

HOME AND (BE)LONGING : A STUDY OF DIVAKARUNI'S "MRS. DUTTA WRITES A LETTER"

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Abstract

The concept of 'home' has undergone a drastic revision with the evolution of the modern multicultural society, which in turn is effected by migratory movements across the globe. The traditional concept of home as 'the place of origin' is inadequate for people who have crossed the boundaries of a nation state once or more. For people with transnational identities who inhabit the transnational diasporic space, 'home' is a fluid concept. To quote Homi Bhabha, "Home may not be where the heart is, nor even the hearth . . . Home may be a mode of living made into a metaphor of survival".

The paper seeks to examine the various concepts of 'home' that find representation in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's short story "Mrs. Dutta writes a letter". It also attempts to find out how appropriate Bhabha's concept of 'unhomeliness' is for a proper understanding of the reality of the protagonist's situation. Divakaruni has skilfully delineated the flux of consciousness of her protagonist through her brilliant craftsmanship that blends the limited omniscient point of view with the first person narration through letters and interior monologue.

Keywords : multicultural, transnational, diasporic space, unhomeliness, omniscient point of view, first person narration, interior monologue.

"Home may not be where the heart is, nor even the hearth . . . Home may be a mode of living made into a metaphor of survival."
(Homi . K . Bhabha)

The concept of 'home' and the loss of home is a recurrent motif in Postcolonial literature. Nevertheless, it is rather difficult to define 'home' and 'belonging' in a world which is characterised by flux and globalisation. As the migratory movement is on the rise it is getting increasingly difficult to arrive at a fixed definition of 'home'. A world that is fast becoming cosmopolitan inevitably engenders a plurality of 'homes' and 'belongings'. Generally speaking we associate the ideas of comfort, shelter, security, happiness, welcome and identity with the concept of 'home'. It is a place associated with nostalgic memories of our growing up years. It is a place amidst our family and friends, and "where we can be with people very much like

ourselves” (McLeod , 210) who share our beliefs , faith and cultural values . It is a place that forms our identity and imbibes in us a sense of belonging . Nevertheless , the concept of home is a problematic one for a diasporic subject . The term ‘diaspora’ which originally means ‘scattering of seeds’ (Anthias , 560) was first used to refer to the dispersel of Jews from Palestine . Since then it is being used as a comprehensive term to signify people who have been uprooted from their native place through migration , immigration or exile . Therefore it follows that diaspora is “ dislocation from the nation-state or geographical location of origin and relocation in one or more nation-states , territories or countries” (Briziel and Mannur , 1) . For people with a migrant background and transnational identity , who have crossed the boundaries of a nation state to settle in a foreign country, and who live in-between cultures , ‘home’ is a complex and multilayered concept . The connection between a migrant and his homeland is generally characterised by ambivalence. The diasporic subject is constantly at war with himself trying to resolve the conflicting passions concerning home – allegiance to the place of origin or to the place of residence . This is especially true for a first generation immigrant who suffers from a sense of ‘double consciousness’. For them the urge for assimilation is as strong as the need for preseving one’s culture and heritage . Living on the borders of two cultures while belonging to none completely , they suffer from feelings of ‘unhomeliness’. Homi .K. Bhabha , a leading voice in Postcolonial theory , has coined such terms as hybridity , ambivalence , unhomeliness to resist the colonial discourse . The feeling of not belonging to a particular place is what is described by Bhabha as unhomeliness . It is not a physical state of homelessness , but rather an emotional state . Lois Tyson in *Critical Theory Today* explains the term in the following manner:

“ to be unhomed is to feel not at home even in your own home because you are not at home in yourself : your cultural identity crisis has made you a psychological refugee” (14) .

While theorising the concepts of home and belonging it is necessary to consider both the traditional notion and the revised notions befitting a modern multicultural world . The traditional concept of home and belonging defines ‘home’ as the place where our ancestors lived ; it is the place of our origin . It is a static concept where home is a fixed geographical space . The traditional idea also implies that people define their identity according their roots . In this regard John Macleod argues :

“The concept of ‘home’ often performs an important function in our lives . It can act as a valuable means of orientation by giving us a sense of our place in the world . It tells us where we originated from and where we belong” (210) .

This old concept of home and belonging is quite inadequate in the globalised world of today where migration is a common phenomenon . This definition cannot be applied to a multicultural society where people from various races , ethnicity , and religions jostle together and eventually develop a hybrid identity. Nevertheless identity and belonging are central to the concept of home . Some people who have crossed the boundaries of their homeland rather inadvertently live like expatriates in the host country . Evidently their immediate place of residence where they live a marginalised existence and where their identity is questioned repeatedly will not arouse feelings of belonging or attachment . This is true for a migrant who has been unable to assimilate into the culture of the host country and lives in exilic conditions with nostalgic longings for the homeland . When a migrant resides in a nation state far away from his place of origin , and is long removed from his roots , he creates an image of the homeland in the mind . To him home is

a mental construction built from the residues of memory that survives from the past . It is an ‘imaginary homeland’, an ideal mental image that differs widely from reality . As Avtar Brah puts it, “ Home is a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination” . In this sense it is a place of no return . Here again ‘home’ as a place of origin is emphasised .

For those people who live in the diasporic space ‘home’ is an intricate , complex and multifaceted notion characterized by a plurality of ‘belongings’ and ‘homes’ . In this regard Walters explains that “ the notion of diaspora can represent multiple , plurilocal constructed location of home , thus avoiding ideas of fixity , boundedness , and nostalgic exclusivity traditionally implied by the notion ‘home’”(xvi) . For a second or third generation immigrant who is completely or partially acculturated to the country of adoption , home is where the feet are since they cannot relate to the homeland in the same way as their parents or grandparents do . So for them ‘home’ is their immediate residence . It is the “ . . . lived experience of a locality . Its sounds and smells , its heat and dust , balmy summer evenings , or the excitement of the first snowfall , shivering winter evenings , sombre grey skies in the middle of the day . . .all this , as mediated by the historically specific everyday of social relations” (Brah , 192) . Again for such people with transnational identities ‘home’ is also an abstract idea , i.e. , a community which caters to their emotional needs and gives them a definite identity . In the words of Dorinne Kondo ‘home’ is “ . . . a safe place , where there is no need to explain oneself to outsiders ; it stands for community” (97) . Therefore it follows that home is not only a spatial or physical location in the cartographic sense , but also an abstract space in the conceptual realm circumscribed by cultural and historical boundaries . In the modern globalised world the notion of ‘home’ has a wide significance . Cohen summarises the concept of ‘home’ as “ a place of origin , or the place of settlement , or a local , national or transnational space , or an imagined virtual community , or a matrix of human experiences and intimate relations” (Cohen , 3) .

This paper seeks to explore how cultural and temporal displacement affect the concept of home , and what ideas of home and belonging are presented in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s short story ‘Mrs. Dutta writes a letter.’ It also attempts to find out how appropriate Bhabha’s concept of ‘unhomeliness’ is for a proper understanding of the reality of the protagonist’s situation . Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a Postcolonial diasporic writer of Indian origin . A prolific and acclaimed writer she has been widely published . She has seven novels and two anthologies of short stories to her credit . The story under review “Mrs. Dutta writes a letter” is included in her second short story collection *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives* . The story was first published in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1998 . It has also been anthologised in *The Best American Short Stories 1999* which was published by the Houghton Mifflin Company 1999 . In the story under review Divakaruni successfully employs the limited omniscient point of view alternating with the first person point of view in the form of interior monologue to explore the flux of consciousness of the old Mrs. Dutta to lay bare her sense of alienation and dislocation ensuing her migration . When the story begins it has already been two months since her arrival in California , but still she finds herself out of place in the Americanised household of her son . Being a strong and intelligent woman she makes every effort to adjust in the new environment . It was her voluntary and conscious decision to relocate to America after selling off all her property in Kolkata . Leaving her ancestral place , her homeland , she embarks on a journey to the other part of the world only to be with her family and her grandchildren . Very soon she realises that physical proximity with family members may not always ensure happiness or belonging if the ideological chasm is greater . Her fluctuating notions of ‘ home’ are presented through her psychological agony and her efforts and failure at assimilation . She undergoes a

mental crisis which arises not so much out of the inter-generational gap as out of the cultural conflict . The author delineates her situation as akin to a first generation immigrant who being unable to cope with the “shock of arrival” is relegated to a “Trishanku” existence . It is then that her notion of home , identity , belonging , happiness undergo a drastic revision .

When Mrs. Dutta decided to “give up her home of forty-five years” (17) to relocate to America she held quite positive ideas about her future . Her decision is triggered by a small incident . When she was down with pneumonia which confined her to bed for a long time, she began to feel like an invalid . Feelings of insecurity began to get the better of her when suddenly her eyes fell on the Olan Mills portrait of her grandchildren . She felt a strong desire to be with them . This urge to be among her family , no matter how far away they are , indicates her strong sense of belonging . And so she writes to her son , “ *You’re right , my place is with you , with my grandchildren*” (12) . When her close friend and neighbour , Mrs. Basu , expresses her doubt over her well being in a faraway foreign land , it offends her . But skillfully camouflaging her feelings she replies , “ I’ll miss my friends , I know – and you most of all . The things we do together – evening tea , our walk around Rabindra Sarobar Lake , Thursday night Bhagavat Geeta class . But Sagar – they’re my only family . And blood is blood after all” (19) . Again in the opinion of her relatives , “ . . . a wife’s place is with her husband , and a widow’s with her son” and “it was foolishness to stay on alone so long after Sagar’s father , . . . , passed away” (17) . It is quite evident that her notion of home is based on the idea that ‘home’ is a community (especially of blood relations) where one is welcome , secure , happy and where one really belongs . To her , ‘home’ is family . That’s why she does not think twice before selling off the house , the ancestral place , and giving away her most treasured possessions – cutwork bedspread , Corning Ware dishes , tape recorder and bone china tea set – to her relatives in Calcutta . It appears that she is being practical in having no sentimental attachment to the house where she started her life with Sagar’s father right after her marriage . At this point in her life she is driven by a strong desire to be united with her family , and this totally eclipses the relevance of the house that bore witness to her joys and sorrows for forty-five years .

As the story proceeds it can be perceived how family and blood relations gradually gain importance to her . Her home constitutes her family . Even in her son’s house in California she constantly reminds herself of this . Though things are very different there , she tries to fit in brushing aside her dissatisfaction and grudges . The Perma Rest mattress on her bed may be “too American- soft”(1) and “quite unlike the reassuringly solid copra ticking she is used to at home” , she immediately reminds herself , “ *Except this is home now . . .*”(1) . Whenever she tries to get the company of her grandchildren “ their bodies twitch with impatience” and offering “the most transparent excuses” they get away from her . But she is sure that they “ love her – how can it be otherwise among family?” (12) . After all “*They’re flesh of my flesh , blood of my blood*” (13) . Initially her culinary skills are appreciated as Shyamoli , her daughter-in-law , is happy to have someone take over the cooking . She would say , “ It’s wonderful to come home to a hot dinner . . . what crispy papads , and your fish gravy is just out of this world” (9) . This stimulates Mrs. Dutta’s sense of belonging and makes her feel a part of the family . In her mind she writes to her friend , Mrs. Basu , “*At least the family’s eating well since I’ve arrived . . . proper Indian food . . .*” (9) . When Sagar , her son , asks her to serve him ‘luchis’ she feels elated as “she shuts her eye and takes a deep breath , and it is as though merciful time has given her back her youth , the sweet , aching urgency of being needed again” (24) . The feeling of being wanted makes Mrs. Dutta feel at home . If we consider the fact that home is a place where one finds happiness , evidently she is at home in Sunnyvale ; her happiness stems from her ability to find her own

space and to solve problems ingeniously . Once she is in the kitchen she recovers “her spirits” and “. . . hums too as she fries potatoes for alu dum” for “the kitchen—sunlight sliding across its counter tops while the refrigerator hums reassuringly – is her favorite place” (7) . This is the only place in the house where she can relate to . Cooking for the family and preparing her son’s favourite ‘alu dum’ gives her immense pleasure . Being unaccustomed to handling a washing machine , she does her laundry manually without anyone’s knowledge which she considers “My small victory , my secret” (16) . This gives a boost to her confidence in her ability to cope with alien environment . She writes in her mind to Mrs. Basu , “*I’m fitting in so well here , you’d never guess I came only two months back . I’ve found new ways of doing things , of solving problems creatively . You would be most proud if you saw me*” (17) .

When Mrs.Basu’s letter arrives from India packed with news of their locality and her query , “ *Are you happy in America?*” (5) , Mrs. Dutta delays with the reply as “ in her heart family loyalty battles with insidious feelings of – but she turns from them quickly and will not name them even to herself” (5) . Though she would like to accept her son’s house in Sunnyvale as her true home , but she has her doubts . She would not acknowledge it but there have been moments when she felt like an expatriate . She has nostalgic longings for the home and the environment she has left behind :

“ Oh , Roma , I miss it all so much , sometimes I feel that someone has reached in and torn out a handful of my chest” (8) .

As she cooks in the kitchen of her son’s house in California “she permits herself a moment of nostalgia for her Calcutta kitchen”(8) . She is reminded of the mouth-watering smell of ginger and chilli paste and the aroma of strong black Assam tea brewing in the kettle when her friend paid her daily visit . She misses the sights and sounds of her Ghoshpara lane in Calcutta and the intimate friendship that she had with her neighbour , Mrs. Basu :

“How many times had she walked up the stairs to that airy room painted sea-green and filled with plants where her friend would be waiting for her. What took you so long today , Prameela? Your tea is cold already. Wait till you hear what happened , Roma . Then you won’t scold me for being late . . .”(20)

When she ventures out into the backyard of the house , she is inevitably reminded of Calcutta again “with its narrow , blackened flats where families of six and eight and ten squeeze themselves into two tiny rooms , and her heart fills with a sense of loss . . .” (21) .

She suffers from social , cultural as well as emotional displacement . Though she would hardly acknowledge it , it would not be difficult to locate her alienation . Her attempt to befriend her neighbour falls flat ; it is met with indifference . When she “lifts her hand in the gesture . . . to wave an eager hello” the woman simply “ stares back at Mrs. Dutta . . . she does not wave back or smile” (22) . She had wanted to visit her next-door neighbors and take for them some of her “special rose-water rosogollas”(21) , but her daughter-in-law explained that “ such things were not the custom in California” (21) and “Americans don’t like neighbours to . . . invade their privacy” (22) . She is therefore compelled to stay indoors all by herself , being cut off from the social world of the American life . Again , Sagar and Shyamoli are too busy with their own office to spare some time for her . And her grandchildren are more interested in chatting with their friends and watching the television than listening to her stories . At the thought of her grandchildren “ a heaviness pulls at Mrs. Dutta’s entire body . . . Like so much in this country they have turned out to be – yes , she might as well admit it – a disappointment” (9) . There can be no pain greater than the agony of being alienated and unwanted in one’s own home among her

own flesh and blood . The feeling of being a stranger in one’s own family breathes poignantly in the following lines :

“A silhouette – man , wife , children – joined on a wall , showing her how alone she is in this land of young people . And how unnecessary” (33) .

It can be clearly perceived how her sense of ‘unhomeliness’ intensifies with time . As explained by Homi .K. Bhabha , “The unhomely moment creeps up on you stealthily as your own shadow and suddenly you find yourself . . . in a state of ‘incredulous terror’” (441) .

Unlike in Calcutta , here , she has none for company or to confide her feelings and thoughts . When she willingly migrated to America to settle there permanently , little did she realise the enormity of the impact of her relocation (or dislocation?) . Little was she prepared for the culture shock that she would encounter in the Americanised household of her son . It is , indeed , a shocking realisation that her lifestyle and worldview are grossly incongruous in the American situation . The difference lies in the polarity of cultures –the typical rigid Indian ways and the comparatively liberal Western ideals and values . Though her son and his family are happily assimilated into the host culture , Mrs. Dutta cannot make sense of it : “ Oh , this new country where all the rules are upside down , it’s confusing her . Her mind feels muddy , like a pond in which too many water buffaloes have been wading” (28) . She adheres to the old ways and traditional habits from which she cannot break away .She cannot give up the old habit of setting the alarm at 5:00 A.M . When the alarm goes off “buzzing like a trapped wasp”(1) she hurriedly tries to put it off lest she wakes everyone . Again instead of putting away her soiled clothes in a hamper to be washed on Sunday , she prefers to launder manually everyday because “ the machines with their cryptic symbols and rows of gleaming knobs terrified her” (16) . She feels that “ *the amount of TV they watch here is quite scandalous . The children too sitting for hours in front of that box like they’ve been turned into painted kesto nagar dolls , and then talking back when I tell them to turn it off*” (28) . She finds it impossible to concede with Shyamoli when she bursts out “Mother . . . That’s why Indian men are so useless around the house . Here in America we don’t believe in men’s work and women’s work . . .” (15) . Again it is a great disappointment when she considers her grandchildren . When Pradeep and Mrinalini , her grandchildren , refer to her as ‘she’ , Mrs. Dutta is quite shocked and hurt at such rudeness :

“But Mom *she’s* in there . She’s been there forever . . .It’s not fair . Why can’t *she* go downstairs?” (6) .

She’s in there for another disappointment when her daughter-in-law , Shyamoli , simply dismisses the matter in a tired voice instead of rebuking the children for their disrespectful behaviour : “ That’s enough ! Go put on your clothes , hurry” (7) .

Again Shyamoli’s frequent sighs do not go unnoticed . Mrs. Dutta is quick enough to realize that she gets frustrated easily :

“Shyamoli sighed often nowadays . Perhaps it was an American habit ? Mrs. Dutta did not remember the Indian Shyamoli , the docile bride she’d mothered for a month before putting her on a Pan Am flight to join her husband . . .”(13-14) .

On overhearing Shyamoli’s complaint against her , Mrs. Dutta’s illusion of the “ . . . sweet , aching , urgency of being needed again” (24) is shattered :

“ . . . she still keeps on doing what I’ve asked her not to – throwing away perfectly good food , leaving dishes to drip all over the countertops . . . She’s taken over the entire kitchen , cooking whatever she likes . You

come in the door and the smell of grease is everywhere , in all our clothes .
 I feel like this isn't my house anymore" (30) .

This incident leads her to reconsider her notions of happiness and belonging as “ all the certainties she trusted in collapsed upon themselves like imploded stars” (33) . If happiness is synonymous with ‘ being at home’ then it can be well perceived that Mrs. Dutta is certainly ‘unhomed’ . As she finally writes out the reply to Mrs. Basu’s letter , she is not sure what happiness is :

“ I cannot answer your question about whether I am happy , for I am no longer sure what happiness is . All I know is that it isn't what I thought it to be . It isn't about being needed . It isn't about being with family either . It has something to do with love , I still think that , but in a different way than I believed earlier . . .” (33) .

In the letter she also expresses her desire to return to her homeland , to her roots : “ *Perhaps we can figure it out together , the two old women drinking cha in your downstairs flat (for I do hope you will rent it to me on my return) . . .*”(33) . Suffering much the pangs of uprootedness she takes a prudent decision to return to where she really belongs . Her desire to retrieve the life that she was so used to in Calcutta foregrounds the element of physicality associated with the idea of ‘home’ . Instead of trying out other strategies of assimilation she would rather return to that particular locale whose sights and sounds are so familiar to her . She is looking forward to meeting her old friend too . She feels she is very much a part of that community she has left behind in Calcutta . As has already been explained , identity is central to the concept of home . In Sunnyvale , California , her identity has been blurred into anonymity . She is simply ‘the old lady’ (29) or merely a ‘she’(6) . But in Calcutta she is either ‘Prameela’ or ‘Dutta –ginni’ or ‘Mrs. Dutta’ . Therefore ‘home’ for her is Calcutta which gives her a definite identity .

In the beginning ‘home’ for Mrs.Dutta was ideally a place among one’s family and loved ones . It has no particular geographical location . But her immigrant experience in the course of two months of her migration leads her to revise this notion . Now she feels that home should definitely be a place where she can enjoy her own space and be happy . Also it should be the place where she can relate to socially , culturally and emotionally . Therefore the Ghoshpara lane in Calcutta is her real home where she has spent forty-five years of her life . The idea that home is a concrete physical reality is foregrounded through her nostalgic longings and her desire to return to Calcutta . Like a true diasporic subject she exhibits “a strong attachment to and desire of literal return to a well-preserved homeland” (Clifford , 309) . To paraphrase Doreen Massey , the space of home is always under construction , it is always in the process of being made , the product of a multiplicity of interrelations .

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