

Tracing Displacement and Alienation in Thrity Umrigar's *If Today Be Sweet*

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Abstract

Displacement is an inevitable reality in our contemporary world. We move out in search of education or livelihood, in order to find out about ourselves and to live our best lives. We adapt ourselves to the particular community that we have been always living in, knowingly or unknowingly, affecting our behaviour, our mindset, our actions, our likes and, etc. It makes us who we are. Therefore, moving out from a certain society where we belong to, leads us to many sufferings especially mental pain. As soon as a person considers herself as different or lesser to others in an unknown place, the world becomes new to her. This feeling of newness makes her feel like an outsider or alienated. Consequently, the feeling of alienation brings other feelings of disconnectedness like despair, dejection, nostalgia and seclusion and she strives to sustain. This is represented in *If Today Be Sweet*, a novel by Thrity Umrigar, through her major character, Tehmina Sethna, popularly called as Tammy in America. When she has to make the decision whether to stay with her son in America or to return to Bombay, she finds it hard to choose. Finally, she experiences a metamorphosis into a fresh woman, who chooses to live an independent life in America, affirming her individuality. The present paper intends to highlight the portrayal of lifelike characters who displace themselves for some or the other reason and suffer from alienation. This paper also examines how they assimilate, how they choose to embrace the new identity later, while still retaining the old identity and culture.

Keywords: Alienation; Assimilation; Displacement; Isolation; Nostalgia.

Displacement is an old phenomenon. In ancient days, men roamed in search of food. They were mostly hunter gatherers and led a nomadic life. This remained prevalent in stone and iron age. This continued even when men learned the art of cultivation of crops and gathered food from one

particular place. There are several such instances of movement/displacement of people noted in the pages of history. One of the oldest examples of displacement in the world is the eviction of Jews from their own land. Mass movement is also noticed in other places across the globe like the Palestine diaspora. H. S. Parladir in "Diaspora Studies in Social Sciences: Modernity, Power and Identity" examines the term 'victim diaspora' while talking about the dislodgment and expulsion of the Jews and the Palestinians. He corroborates:

The meaning that the term diaspora connotes reminds the term with a negative meaning which can be demonstrated by the term victim diasporas. The term victim diaspora implies an outcast ethnic group driven from its original homeland through a traumatic set of events and forced to live in an alien environment and cultural setting. In this context it is possible to refer to the Jewish, African, Armenian and Palestinian Diasporas as victim diasporas. (105-106)

Even "...Diasporic Jews were depicted as pathological half-persons - destined never to realise themselves or to attain completeness, tranquility or happiness so long as they were in exile" (Cohen 508). Africa witnessed massive displacement of people, the reason may be conflicts with another race, lack of food, etc. But Philip D. Curtin points out that "...Africans mainly moved as slaves and for very different ends... and it was involuntary on the part of the migrants..." ("The African Diaspora" 4). Intra-India migration or movement of people outside the country makes Indian diaspora one of the noticeably largest diasporas. Diksha Jha in "State Strategies of Differentiated Citizenship" has rightly observed: "India has the second largest diaspora in the world after the Chinese" (379). These displaced/dislocated people form the diasporic community in the new land where they settle in and simultaneously they develop a kind of longing for their home that they have left behind.

India has a long-standing history of displacement. It is not a recent phenomenon. The fact that Indians as traders had been visiting to the countries bordering the Indian Ocean during Pre-colonial India has been insufficiently addressed in the history. As pointed out by Kenneth R. Hall in "Multi-Dimensional Networking", 'Indian Ocean Maritime Diaspora' needs more attention:

Southeast Asia's maritime communities have been inadequately considered in discussions of pre-1500 Indian Ocean trade. Early

Indian Ocean maritime diaspora in particular deserve and require careful re-examination, as this focal consideration has much to offer to the wider discussion of Asian trade as also of international diaspora. In part, the failure to adequately address pre-1500 Asia-based maritime diaspora is due to the nature of the primary sources, which are a mix of archaeological evidence, Chinese dynastic records, Southeast Asia's court chronicles, the accounts of fifteenth-century visitors to the region.... (454)

Certainly, the Indians traded through land route too. This is often referred to as 'Indian Trade Diaspora' (Dale 57). On one hand, they had traded in Arabia and Persia, and on the other, they had trade relations with the peninsular countries of South-east Asia like Burma, Malaysia, etc. Indians even traded in China, Central Asia and with the countries of Central Europe. In "The Indian Merchant Diaspora in Early Modern Central Asia and Iran", Scott Levi observes:

In a recent work, Stephen Dale has uncovered the existence of an early modern Indian merchant diaspora with communities dispersed throughout Central Asia, Iran, the Caucasus and much of Russia. Several primary centres of diaspora activity emerged in those Eurasian locations most conducive to mediating trans-regional commerce, including Isfahan, Bandar Abbas, Astrakhan, Qandahar, Kabul and Bukhara, each of which hosted communities of several hundred to several thousand Indian merchants. Smaller secondary diaspora communities likewise developed in other cities situated on the numerous Eurasian trade routes which pulsed with commercial activity. (483)

Regrettably, very scanty literature exists about these movements/displacements.

In colonial India, movement/displacement within the country was more prominent. Under the European colonization, intra-India mass displacement might be the consequence of the demand of cheap labor force who were mostly natives and who were forcibly made to work in the plantation farms. The mass movement/displacement under colonial rule undoubtedly had helped unifying people and in fostering national consciousness in a polyglot nation like India that promote multiculturalism. In postcolonial India, the mass movement/displacement is mostly international owing to better professional prospects. Presently, globalization is the main reason of mass displacement.

Robin Cohen observes that movement from homeland in search of work/job, in pursuit of trade or any other ambition is traumatic. This kind of displacement seeks an idealization of ancestral home, as Cohen puts forth “a collective memory and myth about the homeland including its location, history and achievements” (“Diasporas and The State” 514), followed by a return movement, often the reasons being a troubled relationship with the host societies or inability to culturally assimilate. Rather, the displaced individual is seen preoccupied with elements of nostalgia and therefore he often negotiates with the cultural space of his new home. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Hellen Tiffin affirms that “Diaspora does not simply refer to geographical dispersal but also to the vexed questions of identity, memory and home which such displacement produces” (*The Empire Writes Back* 217–218). This opens up the discussion on existential angsts, rootlessness, alienation and quest of identity.

As displacement is directly contradictory to place, it is defined as the condition wherein people are obligated to leave their homeland, the home where they generally lived (Cambridge Dictionary). Displacement can be interpreted with the idea that people get displaced socially, existentially, and philosophically at the same time from their traditional environment due to several reasons and these reasons may alter according to the different situation and time. With the advent of modernity and globalization, displacement is generally witnessed on account of one’s wish for growth and development in life. This is pointed out by Angelika Bammer, in her book, *Displacements: Cultural Identities in Question*. Bammer observes displacement as: “The separation of people from their native culture either through physical dislocation (as refugees, immigrants, migrants, exiles or expatriates) or the colonizing imposition of a foreign culture” (xi).

Displacement, whether voluntary or involuntary is not a smooth process for a particular individual or even a group. It is like leaving our current existence to become a new person and with time it involves leaving behind a part of our individuality. This is pointed out by Relph in his book, *Place and Placelessness*: “...identity is found(ed) both in the individual person or object and in the culture to which they belong. It...varies as circumstances and attitudes change...” (45). It is only natural that we adapt ourselves to the particular community that we have been always living in, knowingly or unknowingly. It becomes the part of ourselves, affecting our behaviour, our mindset, our actions, our likes, and dislikes etc. It makes us who we are, thus affirming our individuality. Certainly, moving out from a certain society where we belonged to, leads us to many sufferings especially mental and emotional pain. As soon as a person considers himself as different

or lesser than others in an unknown place, the world becomes new for her. This feeling of newness makes a person feel like an outsider or alienated. The effect of displacement is alienation in individuals towards society and even with self, at times. Displacement, therefore not only leads to separation but it also leads to problems such as "...assaults of host people, alienation, fear of assimilation and acculturation, nostalgia, feeling of belonging, cross-cultural and multi-cultural issues, identity problems..." (Jaleel 337) in a new country, along with new values, culture and society and thus, new adjustments in an unfamiliar place. On one hand, one cannot forget one's particular culture, people, language and, environment, and on the other, one finds it tough, to adjust oneself in the new country and surroundings that one picked up to adopt or were imposed to adopt, due to numerous reasons. Thus, once displacement happens, the potential of retrieving a solid, single, monolithic identity is left with no scope.

Indians who moved to the USA tend to lose their identity. Consequently, they often face alienation. These issues are explored through various texts in Indian English Literature. *The Immigrant* (2010) by Manju Kapur revolves around Nina, and her husband Ananda. The story narrates the predicament of Nina before and after her marriage. While Ananda also moved to Halifax after his parent's death and suffered from loneliness and longing for his home initially, but eventually he amalgamated himself with the new society and culture. After their marriage, Nina feels alone and secluded. She misses her home and her mother. She even joins several book clubs and other groups to keep herself occupied. She then joins a library science course as well which gives wings to her for independence. Instead of returning back to her old culture or staying here with the new identity in the new society, she chooses to leave both the alternatives and choose the third option. Thus, Nina is seen evolving into a new and independent woman, who is not fearful to live and begin her journey altogether in a new and strange land.

Jhumpa Lahiri's novel, *The Namesake* (2003) is about the life of first-generation immigrant parents, Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli along with their children, Gogol and Sonia, who has been born and brought up in the USA. Ashima misses her home in Calcutta, and even more after her delivery, as she says, "...I don't want to raise Gogol alone in this country. It's not right. I want to go back..." (33). It can be observed Ashima is slowly integrating and thus trying to balance both Indian and American cultures at her home, as she wears saris and bindis, yet for her children, they celebrate American festivals such as Thanksgiving and Christmas as well. She even starts making friends outside her Bengali network. Finally, after Ashoke's

death, instead of choosing one permanent residence of her own, she decides to spend six months in India and rest six months in America as Lahiri comments, "... True to the meaning of her name, she will be without borders, without a home of her own, a resident everywhere and nowhere ..." (177). Thus, she grows confident in making route of her own life.

Another novel by Lahiri, *The Lowland* (2013), talks about the lives of two brothers, Subhash and Udayan and dilemmas of the female characters, Gauri and Bela as well. Udayan feels disconnected in his own homeland, while Subhash suffers from rootlessness and nostalgia living away from his homeland. After Udayan's death, his wife, Gauri is remarried to Subhash, who takes her to America. She's not able to forget her past life spent in the lowland of Tollygunge, which prevents her from assimilating with her present setting. She does not feel connected to the home, Subhash or her own daughter, Bela. After few years, Gauri leaves Subhash and Bela and moves to California for a job and to fulfill her aspiration of studying philosophy. Sudden meeting with Bela and Subhash after many years, lead her to revisit Calcutta. There she saw, the lowland was removed and everything was changed. She wanted to cut the ties of her memory of Udayan, to be able to live a self-fulfilled life. After visiting to Calcutta, she went back to California to begin her life in the actual sense. All throughout the novel, Gauri has alternative versions of her identity, but only in California, she felt at home and embraced only this version of her identity. She never regretted any of her decisions and understood that it is possible to have different identities and it needs to be modified according to the setting and situation.

Jasmine (1989), a novel by Bharati Mukherjee is about Jasmine, the protagonist from Punjab who immigrates to America and later undergoes several identity transformations to adjust with her surroundings in America. To find out about her husband's murderers, she sets out to American soil with forged visa and passport, and from here, her journey into different identities and roles begin. Continuous change of her name, from Jyoti to Jasmine to Jazzy to Jase and finally to Jane, shows how her identity and personality is in a continual flux. When she is raped on her arrival, she kills the rapist, and evolves into a brave-like kali figure. Later, while living with an American family, she undergoes a physical transformation with American clothes. America, for her, is like a new setting for her rebirth, where she is more daring and even ready to take as many risks and challenges that comes in her way. She is surprised to see how capable and strong she was, something which she could not recognize while living in India. Finally, she settles with her new American husband, Bud Ripple-

meyer in Iowa. She completely enjoys and embraces her new liberated self and her choice to become a part of American society, detaching completely from her past.

The Mistress of Spices (1997), a novel by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, is about Tilo, a mystical figure who runs a grocery store and uses spices so that the customers can overcome complications of their lives, especially for homesickness and alienation that the Indian immigrants face in a foreign land. Her names and thus her identity and personality are also changed several times in the novel. Finally, she is renewed as Maya, leaving her magical figure behind and rightfully asserting her right to do and think whatever and however she wishes to do, even on the foreign land. It is shown in the novel, that all characters are suffering from alienation, but even if all of them are not winners, they are not losers either, thus depicting that there is some kind of hope still left. In the novel, *If Today Be Sweet* (2007) written by Thrity Umrigar, the protagonist, Tehmina Sethna also moves to the USA like the characters mentioned above and faces similar issues of displacement and nostalgia. How she deals and overcomes these difficulties of being in a new land is explored in the next part of the paper.

What is place exactly? Is it only an alternative word for the location, or a unique combination of culture and nature, or it could be something more also? This is what a Canadian Geographer, Edward Relph tries to explore in his book, *Place and Placelessness* (1976). He portrays that place plays a fundamental role in shaping human experiences. In the book, Relph examines the identity of a place through the concept of “insideness and outsideness” (49). It is essential to understand an ‘inside’ and an ‘outside’ to recognize identity of a particular place. Insideness refers to be inside a place implying that a person belongs and identifies to the place, and the more inside one feel, the deeper would be his identity with the place. In contrast, outsideness is a feeling of separation or alienation from a place.

For instance, feeling homesickness and nostalgia in a new place. In his book *Place and Placelessness*, Relph provides seven different modes of feelings of insideness and outsideness: [1] Existential outsideness – “involves a selfconscious and reflective uninvolvedness, an alienation from people and places...and of not belonging” (51). The person in this state feels disassociated with everything around as all the places undertake same hollow identity and are only noticeable by their artificial qualities. The places are merely background full of activities sans any sense. Often, the people who switch the cities or the countries experience this state initially, always having a feeling that they don’t belong here, or they are ‘outsiders.’ Many

19th and 20th century English novelists and poets have illustrated this phenomenon through their works. For instance, in Manju Kapur's novel, *The Immigrant* (2008), the protagonist, Nina experiences this phenomenon. As soon as she reaches Canada, she laments that she is already feeling like "...an illegal alien" (107) and out of place. [2] Objective outsidership – is a "deliberate adoption of a dispassionate attitude towards places" (51) having certain attributes. It encompasses a profound separation of person and place with each other. [3] Incidental outsidership – involves "a largely unselfconscious attitude in which places are experienced as little more than the background or setting for activities and are quite incidental to those activities" (52). It is applied to such spaces wherever we are tourists or guests wherein our intents are restricted and limited. [4] Vicarious insidership – it implies experiencing places "...without actually visiting them..." (52) through imagination.

It is the most noticeable when the portrayal of a particular place links with our understandings of known places. It gives an impression and sense of that particular place. Usually, artists and poets depict their art pieces such as novels, films, music, and plays in such a way that through it, the audience is also able to experience those places, without actually visiting them. For instance, in *Malgudi days* (1982) by R. K. Narayan, he gives the description of the market-place, "It was a remarkable place...A variety of trades and occupations was represented all along its way: medicine sellers, sellers of stolen hardware and junk, magicians and, above all, an auctioneer of cheap cloth...a vendor of fried groundnuts...calling it Bombay ice-cream one day, and on the next Delhi Almond..." (23). His use of such vivid description in all his texts transport the reader into the setting of the novels. Thus, just through reading a novel, it allows the audience to visit these places through mere imagination. [5] Behavioural insidership – "consists of being in a place and seeing it as a set of objects, views and activities arranged in certain ways and having certain observable qualities" (53). The designs, constructions and the content of inside expresses us that we are *here* instead of some other place. [6] Empathetic insidership – is a deliberate attempt towards a house "...to feel it, to know and respect its symbols...seeing into and appreciating the essential elements of its identity" (54). It requires acknowledging the worth of a place and to recognize that place as rich in meaning as of those whose place it is.

For instance, in *The Immigrant*, Nina experiences her new self in a trip to Ottawa, as Kapur comments, "Joining in the fun Nina too held a cigarette between her fingers and had drinks. She felt daring. It was easy here, drinking, smoking, asserting something, probably her sexuality" (258).

Nina felt that here she could do whatever she likes and nobody will judge her also. She can take risks here and for some time, leave her reserved self as well. She was beginning to accept and appreciate some of the cultural differences. [7] Existential insideness – involves “...belonging to a place and the deep and complete identity with a place...” (55). It gives a feeling that this place is where a person belongs to. It is this stage when a person knows the place and its inhabitants are acknowledged and recognized there. For instance, in *Gilead* (2004), by Marilynne Robinson, it can be observed that Anes is seen in this stage, wherein he loves his place and its connections so much that he wishes to be buried in Gilead itself as “... a last wild gesture of love” (247). Relph exclaims that this is the strongest sense of a place experience. These modes are not depicted in sequential form, rather it can change from person to person, or their sense of place can also be changed after a period of time for example, a person can move through existential insideness to existential outsideness or vice-versa. Out of seven different modes mentioned above, only four of them are essential for the analysis of this paper: ‘Existential outsideness’, ‘Vicarious insideness’, ‘Empathetic insideness’, ‘Existential insideness’.

Homi K. Bhabha is an Indian-British scholar and a critical theorist. He is famously known for his contribution in field of post-colonial studies. His important concepts include unhomeliness, hybridity and in-between space, which he has explicated in his book, *Location of Culture*. Discussing about the feelings and experiences of a displaced individual, Bhabha points out that he can create a new space for himself in an alienated setting. The displaced yearns about his/her own background, therefore the person cannot completely fit in a new place. In *Location of Culture*, Bhabha defines the term – ‘unhomeliness’: “The negating activity is, indeed, the intervention of the ‘beyond’ that establishes a boundary, a bridge, where the ‘presencing’ begins because it captures something of the estranging sense of the relocation of the home and the world - the unhomeliness...” (9).

Unhomely is not a condition of being homelessness. It suggests of having a feeling of not at home even though the person is in one’s own home. For the diasporic society, the sense of having one’s own home and also the sense of belonging to a nation is broken. Voluntary or involuntary, they leave their own homeland and reconstruct another one by moving past the boundaries. Unhomeliness does not really refer to physical loss, absence or abandonment of departure from one’s home. It is rather recognized as spiritual, psychological and sentimental displacement and estrangement from home, and thus from whatever is familiar. This unho-

meliness is caused due to cultural hybridity. He suggests that there is no culture and so no identity which is pure and unaltered by the influence of the other cultures. Bhabha defines hybridity as something which is "new, neither the one nor the other" (25). Hybridity is a state of being caught between two cultures. It questions 'who I really am' and 'where I really belong to', destabilizing the notions of the steady and permanent, self and home. This gives rise to in-between spaces which "...provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood- singular or communal- that initiate new signs of identity and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself" (Bhabha 1-2). Hence, it helps forming and reforming the cultural identities. The displaced tries to form new identity somewhere between the old and new identities, thus establishing a new third identity.

Literature has the potential to capture all predicaments and human emotions in different settings and environment through different time spheres. Diaspora, displacement and alienation are also some important concepts portrayed through literature. Diasporic literature is a broad term which talks about having a sense of longing, loss, alienation and displacement which is due to expatriation and migration. Largely, literature of diaspora is about displacement, homesickness, reminiscence, alienation, crisis of identity and existential rootlessness of the displaced. Migrants usually grieve from the agony of being away from their own homes, and the reminiscences of their motherland. Diasporic writing deals with characters who are in a perpetual psychological and emotional combat, oscillating between the traditions and customs of their old world and the liberty and lures of the new one. The migrants stay in a continuous dilemma as to whether follow their old culture or break the hindrances and embrace the new morals and society, being and cultural identity.

Avtar Brah in his book, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* (1996) states that the "experiences of diasporas are different, and all diasporas refer, in essence, to a certain kind of displacement" (183). In order to match the current culture in these surroundings, a new form of mindfulness and thus a new culture is developed too. It results in a new invented community which simply do not just replace the old one but actually form a new and fresh society that is referred to as a new and fresh diaspora (63) as suggested by Benedict Anderson in his book *Imagined Communities*. Even though in such narratives, the central characters suffer from displacement, rootlessness and alienation, yet they can carve out a niche for themselves to fit in, be it in their homeland or in a foreign country, in spite of political, social, and cultural complications.

The concept of 'Home' and 'Displacement' appear again and again as the fundamental themes in the writings of Indian Diasporic writers. Diasporic experience often comes from reminiscence, a memory of loss, of departing from the home, of not having any connection with the host country and thus Diasporic literature constantly acts as a link between two diverse cultures. Diaspora, alienation and displacement are some common themes in the texts of post-colonial and modern Indian English writers, such as Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, Gita Mehta, Vikram Seth, Bharti Mukherjee, Rohinton Mistry, Chitra Banerjee Divakruni, Shashi Tharoor, Manju Kapur, Anita Desai, Kiran Desai, Jhumpa Lahiri, Thrity Umrigar, Amit Chaudhury, Meena Alexander, Meera Syal, Sunetra Gupta, Jhumpa Lahiri, etc. The women writers of post-Independence era of India have shaped their own individual literature by depicting contemporary difficulties and issues especially associated with women. Rashmi Bajaj, in her book, *Women Indo-Anglican Poets: A Critique* articulates about the contemporary English writings of Indian women that, "We have here increased social consciousness, a strong awareness of identity as woman, championing of women's cause, problems of alienation and identity crisis, daring portrayal of sex and emphasis on the study of personal relationships" (28).

Most of the women writers produce a new manifold reality, a variegated pattern which is typical yet distinctive wherein a new and independent woman emerges in almost all the novels. Initially, "all of the characters feel alienated on their life journey, which is an essential part of identity formation, but they learn to face the pain with courage" (Borgohain and Ammari 227). Thus, at the beginning of the narratives, the women characters suffer between two cultures, but as the novel progresses, the characters transform into a new and empowered self, rightfully taking their independent decision as to whether stay in the host land or return to their native land.

Thrity Umrigar is one such Indian-American novelist, journalist, and critic. Thrity was born in Bombay, India and when she was 21 years old, she went to the USA. She had a diverse childhood as she was a Parsi child who studied in a Catholic school in a Hindu nation, which supported well in her life as a novelist. She is a successful author of numerous novels, such as *Bombay Time* (2001), *The Space Between Us* (2006), *If Today Be Sweet* (2007), *The Weight of Heaven* (2009), *The World We Found* (2012), *The Story Hour* (2014), *Everybody's Son* (2017), *The Secrets Between Us* (2018) and *Honor* (2022). Additionally, Umrigar is also an author of a memoir, *First Darling of the Morning* (2004) and three youngsters' picture books, *When I Carried You in My Belly* (2017), *Sugar in Milk* (2020) and *Binny's Diwali* (2020). Her

books have been rendered into many dialects and are available in print form in more than fifteen countries. She is an eminent English lecturer at Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland. Thrity is honoured with the Cleveland Arts Prize, the Seth Rosenberg prize and a Lambda Literary award. Thrity is actively regular on the national lecture circuit and has even spoken at several literature festivals, for instance, the L. A. Festival of Books, the Tuscan Book Festival and the Miami Book Fair International; also, at different universities such as MIT, Spelman College, and Harvard University; and at literary events, public and business organizations and also common libraries all around the country.

Thrity in her novels, using her power of fiction presents the stories which are universal and eternal. Her novels mostly have an ending signifying hope, as she believes there is already darkness and grimaces all over the world, the least is she could provide hopeful endings to her audience, so that light of hope still lingers on in her audience. It is observed that as a Parsi, she always thought that it is the role of a writer to illuminate the reader's world. Thrity as a writer, does not write for a plot, but to discover the shades of life on the borders.

Umrigar's third novel, *If Today Be Sweet*, celebrates family and society looked at through the problems of self, family life, immigration, and optimism. It depicts experience of an immigrant Indian in America. The novel is about the protagonist, Tehmina Sethna, also called 'Tammy', is a recent middle-aged widow. She is displaced suddenly from her native home, Mumbai to the strange city, Ohio in America at her son's home. Mentally, she is constantly switching back and forth to her memories in Bombay and her reality in Ohio. In the novel, she is being asked to choose between her hope of creating a new life with the family of her son in peripheral Cleveland or returning to her old life among the community of Parsis in Bombay. It is seen in the novel, all throughout her life she had been entirely dependent on her shielding husband to make all the choices for her. This unanticipated loss leaves her bare to lead her life on her own. Progressing through the novel, a central subplot occurs in the novel, wherein Tehmina merges with the American community by freeing the two mistreated neighbour children. The jump from the fence reveals Tehmina's slow severance from her reliant past to a free presence in America. Tehmina grows into the 'craftsperson of her own life' in a way that advocates worlds and cultures can interconnect and enlighten one and the other in a way that boosts each other.

This paper intends to highlight the portrayal of lifelike characters who

displace themselves for some or the other reason and suffer from alienation. This paper also examines how they assimilate, how they choose to embrace the new identity later, while still retaining the old identity and culture through the theories of Homi K. Bhabha and Edward Relph.

The novel's protagonist, Tehmina Sethna, also known as Tammy is a middle-aged recent widow who has to suddenly leave her homeland and live with her son, Sorab in Ohio. From the beginning of novel only, we see her mentally switching between her past i.e., Bombay and her present i.e., Ohio. She exclaims: "In my mind, I travel through time and space in ways you cannot even dream of—from Ohio to Bombay to Ohio again; from the land of the living to the land of the dead, where my Rustom resides; from my wallpapered bedroom in this house, to my painted bedroom in Bombay, of which I know every inch..." (Umrigar 25).

In *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) W.E.B. Du Bois has defined this feeling as "two-ness" (9) or dual consciousness: "it is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at oneself through the eyes of others..." (9). It shows how Tehmina's self was divided between the two cultures. All throughout the novel, she is trying to make a decision as whether to stay in Ohio or Bombay as she laments, "...she decided where she wanted to spend the rest of her life, in which country she wanted to live out her days. India or America. In her wildest dreams she had not imagined that she would have to make the same choice that Sorab had made years earlier" (Umrigar 25). She couldn't decide which one would be the correct decision, whether to live with her son in the new place where she feels alone or to return to her own home where she has lived her whole life along with the memories of her husband. Living in Bombay will make her physically alone while living in Ohio made her emotionally and mentally alone.

In *Place and Placelessness*, Edward Relph emphasizes on importance of place in shaping the different experiences of human beings. He discusses the idea of identity of a place with his concept of seven different modes of insideness and outsideness. Though for this particular study, only four modes are mainly applicable. In the beginning of the story only, it is observed that Tehmina goes through the existential outsideness, where she feels alienated and not the part of the family and society. Talking to her friend and only companion in Ohio, she feels as a stranger, someone whose existence has no value making her feel like an outsider or a tourist of few days, as she comments: "See, there, in Bombay, I feel like a person—a person whose life has meaning, whose life follows a path. Here, despite all

of Sorab's efforts, I can't help but feel like an ornament, a decoration. Sort of like a package that someone has dropped off at his door. I think – what I'm saying, Eva, is – I don't feel needed here" (Umrigar 34). Remembering the predicament of his mother, the son thinks: "She'd been alone at home all day, knowing how pale and dull and lonely his suburban life must feel to her, compared to the colorful, busy, active, people-filled life she led in Bombay. Here, with the windows shut for the winter, the house felt as sealed and silent as a tomb" (Umrigar 159).

At times, it is observed that there are several small moments of vicarious insideness as well, wherein she did not really revisit Bombay physically but mentally again and again. She used to think what would happen exactly when she will return or what is happening there at that particular moment. Specially she would think of Bombay as she used to go to the farmer's market:

Tehmina loved being at the farmers' market. She felt comfortable and human, here. The dirty, stagnant water on the floor, the shouts of the brown skinned, sweaty vendors competing for customers to sample their wares, even the smell of rotting fruit and fresh fish, all felt familiar to her. Shopping at the farmers' market was like shopping in Bombay – noisy, crowded buzzing with activity. Touching the fruit and vegetables, occasionally haggling with the vendors, tasting their offered samples of cut fruit... (Umrigar 37)

Joe, Sorab's boss kept a party at his place in honour of Tehmina's bravery. The place is adjacent to the sea which reminded of her house in Bombay. "The sound of the waves reminded her of the Arabian Sea and that in turn reminded her of her beloved Bombay. She felt an acute homesickness. Something about this house, with its high ceilings and crown molding was reminding her of her own Colaba apartment" (Umrigar 219).

Though at the beginning she was only feeling alienated no matter what the situation is. But as the novel progresses, Tehmina begins to feel a little bit as a part of the family, moving in the zone of empathetic insideness. There is a small incident in the novel where Joe asks Tehmina about her most favourite thing related to America, to which she answers, "...making rainbows" (Umrigar 220) which can be artificially created with water hose while watering the plants, unlike Bombay where only nature creates rainbow. Later, pondering over her life here and there, she thought:

And who among those millions of people out on the streets of

Bombay cares if I live or die?... Whereas here, despite the barrenness of civic life, despite the cold winters and the deserted streets, despite the fact that there were housing complexes built without sidewalks, there were people who cared very much about her well-being. Who worried, who fretted, who had their own lives and destinies tied up in hers...she had enough love for all of them. (Umrigar 262)

Thus, she started to believe that no matter how dark everything was in America, the people surrounding her, would bring light to her life, and she was ready to accept and return that love to all those people. Empathetic insideness in a way slowly leads to the zone of existential insideness, the strongest mode of experiencing a place. Herein, a person completely feels part of the family and thus the society as well. Just few days before Christmas, she was sitting, watching her family doing morning rituals, and suddenly a thought crossed her mind:

This is peace... this sharing of a meal with my family.... She felt as if she was recovering from the flu – the sluggish, tired feeling that she had felt in the months after Rustom’s death was finally leaving her bones.... This morning, she felt alive, strong, hopeful. Yes, that was it – that was the new feeling that was making her skin tingle, making her blood rush faster, making her muscles feel smooth and strong. It was hope.... (Umrigar 246)

This particular dialogue acts as a bridge of her thought-processes from alienated self to liberated self. It shows her journey of belonging in America, finally having a feeling of contentment and hopeful towards her life, which was missing for long since her husband, Rustom’s death. Her decision to stay in America is reflective of her acknowledgement towards the people and surroundings there.

In *Location of Culture*, Homi K. Bhabha provided significant notions related to the concept of identity and displacement. He suggested that as human beings are always in motion, so their identities are also always in flux. When Tehmina had to go to Ohio, soon after Rustom’s death, she was completely nostalgic and sentimental for Bombay, her homeland. Her presence, emotionally and mentally was still in Bombay only. She was not feeling homely at her son’s home. Unhomeliness is basically a feeling of living here but belonging to somewhere else, like Tehmina’s condition in the novel. Simply sitting in a room in Ohio, she could remember and identify each piece of furniture or other stuff of her Bombay household, as

explained by William Safran: "They retain a collective memory, vision, or myth about their original homeland – its physical location, history, and achievements..." (83-84). Merely through her imagination, she could picture her apartment in Bombay. It shows her deep affection and attachment with her homeland. On one hand, she didn't want to leave the land where she and Rustom had created their own small world, but on the other hand, she also felt ungrateful sometimes when she used to see Sorab and Susan's efforts to make her stay there. Stuck between her decision, as whether to stay there or return, she often wondered, "...I need to be home. But where home was, she was no longer sure" (Umrigar 110).

The person feeling unhomeliness is trapped between the two cultures. On one hand, Tehmina criticized America who made people duller and also robot-like, where there is no show of emotions and expressions, she wondered, "does everything in this country has an expiration date...even grief and mourning?" (Umrigar 119). People are just working day and night as "...the robots, carrying out the wishes of their mechanized gadgets" (Umrigar 29). On the other hand, she is thankful to America to help Percy lead a good and respectful life. She was impressed as how coming to America gives a virtuous makeover to one's personality. She thought, "It was amazing the transformation that happened to all these young people when they came here... they became happy in America. Kids who had been pencil thin, melancholy, depressed, quiet, and shy became confident, strong, talkative, happy..." (Umrigar 137-138). She also agreed that she felt liberated in the streets of America:

She had never felt free in Bombay the way she did here. The simple act of eating an ice-cream cone on the streets and not being followed by the hungry eyes of a hundred children was a freedom, a luxury she had never experienced on the streets of Bombay. In America, she didn't feel leered at by young, sex-starved men, was not self-conscious about her breasts, was not miserably aware of her female body, didn't carry herself in that tense, guarded way that she did back home. (Umrigar 138)

Bhabha believes that unhomeliness is the starting point to go beyond the binary opposition of homeness and homelessness. Thus, hybridity is a positive alternative to the condition of unhomeliness. According to S. Krishna, "hybridity is a third space that is neither the one nor the other..." (95). Hybridity, consequently, results in mixing of different cultures, forming a new third identity as defined by Bhabha. The displaced person often struggles to choose between one or the other identity, which is a

very difficult and painful process, as it can be seen through the character of Tehmina. Tehmina could not lead a happy life because she was constantly switching between her past and present. She was neither happy in Ohio, nor she could decide to return to her homeland. Thus, she only felt sad and isolated all the time. But once she took the decision, she was content and happy. The moment when Tehmina jumped over the fence to rescue the two little boys, it was symbolic of her own movement from past to future: "...she had landed in America. The fence had been the dividing line between the past and future, between India and America..." (Umrigar 262). She realized she could stay in America, without having to give up her Indian values and cultures along with memories of her Bombay apartment: "...she was thinking of how she would decorate her apartment. The Hussein she would definitely bring back from Bombay. Also, some of the smaller pieces of furniture. And in the summer, she would go shopping for plants with Susan. Maybe the apartment would have a little balcony where she could grow flowers. And make rainbows" (Umrigar 263).

Therefore, if the person decides to have a midway, that is a mix of both the cultures, it results in a liberated and independent formation of the self. This way, the person can also have best of both the worlds like the character Tehmina chose for herself. She created a third space for herself without losing anything. She did not return to Bombay, nor she stayed with her son. Though, she decided to live in America, but in her own apartment:

She would stay. But on her own terms. And the main thing was that she had to have her own apartment. There was no reason for the children to sell this house in order to buy a bigger one. Yes, she would insist on that – that she have her own place. That way, she could have her independence and the children could have their privacy. She had never lived alone for a day in her whole life – she had left her father's house to move into the apartment with Rustom – but somehow, the thought didn't faze her. In fact, she felt daring, excited at the prospect. (Umrigar 263)

In the prologue, Rustom remarks about Tehmina, "she is the architect of her own life..." (Umrigar 9). Indeed, Tehmina has evolved herself through the course of the novel. Her journey began with alienation and rootlessness from her homeland. Later she develops some kind of affinity and attachment too towards the new land. She does not completely forget her homeland; in fact, she infuses both the cultures in her identity. There were moments when she could not take a decision and was merely stuck. Umrigar herself has said in an interview, that she believes that life is full

of movements. For her, standing still is death. And in today's globalized world, movement often means moving away from the past, moving away from the familiar, and moving away from the known world to the unknown. Umrigar thinks that she is fortunate as each of her journey has always brought her up to something better. Despite several conflicts and struggles, Tehmina eventually grows into an independent and self-reliant woman, thus leading herself to a better state of being, both emotionally as well as physically.

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