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Academic essay (1.500 words) based on the chapter *The home, the journey and the border* of Madan Sarup.

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“Identity is a construction, a consequence of a process of interaction between people, institutions and practices” (Sarup, 1996:11)

In chapter 1 of the book *Identity, Culture and the Postmodern World*, Madan Sarup explores the meanings of home, tradition, exile and foreignness linked with the idea of identity. They are related to each other and shape human behaviour, sense of belonging and personality.

“It is usually assumed that a sense of place, or belonging, gives a person stability. But what makes a place home?” (Sarup, 1996:1) This is the first big question in this reading as well as an important reflexion to focus on. When a person talks about home usually refers to family, sense of love, privacy, friends and comfort. For some people home it would always be their parent’s house because is the place where they grow up. Childhood memories and the mother are recurrent home places too. However, a friend house or this apartment located in the coast where you share your holidays with your couple it could be understood as home too. This reflexion makes us think if the real meaning of home is more related with feelings than physical places. It is usually said that “home is where the heart is” (Sarup, 1996:2) because it does not matter where you are or in which country you live, a piece of what you feel as home will always go with you.

Many people have to leave their own country, their home, and move to a different place. The reasons are many: political problems, violence, love, studies, illness, job, etc. In any of these situations the person needs to build a new home once s/he “has crossed the border” (Sarup, 1996:1). This is the situation of migrants, who need to build a new home inside their heart to start feeling part of the new place. It is in these new situations when the old home can be replaced to the new one leaving the original roots behind.

“Identity is to do not with being but with becoming” (Sarup, 1996:6).

When someone migrates to a different place s/he changes his identity because s/he adopts new traditions, new culture and new lifestyle. As traditions and identity, home is not fixed, is changeable: “Place is often associated with tradition, we often forget that tradition, too, is always being made and remade (...) Tradition is about change” (Sarup, 1996:4-5). Another interesting idea is that adapting to a new place is always linked with losing our roots. As Sarup points: “In the transformation, every step forward can also be a step back” (1996:6) referring that once you embrace a new culture, depending how fast or slow you do it, you can forget your old traditions, your old home.

When someone migrates that person always suffers an interior change. The way s/he understands life, communicates with each other, adopts the new culture etc. This transformation can be big or small but there is always an alteration that makes this person different than before starting the journey.

When we talk about identity and affirm that it changes depending where that person lives, the traditions s/he adapts, the language and friends etc. we need to think there are many kinds of identity and any of them are fixed. According to Sarup, there are “personal identity, social identity, national identity, ethnic identity, feminist identity” (1996:1) and they are changeable. Even if that person has always lived in the same city and same house, has always been married with the same person and have always had the same friends; human behaviour always changes. Identity is what we are as human beings and over the time it is altered.

Identity is a “key word” (Sarup, 1996:1) really difficult to define with accuracy. According to Sarup, “identity can be displaced; it can be hybrid or multiple. It can be constituted through community: family, region, the nation-state” (1996:1). But why it is so important to understand what is our real identity? “Some people don’t feel at home where they are; they are unhappy and they look back. Millions of people in the world today are searching for ‘roots’: they go back to the town, the country, or the continent they came from long ago” (Sarup, 1996:3). This quote points identity as part of human happiness so that is why there are so many people focusing on finding it. However, sometimes it is used as a way to escape from reality, from real troubles and real reasons why they could not achieve happiness. Even the lack of identity might be

the main reason of their problems; that need of filling an empty space could be related with a current emotional lack.

In many situations people do not find what they were looking for but what they needed. It usually happens during these trips where they look for their roots because what those journeys really mean are interior trips. During those days and weeks, the person has had time to think about himself and his life. As Sarup said: “These are the people who in some way have found it difficult ‘to from roots’ to become firmly established. By learning about their ‘roots’ they (hope to) gain a renewed pride in their identity” (1996:3). Finding their roots, coming back to the place where their grandparents lived until dead, where their parents grown up or where they were born are desperate ways of finding the meaning of life and making their own life more valuable, more real, more exciting.

Another interesting point in this chapter is the awareness of identity. “People with a good memory don’t remember anything because they don’t forget anything” (Sarup, 1996:4). When you are sure about your own identity you do not have the necessity of search it, there is no need of finding for your own roots because you are sure they are already part of yourself. Roots are related with the term homeland but as we have explained before, home it is not necessary a physical place, is more about feelings. For this reason, when someone travels to the place where his roots are, is because s/he is trying to recover some familiar feelings, to obtain a lost sense of security and belonging. That is why identity search is usually linked to emotional states.

“We are born into relationships which are always based in a place” (Sarup, 1996:5). When we change this “place” everything we have always understood as home changes as well: language, culture, friends... Adapting to a new place, a new home, is never easy. The memory of the old home is usually part of migrant’s mind as a secure and comfortable place. That is why many of them try to strongly keep their culture. As Sarup explained: “Migrants who, feeling threatened, often emphasises their cultural identity as a way of self-protection” (Sarup, 1996:12), as a way of fighting against nostalgia.

“The stranger is universal because of having no home and no roots” (Sarup, 1996:11)

When we refer to exile and migration we define “foreign” as someone “who does not belongs to the group (...) who does not belong to the state in which we are, the one who does not have the same nationality” (Sarup, 1996:7). These people, these foreign, “have a foot in each camp” (Sarup, 1996:7) because they share old and new traditions. However, there is a kind of people who are not just foreign but “strangers”, they do not belong to anywhere and “try to erase their stigma by trying to assimilate”. According to Sarup: “Unlike an alien or a foreigner, the stranger is not simply a newcomer, a person temporarily out of place. S/he is an eternal wandered, homeless always and everywhere” (1996:11).

We live in a global society where it is really common to have lived in different places and mix others cultures with ours. Globalization has changed the old idea that frontiers are made to lock up a country and its culture, currently “the frontier does not merely close the nation in on itself, but also immediately opens it to an outside, to other nations” (Sarup, 1996:6)

According to Kristeva, quoted on Sarup book, “we are all in process of becoming foreigners in a universe that is being widened more than ever, that is more than ever heterogeneous beneath its apparent scientific and media-inspired unity” (1996:9). Because in current society is almost impossible to do not be influenced by other cultures while we loose some of our original identity. It is not necessarily a bad thing because it lets us reach other realities and other ways of understanding life. However, if “it is nearly always assumed that to have deep roots is good” (Sarupt, 1996:3) and we loose them, what kind of society are we building? As Kristeva and Sarup point, a universal one where identity will not be anymore a physical place but a personal feeling occasionally shared with others “strangers” like us.

Bibliography

Sarup, Madan (1996) The home, the journey and the border in SARUP, Madan (1996) *Identity, Culture and the Postmodern World*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh Universtiy Press.