyone to take care of except Rukmini. Arundhati feels about this transference of caregiving from Venu to Rukmini and realises "she was being handed over, like a burden, to a stranger" (Reddi, 2007). Thus, it reverberates the narration of a typical South-Asian household in the US where multiple conjectural points have been addressed in view of a migratory family and its upend value-ethics with the conflict in generational relegation in it where-

a successful American doctor tries to fulfil his duty by bringing his newly widowed mother from Hyderabad to his upscale suburban home, but fails to make space in his young family's life for her religious and cultural needs. ("Fiction Book Review: Karma and Other Stories by Rishi Reddi", 2007)

The case of Arundhati as it unfolds realises her as a dependent individual who has to move to her son for security. There she almost lost her freedom and gradually becomes a caretaker of the house. Her orthodox belief that only a son will take the responsibility of his parents also gets shattered when an unknown woman, Rukmini, cares for her. Thus, at the end of the story she tried to buy her freedom in exchange for her bangles, as she says Rukmini: "Then take these." She slipped the gold bangles off her wrist. "We need not tell anyone. Take them and sell them for me" (Reddi, 2007). Arundhati gives off her last possession, the bangles that are most dear to her, to buy ticket back to her home as she finds Venu incorrigible for this.

The widowed Arundhati, however, casts light on an interesting fact. The life expectancy of Indian women's is slightly high compared to men. Wherein the average women live for 64 years, men live 63 years (Leete & Alam 1993). This difference has an impact on the well-being of older women since women in India are generally younger than their husbands. Thus, Arundhati is an example in the fact that "gender is likely to affect the ageing process, as Asian women are more likely to be subjected to social and economic marginalisation" (Burholt & Wenger, 2003). Economic dependency of women is a phenomenon which

becomes more chronic with age and widowhood. Consequently, older women become dependent on their families for economic and social support in their late age. Thus, Deluigi points to the inadvertent situation a mother usually had to undergo in case of extension of familial bondage to the ends of a nation. He writes-

The migration choice of mothers is, therefore, a necessary and contingent family strategy focused on the children. Women often live trapped in a contrasting polarity between distance and guilt, economic and existential fragility needs, remote care and ongoing support, delegation and fear, etc., concealing the emotional costs of the experience of transnational parenting. (Deluigi, 2016)

Arundhati is just an other woman who falls short into this transnational idealisation of close family circle under one roof. Once she realises her space into this strange land being shrunken up, she feels trapped. What she can do to get out of this is to return back. But that return or rather freedom to go back comes with a price- the price to lose her dearly held possession. What a golden bangle for an aged woman into her widowed mental disposition can do is understandable.

## VI. CONCLUSION

In the current scenario, people travel more frequently and extensively than at any earlier point in human history. They are leaving their filial surrounding and move to a foreign country with all the suspicion and doubts regarding the unknown place into its strangeness and opportunities. As the individual family structure is increasing, the support for the old people back at home are getting eroded day by day. Old people often travel to foreign countries to their children for old age security and to be of a household help. In the above mentioned two stories, the plight of the elderly people are drawn as both of them are more into the uneasiness of the new world. In these stories, both the elderly Shiva and Arundhati finds the consequences of migration very hard. While Shiva Murthy suffers with his identity, Arundhati finds the dependent life troublesome. Both of the characters appear disillusioned to the idea of an ideal life in another country. Moreover, the two stories selected here for discussion portray the old age migration and the problem faced by them in two different social circumstances. From the above discussion on the two stories "Justice Shiva Ram Murthy" and "Bangles", it can be said that for elderly people it is very difficult to adapt and accept the new surroundings. Proverbial remark of the old wine into new bottle, here in the case of aged people in

new surroundings, proves more of an uncanny and uneasy testimony as the wine here is too timid to taste its shape in the ever new situation of the hostland. Thus, Shiva and Arundhati are the old essence where the taste of the other characters get reflected but they themselves appear outmoded, sometimes a taken back rigid caricature into the world of ever changing humans.

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