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The Portable Homeland: The Space in Between Belonging and Becoming

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Abstract: This paper re-evaluates the notion of “home” not as a geographical vantage point but as a fluid concept negotiated through the tension between a migrant’s long-term residence, the home they once knew, and the systematic exclusion they encounter in the “host” country. Migrants today assume the status of the “permanent guest” within the socio-political fabric. The paper explores how they navigate the “third space,” a concept of hybridity proposed by Homi Bhabha, a psychological realm of tension between the dualities of their realities, and whether adaptability as cultural hybridity is a proactive choice or a survivalist necessity.

Central to the study are material anchors and sensory architecture. Through the lens of sensory ethnography, the paper examines how material belongings, ranging from a mere smartphone to the ancestral weight of heirloom jewellery, serve as vital tethers to the notion of a fractured identity. These act as anchors to the life they knew, the life they could have had, the void of exile, and the momentum of bridging the gap between the lost past and the uncertain future.

The research also delves into how domestic tasks such as cooking, storytelling, and clothing not only bind migrant families together but also help replicate the memory of home and, moreover, act as migrants’ attempts to regain agency when the world seems foreign. By weaving their past into their day-to-day activities, they trespass physical boundaries and seek comfort in their history within the sanction of their home, which remains a breathing reality.

Finally, the paper engages with the deep psychological implications of “bifocal existence.” The study contributes to an understanding of the liminal space between belonging and becoming as both a site of profound psychological toll and radical resilience.

Keywords: the third space, migrant agency, bifocal agency, sensory architecture, fragmented identity

Introduction

“My home is the second one to the right of the statue.”

That is what I, at five, used to say when someone asked me where my home was. A child’s understanding of home was anchored in the stone and specificity of the street she grew up in. But that notion changed radically. Nearly a decade later, I realized my “home,” as they claimed, was not the blue house to the right of the statue I had known all my life but a country I had never stepped foot in. That realization came with a weight of inheritance, a strange confusion, and a sense of being different—a paradox in which the sanctuary I knew was a ghost of a past I would never be able to claim. And that is how thousands like me—“migrants”—view home: something blurry, something real; an idea that is both abstract as well as concrete. A shared confusion that never seemed to ease but instead flowed effortlessly from one generation to another as an heirloom we kept close but never dared share.

Traditional sociological perspectives often frame home as the four walls we grew up in, perhaps a garden beside it, or a corner that molded us into who we are. In almost all cases, it is tethered to a piece of land, a wall, architecture, and division, all leading to boundaries—be they those of our neighborhood, the state, or even the nation. The notion of home involuntarily sparks a sense of nostalgia, comfort, permanence, stability, and security. It is often viewed as a geographical vantage point—a fixed point on the map, a static architecture, an answer to the frequently asked question:

“Where is your home?”

But what of those whose boundaries have been blurred before they could even spell home?

In the contemporary world, marked by mass displacement and mobility, the concept of home as four walls proves increasingly inadequate. For migrants scattered across the world, the word *home* is not a particular spot on the map but a fluid negotiation. It never appears as a definite circle on the map; instead, it emerges as a constant struggle between belonging and isolation, permanence and perishability, memory and survival. This paper re-evaluates the notion of home for migrants not as a destination but as a portable homeland they carry with them. They often embody the status of the “permanent guest,” included in the official paperwork of states or counted during elections but, more often than not, excluded socially.

This condition is further explained by Homi Bhabha in *The Location of Culture*, where he conceptualizes it as a “third space”—an identity that is neither wholly of the homeland nor of the host nation, but a liminal space of exploration and confusion. It emerges as a site of psychological turmoil and a bifocal existence in which the dualities of being are constantly called upon and challenged,

further strengthened by the concept of the “Myth of Return” or “Imaginary Home” articulated by Salman Rushdie. The study questions whether adaptation and the need for assimilation are choices available to migrants or necessary strategies crucial to their survival within systems of long-standing structural exclusion.

The paper moves beyond the trauma of displacement and sheds light on migrants’ efforts to reclaim agency within the four walls of their existence. It examines the construction of a sense of home and belonging through sensory ethnography, using mundane materials—from the taps on digital smartphones to the clink of old bangles—as vessels of memory of the home they once knew. It also studies how the kitchen becomes a site of radical resistance, where simple recipes or domestic acts become more than daily chores; they become acts of remembrance, agency, and legacy. With reference to the poem *At the Lahore Karhai* by Imtiaz Dharker, the paper demonstrates how deeply food is tied to migrants’ quests for identity. Through meals, the soft art of storytelling, and the preservation of certain clothing materials, migrants fill the void of exile in their hearts. These practices become simple acts of rebellion that help them transcend physical boundaries and reach toward a home that whispers only through memory. Similarly, with reference to *The Namesake* by Jhumpa Lahiri, this paper explores how the simplest acts can become the most radical forms of resistance.

Finally, the paper explores the psychological toll on migrants and how they transform the trauma of displacement into a radical sense of belonging to a place they now call their own. It examines how they navigate bifocal existence and situate identity within a liminal space between belonging and becoming. For migrants, home is not merely a place they inhabit but a reality shaped by psychological strain and radical resilience. The paper concludes with an exploration of the psychological architecture of exile: How do people live when their “home” is a ghost and their “host” is a cage? It argues that for migrants, home is not a fixed geographical entity but a portable psychological architecture sustained through memory, material culture, and everyday acts of resistance. This study employs a multidisciplinary approach, synthesizing literary analysis of diasporic texts (*The Namesake*, *At the Lahore Karhai*) with auto-ethnographic reflections and material culture studies.

Homi Bhabha – The Third Space Theory

The dilemma of what *home* means for migrants is further explained in postcolonial writings that emerged as a result of colonization and extreme displacement. The notion of home was never the same after rapid cultural exchange, the search for identity, and the question of selfhood intensified. As defined by Homi K. Bhabha in *The Location of Culture*:

“It is that Third Space, though unrepresentable in itself, which constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity.”

This concept emerged as an explanation for the intricate complexities of migration and identity. Bhabha initially distinguishes between two definite places. The first is the place of origin, which acts as the starting point of the migrant’s journey. It is often mythicized by memory and nostalgia and appears almost otherworldly in recollection. The second place, the host country, emerges as a sharp contrast. It counters memory with reality and appears as a site of bureaucracy, rules, and a cold, systematic manner of life.

These two places, though forming a clear structure of expectations, are never definitive. Bhabha therefore proposes the notion of a space that exists between them. This idea of a middle ground leads to his theory of the “Third Space.” The Third Space offers a fundamental framework for a deeper understanding of migration and cultural negotiation. Emerging from postcolonial debates regarding identity, language, and representation, it becomes a form of resistance that challenges conventional understandings of nation and culture.

According to this theory, identity is not fixed but constantly evolving. It remains fluid, continually reshaped through circumstances and influences. Identity is never “pure”; it belongs neither entirely to the place of origin nor entirely to the host country but instead emerges within a middle ground between the two. In identity formation, the past and the present collide to produce something raw, unapologetic, and distinctly one’s own.

Within the framework of the Third Space, identity becomes associated with negotiation, hybridity, and translation of the self. When understood within the context of migration, this space becomes crucial for interpreting the complexities of both the place of origin and the host country. According to Bhabha, the Third Space does not exist merely as a metaphorical midpoint of negotiation; rather, it is a site where meaning and identity are actively forged. In *The Location of Culture*, he insists that cultural identity is formed in the “interstitial passage between fixed identifications.” Thus, it emerges not as a site of stability but as one of transition that challenges familiar binaries.

In Bhabha’s formulation, strict binaries such as native and foreign, East and West, colonizer and colonized lose their rigidity. While the dissolution of such binaries may appear theoretically straightforward, for immigrants living a bifocal existence it often exposes fractures within both the places they inhabit. This creates an ongoing struggle between past and present, origin and arrival, memory and adaptation.

For migrants, the liminal space between the home they once knew and the home they are still learning to inhabit becomes crucial in defining their existence. Liminality therefore emerges as a central theme in Bhabha's theory. Culture becomes a performance rather than a possession.

For migrants, the notion of home changes continuously. While traditional understandings tie home to geography—a nation, a state, or a territory—for migrants, home is rooted instead in memory, senses, and rituals passed down from one generation to another. These function not only as heirlooms of a lost past but also as everyday forms of resistance within a world that demands assimilation. Migrants carry their fragmented existence into the host country, where it is transformed into something layered, multicultural, and fluid. The concept of the Third Space helps explain this continual shift in their experience of home.

As Bhabha writes in *The Location of Culture*:

“The theoretical recognition of the split-space of enunciation may open the way to conceptualising an international culture ... It is the in-between space that carries the burden of the meaning of culture.”

The theory rejects the idea of purity in identity and instead provides migrants with a framework through which agency may be understood. It challenges assumptions of superiority and domination between cultures and demonstrates how the notion of home becomes increasingly indeterminate. More broadly, the theory not only offered migration a new conceptual dimension but also disrupted the cultural hegemony prevalent across the globe.

Hybridity, one of Bhabha's most influential postcolonial concepts, provides the theoretical backbone for arguments surrounding multiculturalism. It explains how migrants, despite their struggles, often occupy the position of the “permanent guest” within the host country. Hybridity does not advocate the dilution of identity; rather, it supports the creation of something new. Adaptation to unfamiliar environments becomes not merely a choice but a strategy of survival.

Hybridity manifests in everyday practices of resistance. It rarely appears as something dramatic but instead emerges through ordinary acts involving language, festivals, and food, which gradually become tools for survival and reclamation of the life once known. For instance, the child of immigrants who celebrates traditional festivals while participating in globalized modernity embodies this hybridity. She does not oscillate between two incompatible identities; instead, she inhabits a Third Space where these identities intersect. Similarly, an immigrant who thinks in their native language while speaking fluently in English with peers demonstrates another form of hybrid identity. For such individuals, home is neither confined to ancestral soil nor limited to the present residence; rather, it is layered through inherited memory and lived experience. This condition represents not cultural confusion but cultural negotiation.

These examples reinforce the idea that homeland is not defined solely by territory but also by disruption and transformation.

However, the Third Space is not a utopian site of seamless blending; it is marked by tension, isolation, and difference. For instance, a third-generation Bangladeshi ten-year-old may not understand why her Bengali accent sounds unfamiliar to those who look like her. Over time, she may feel compelled to modify her dialect to fit in with her peers, yet when she imagines home, she recalls only the house she grew up in rather than the land her grandparents described.

Migration thus becomes paradoxical, creating both attachment and estrangement and leaving immigrants in a state of limbo regarding what to call home. Despite possessing voting rights and bureaucratic recognition, they often remain socially marked as different. Passports and formal inclusion frequently function as performative markers of belonging rather than guarantees of acceptance. Migrants therefore assume the status of “perpetual guests” in lands they now call their own, facing continuing alienation. This condition produces what may be described as “differential inclusion,” in which migrants are present within the state but remain socially excluded.

Although they share offices, neighborhoods, and classrooms with their peers, during moments of political tension they are often the first to be singled out. This raises an important question: where does such inclusion leave them? As vote banks, or as dispensable populations in times of crisis? The ballot offers them a voice but not always an ear. This gap between official inclusion and lived alienation creates a persistent tension between legal belonging and psychological belonging. Migrants often continue to live within hyphenated identities—Indian-American, Bangladeshi-Indian, or British-Pakistani—where adaptation becomes a necessity rather than a choice.

While the host country may remain unfamiliar, the remembered homeland also gradually becomes distant. In many diasporic texts, the homeland remembered is not identical to the homeland that exists in reality. Memory transforms space, as articulated in Salman Rushdie’s concept of the “Myth of Return” or the “Imaginary Homeland.” Through his metaphor of the broken mirror, Rushdie illustrates how migrants construct fragmented visions of their past. When they leave their homeland, it becomes frozen in memory, even as the actual landscape continues to change. This creates a temporal disconnect, resulting in a double exile—once upon departure and again upon return.

Thus, the homeland shifts from a physical location to a mental space, producing an ontological distance between memory and reality. The immigrant often exists as a spectral presence, assembling fragments of memory into a version of homeland that exists only for them while holding onto the myth of return. According to Rushdie, migrants remain detached enough to recognize the limitations of their host country yet hopeful enough to imagine returning home someday.

This perspective aligns with Bhabha's theory, in which migrants occupy a threshold position rather than belonging fully to either location. The Third Space ultimately provides a framework for understanding migration as a process of becoming rather than simply displacement. It reframes home as fluid, suggesting that migrants do not merely move between two worlds but inhabit a third space shaped by ambivalence, transition, creativity, and agency.

***The Namesake* by Jhumpa Lahiri and the Weight of Identity**

Names for immigrants act as psychological anchors to their heritage and become much more than mere inheritance. The dualities of bifocal existence in a foreign country and the framework of the Third Space theory are vividly crystallized in *The Namesake* by Jhumpa Lahiri. Following the story of Gogol Ganguly, a second-generation migrant, the novel illustrates the weight of identity. His struggle mirrors that of thousands like him who stand at the threshold between the world they were born into and the world they inherited.

His name, Gogol—neither American nor Indian but Russian, a tribute to his father's past—makes him stand apart from his peers. He struggles to fit in both with his Indian heritage and within the American environment, leading to a state of perpetual discomfort. While he holds American citizenship, his name once again positions him as a guest. His eventual decision to change his name to Nikhil does not ease the conflict; instead, it emerges as a desperate attempt at agency in a world that suppresses his sense of belonging.

He is afraid to be Nikhil—someone he does not know, and who does not know him.

This forms the crux of his hesitation and his struggle to accept both the person he is becoming and the person he once was. For him, the decision becomes life-altering. He stands as a powerful depiction of the struggles faced by migrants attempting to balance expectations and reality. For Gogol, his name becomes a cage, entrapping him in a cycle of uncertainty and anguish. His story emphasizes once again the hyphen that separates him from the rest.

He represents the psychological impact of searching for individuality in a world that determines who one is long before one can make sense of it. In contemporary diasporic literature, Gogol emerges as a figure burdened by difference and the mental exhaustion of adaptation, visible from his teenage years into adulthood. He also demonstrates the hypervigilance toward difference common among immigrants and an early disconnect from his roots. Later, in his attempt to reconcile with them, he experiences an ambiguous loss of the past, presenting an unapologetic depiction of a migrant caught between two worlds.

As the novel states:

“And yet it had not been possible to fully reinvent himself, to break from that mismatched name. His marriage had been something of a misstep as well. And the way his father had slipped away from them, that had been the worst accident of all. And yet these events have formed Gogol, shaped him, determined who he is.”

These lines capture the turmoil of fitting in, the quest for reinvention, and the search for individuality that ultimately shape the person he becomes.

Sensory Ethnography

For migrants caught in the liminal space between arrival and departure, home migrates inward. For them, home no longer occupies land but the senses. They build a life through texture, scent, sound, and everyday activities. Architecture implies permanence, but impermanence remains the only constant in the lives of immigrants. For them, architecture becomes psychological rather than spatial.

Material belongings ranging from digital phones to heirloom jewellery act as bridges that lessen the distance between the two worlds they inhabit. For the displaced, *home* becomes a performance curated through mundane objects. These objects—digital pings, worn fabric, and simmering spices—act as “vessels of memory,” carrying the weight of a vanished geography into the sterility of the host nation.

Migration often begins with the rhythmic tap on the phone. A smartphone, an essential tool in contemporary life, becomes necessary for survival. It closes the distance between the unfamiliar world of isolation and another world filled with rain-soaked courtyards, festivals echoing through screens, warmth of laughter, and tender voice notes from grandparents across borders. Unlike passport stamps, which enable physical mobility, smartphones enable emotional mobility. Through WhatsApp calls and video conversations, migrants not only see but also participate in distant lives. The home that exists thousands of miles away is brought closer through the sound of familiar laughter.

While smartphones bridge distance, heirloom jewellery reclaims space. In a host country, the clink of bangles beneath a pashmina shawl reasserts heritage in subtle yet powerful ways. Soaked in nostalgia, bangles passed down from one generation to another become more than heirlooms; they become transmissions of memory, strength, flaws, love, sorrow, and every emotion that shapes the experience of displacement. Their rhythmic sound acts as a territorial acoustic claim in unfamiliar surroundings and as reminders of the life left behind.

These sounds create a sonic palimpsest—the layering of a native dialect over the white noise of a foreign city. The distinct hiss of a pressure cooker, for many South Asian migrants, signals the

transition from the public world of assimilation to the private world of authentic being. Hybridity ceases to exist merely as theory and instead becomes intertwined with everyday practice.

Materials carried across borders are not simply belongings but tactile anchors that create a sense of home. A passed-down silk saree or a worn prayer rug may bring migrants closer to home than geographical return ever could. For migrants, touching such materials becomes a form of haptic memory. When the eyes encounter landscapes that feel unfamiliar, the hands seek textures that feel known. The preservation of textiles, recipes, dialects, and ritual gestures becomes a subtle refusal of total assimilation. These practices function not merely as nostalgic indulgences but as strategies of survival.

The Third Space theory becomes particularly evident when the polyester shirt of the host country is replaced with worn cotton clothing the moment the door closes on the outside world of performance and expectation. This transition marks a symbolic return to homeland.

Through sensory ethnography, it becomes evident that migrants do not passively endure displacement; rather, they curate continuity. Whether through arranging furniture to resemble ancestral homes, recreating festivals despite climatic differences, or preserving storytelling traditions at dinner tables, these acts become forms of narrative reclamation. Such stories, passed from one generation to the next, function not merely as memories but as inheritances, providing later generations with layered identities they may not fully comprehend.

Within this framework, the migrant home is neither an imitation of the lost homeland nor a simple extension of the host nation. Sensory architecture transforms exile into resistance. Migrants do not merely inhabit the world; they recreate it according to their own meanings. Sensory ethnography foregrounds how lived experience is mediated through embodied perception rather than abstract identity categories. Thus, the “portable homeland” emerges as both fragile—because it relies on memory and nostalgia—and durable, because it survives across generations and borders.

At the Lahore Karhai and a New Perspective

While the name in *The Namesake* functions as an anchor of identity, in *At the Lahore Karhai* food becomes an escape and offers a fresh perspective on the problem of displacement. The kitchen in Imtiaz Dharker’s poem becomes a site of radical resistance. Opening in the cold of winter, the poem gradually transitions into the warmth of Lahore. The recipe becomes a map, and food becomes a language that refuses to be bound by borders, instead emerging as something primal—an inheritance that existed long before displacement or nation-states.

The poem performs something remarkable: it overturns the grimness that often surrounds migration and presents food as a social glue. It emphasizes community-building, where individuals from different regions come together to share a meal. *At the Lahore Karhai* resonates strongly with Salman Rushdie's theory of the "broken mirror," where fragments of memory come together to form a collective image of belonging. Individuals offer pieces of their histories and assemble a kaleidoscope of community, memory, warmth, and home. In doing so, the poem creates a micronation in which identity is reconfigured.

Dharker personalizes food through the lines:

"A feast! We swoop
on a whole family of dishes.
The tarka dal is Auntie Hameeda
the Karhai ghosht is Khala Ameena
the gajjar halva is Appa Rasheeda.

The warm naan is you."

These lines form the emotional center of the poem. For a brief moment, while sharing the same food, they are no longer Pakistani, Sindhi, or English; instead, they belong to a shared community rather than existing as guests. Within the radius of that table, they are no longer immigrants or natives but people at home.

Dharker maintains a strong connection to her roots and sustains a quiet resistance through everyday acts of remembrance. In the lines:

"the owner's smiling son,
the cook at the hot kebabs,
Kartar, Rohini, Robert,
Ayesha, Sangam, I,
bound together by the bread we break,
sharing out our continent."

she emphasizes food as a binding force through which individuals are united by something as simple as bread. These become ways of remembering the life left behind while simultaneously reclaiming a new one. The pungent smell of spices, the simmering preparation of food, the prayer mat, and the clink of the ladle together create a legacy that belongs entirely to those who share these experiences. The poem therefore presents an alternative perspective on displacement—one that is not silent or empty but filled with possibility and agency.

Conclusion

Ultimately, home for migrants emerges as a verb rather than a noun. Everyday objects and practices act as bridges that hold them together when the host country becomes a cage and the homeland becomes blurred. The paper concludes that the ghostliness of such existence is not something to fear but something to learn to live with.

Despite the psychological toll of migration, immigrants often develop a stereoscopic advantage—a capacity to see the world from multiple perspectives. Whether through the act of sharing a meal in London or struggling with a name in New York, migrants remain in a constant process of becoming rather than existing in a fixed state. Adaptation, therefore, is not a choice but a necessary strategy for survival.

Migrants do not simply fit into existing structures; they transform them. Home is no longer located on a particular street or tied to a specific geography but exists in the scent of spices, the clink of bangles, and the voices of grandparents across distances. Home is carried within memory and embodied practice. It becomes an act of resistance in a world that continually demands assimilation. It is stability, comfort, and confusion at once—never fully explainable in a single word, yet always deeply felt.

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