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Problematizing Home and Belongingness: A Comparative Study of Meena Alexander's *Manhattan Music* and Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*

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Abstract

In diasporic culture, the concept of home emerges out as a mystery. Various authors interpret it in diametrically opposed ways. For instance, Amitav Ghosh, in his novel *The Hungry Tide* (2004), describes home as an ambience, a physical space and an existence. While Meena Alexander, in her *Manhattan Music* (1997), proclaims the idea that home may be constructed in one's mind and imagination without a concrete structure. Therefore, these two writers are seemingly contrastive in their exemplifications of home. The present paper seeks to problematize the idea of home and belongingness with an in-depth comparative analysis of aforementioned novels by Meena Alexander and Amitav Ghosh.

Keywords: Home; Homelessness; Belonging; Identity; Indian Diaspora.

The elucidation of home in diasporic culture is a very cryptic one. Different writers construe it in antithetical ways. Amitav Ghosh, in his novel *The Hungry Tide* (2004), alleges that "the home is where your feet are" (245), which refer to the home being an ambience, a physical space and an existence. Whereas Meena Alexander, in her *Manhattan Music* (1997), affirms that, "the home is where your heart is" (86), which proclaims the idea that home may be constructed in one's mind and imagination without a concrete structure. Consequently, the ways in which these two authors have described home are in opposition. If one ponders over the various annotations of home by distinct critics, one finds that neither definition can be considered the ultimate one nor any one of them can be reprobated in its entirety. So before delving deep into the elucidation of home in the novels taken up for the present study, it seems pertinent to establish an

acceptable definition of home that would be the working ground for the present study.

Oxford Advanced Learner's *Dictionary* describes home as, "the house or flat/ apartment that you live in, especially with your family" (483). Banking upon this single definition would be unacceptable as home has earned many more connotations in its contours across time and space. There is a growing awareness that notions of home are the outcome of dynamic processes, evolving and varying from individual to individual. Definitions of home can shift across several registers depending upon the person concerned.

Nikos Papastergiadis defines home as including a physical and symbolic space, "The ideal home is not just a house which offers shelter . . . Apart from this physical protection and market value, a home is a place where personal and social meanings are grounded" (2). Peri L. Fletcher opines that the home is an "icon of community and family values, the heart of daily life where people redefine their own power to construct culture" (5).

For Ahmed, as diasporas, "What we have in common is the loss of a home" (329). In present era of global refugee movements and displacements, it is clear that the concept of home has become a complicated one. Is home the place that displaced people originated from, or can a new home be established elsewhere? Are displaced people necessarily homeless or can they have more than one home? In this post-modernist era, more and more emphasis seems to be placed on the plural locality, mobility and flexibility of homes. Nigel Rapport and Andrew Dawson stress the fluidity and ambiguity of home and define it very broadly as, "where one best knows oneself". They maintain that people are, "always and yet never at home" (9), as places do not exist in isolation and people live in movement, transition and transgression. Many migrants do not manage to construct an identity and a sense of home as claimed by Nigel Rapport and Andrew Dawson as their belonging is based solely on narratives of roots, on traditional conceptions of home where it is considered to be the stable, physical centre of one's universe, a safe and territorially fixed place to leave and return to.

The moot point of the present study is that the idea of home is not natural and immutable, but constructions and therefore subject to negotiation, re-inscription, and re-routing. This is not that home is an utter delusion or unreal, but only that it is not absolute and immutable and is open to negotiation and interaction as Eade emphasizes, "Locating fixed social or cul-

tural roots and establishing unambiguous senses of home and belonging in a world of movement becomes an increasingly complicated process" (26).

In the present analysis, the definition of home is the voluminous one. Here home is not just a concrete structure which gives shelter to a person from natural disasters. Rather home stands for safety, security, togetherness, love, and many more things. This paper focuses upon – with special reference to the female characters of both novels, the homelessness within the home whether it is the home where one is born or the home which is being adopted by a person. The female protagonists in *The Hungry Tide* and *Manhattan Music* are of Indian origin. They have faced migration problems in different times and spaces where they feel alien, and homeless within home. Sandhya and Draupadi in *Manhattan Music* live in America in the 1980s, whereas Piya and Nilima in *The Hungry Tide* are facing the challenges of life in Sunderbans of West Bengal in the 1960s.

About Meena Alexander, Maxine Hong Kingston has said, "Meena Alexander sings of countries, foreign and familiar, places where the heart and spirit live, and places for which one needs a passport and visas. Her voice guides us far away and back home. The reader sees her visions and remembers and is uplifted. (Qtd in "Travelling Helps…)" Alexander can appreciate the emotional despair of people caught between two worlds, belonging to neither. *Manhattan Music* is Meena Alexander's fourth but most refined and enchanting novel written in poetic prose. The story revolves around Sandhya and her best friend nay her alter ego Draupadi, living in New York.

Sandhya displaced to America after being married to a Jewish American, feels homeless in Manhattan. At the beginning of the story, she resorts to memories to surmount her loneliness in a foreign land and metaphorically remembers her home back in India. Born and brought up in a place where identity and culture are inseparable nay synonyms, her definition of home is narrow. Rooted in an orthodox interpretation, for her, home is where she is born and reared up, " a locus from where the dispersion occurs" (Brah 181). This is not an isolated or queer case; this poser is faced by every diasporic individual. Like any other absence or lack of presence, the question of home arises when one feels homeless or lacks feelings and emotions related to home. As Draupadi interpolates, "Sandhya's people, on the other hand, seemed never to have budged from the Indian subcontinent. Her veins were etched by centuries of arranged marriages, dark blue blood pouring through" (Alexander 4). Sandhya is not able to cope

with her new existence in a new space. Obsessively conscious of foreignness, she always feels like an elephant in the room. Once walking downs in America, she feels, "What if she could peel off her brown skin, dye her hair blonde, and turn her body into a pale, Caucasian thing, would it work better with Stephen?"(7).

Stephen, Sandhya's husband, uses his whole bag of tricks to make her feel at home in America, but nothing goes well. He has not been able to assuage Sandhya. Rather his efforts of luring her prove to be a big fat washout. Disheartened and despondent by Sandhya's cold responses to his advances of creating a new happy home with a new family including their daughter Dora; his endeavors get a big blow and he pities himself:

> She (as always) seemed to be staring, but not really seeing. He caught her by the hand and was so relieved he felt himself on the brink of tears. For the first time in their years together her sense of lost-ness had seeped into his own soul, dissolving the clear wall he had constructed to make himself feel at home. (37)

Sandhya is not able to get her past monkey off her back. She has constructed a four-wall of Indianness around her and is not able to think out of the box. Kicking off her new home in America – the land of opportunities and freedom, she harks back to her past time and again:

> To keep things on an even keel, she kept returning to her childhood home, a house with a red-tiled roof and a sandy courtyard where the mulberry bloomed. Each summer, gradually using up the savings Stephen has put away before his marriage she made his returns. Dutiful daughter to the core . . . . (41)

On the other hand, her second self, projected as Draupadi in the novel, has lived in many homes. She is the true epitome of the concept of home in the diaspora. Born in a hyphenated and hybrid space, she very well defines the idea of Meena Alexander that home is where your heart is. Draupadi is very casual and candid in the acceptance of her fate on the earth since her birth as she informs: I was born in Gingee, most part Indian, part African descended from slaves, pride of Kala Pani sister to the Middle Passage. Also part Asian-American, from Japanese, Chinese, and Filipino blood . . . (47).

Draupadi has shaded out her fixed identity. Living in the American melting pot, she believes in the present and future and suggests the same to

Sandhya as she can read her silence very well. For Draupadi "homes are always provisional" (Chambers 2). When she joins the party thrown by Sandhya and finds her making Indian cuisine, she implicitly admonishes Sandhya to follow the ways of American life. She advises Sandhya to, "be like the roses, cut of the past, frisk it, skin it, live in the present!"(62). Draupadi has thrived in an atmosphere where her father teaches her that, "'Born in America, there is nothing you cannot be,' Papa added. 'Make yourself up the child . . . then repeated to me, 'born in America you can be anything, Draupadi'" (90-91).

Sandhya, over time, comes to terms with reality and understands the importance of change in life. She realizes that by now she has been blowing things out of proportion. Draupadi works as a catalyst in this change of Sandya's personality when she, time and again, presses hard on Sandhya's misconception of the rootedness of home. Draupadi named after the mythical character Draupadi, (Pandva's wife) – who faced exile with them in the epic *Mahabharata*, is an artist by profession in this novel. She persuades Sandhya to play a role in the act that she is going to perform at Diwali Celebration. Draupadi says to Sandhya, "I will take you to my homeland, Sandhya. You will understand the meaning of exile" (194).

Sandhya, having faced another cheating in love by Rashid this time, attempts to commit suicide but is rescued by Draupadi. To come out of this trauma, she stays with her cousin away from Stephen and her daughter for some time. In separation, she comes to make out the importance of her home in America. When Stephen comes to take her back with their daughter Dora, she feels afresh and exhilarated with the prospect of reuniting with her family, "she was racing into America from the dark vessel of her past and she could hear it singing in her, ready to break free, the load of her womanhood of the accumulated life, breaking free into an inconceivable sweetness" (219).

At the fag end of the novel, understanding the importance of a meaningful existence, Sandhya reverses the meaning of her name and seems to be falling in love with her name and life, "'Sandhya', she whispered almost as if she were naming another being. In Sanskrit, the name signified those threshold hours, before the sun rose or set, fragile zones of change before the clashing absolutes of light and dark took hold"(227). By now, she was living like dusk (Sandhya) where the darkness was looming everything new lurking in her life. But now, she would live like the dawn (Sandhya), where only light, joy, happiness, newness and learning would meet life as she has finally acknowledged that:

> There was a place for her here, though what it might be she could never have spelt out. And she, who had never trusted words very much, knew she would live out her in America . . . Then slipping sandals onto feet still damp wits lake water, Sandhya Rosenblum walked quickly into the waiting city *in a new home*. (italics mine 229)

The second novel under present study is authored by a significant voice of the Indian Diaspora in North America, Amitav Ghosh. Ghosh perhaps deserves inclusion in any discussion to ascertain if the fixed and rooted paradigm for the construction of a home is concerned. *The Hungry Tide* by Amitav Ghosh explores the theme of home in the Sundarbans delta region, examining human connection to place. In order to demonstrate the difficulties in creating a secure home, the novel investigates the Sunderbans characterized by diverse ethnic communities facing challenges in preserving and adapting to their unique cultural practices and beliefs.

The Hungry Tide unfolds through the eyes of two upwardly mobile, educated individuals who undertake a journey to the tide country, Kanai Dutt – the Bangali-born and Delhi-settled businessman. He arrives in Lusibari to visit his Aunt Nilima and claims the package left for him by his late uncle, Nirmal. The package, he discovers, is an account of his uncle's last days, which revolves around Kusum and her son Fokir, who are portrayed as the victims of eviction from the Island of Morichijapi. The second voice of the novel is that of Piyali Roy – an American-born cytologist of Indian background, who chooses to journey into the Sunderbans to study the threatened Gangetic River dolphins. In this way, Ghosh weaves together two temporal narratives: one is described through Nirmal's diary, the Morichjhapi episode that happened twenty-eight years earlier, and the second through Piya's expedition, revealing the contemporary situation of the people and the flora and fauna of the Sunderbans.

Piya has travelled to India to study the Gangetic dolphin in the rivers of the Sunderbans. Her journey is neither strictly homecoming nor going into entirely unknown territory. After being exploited by the guard of the forest department and Maj-da, Piya ruminates that she, ". . . had no more idea of what her own place was in the great scheme of things than she did of theirs – and it was exactly this, she knew, that has occasioned their behavior" (31). Later in the novel, Nilima voices her confusion over Piya's proper place, "It's your appearance that gets me mixed up – I keep having to remind myself not to speak to you in Bangla,"(207). Bangla (Bengali) is Piya's putative mother tongue, which she has not simply forgotten, but

rather ' lost'" (78).

The categorical instability of Piya's 'non-resident Indian' identity proves to be a double-edged sword. Has Piya understood local gender norms and social conventions, she may not have been able to enter Fokir's boat, sleep and eat near, if not with him, and develop their, "miraculous collaboration" (118). On the other hand, had she not been the child of her Bengali parents, Piya would have connected to neither Moyna's "soft, crumpled, worn thin sari with that worn by her mother" (60), nor to Fokir's rectangle of, "checkered cloth", with her father's towel momento" (73). These powerful moments of recognition engender in Piya an affective interest in Fokir and Moyna, occasioning, for example, her effort to learn from Fokir the word, "gamchha" (78).

Characters also use memories to affect mental migration in *The Hungry Tide*. Piya, for instance, travels physically across Bengal and goes back to America mentally. Memories and sensations bring the continents together in her thoughts. She went to America when she was only one year old and her parents were not keen on her learning Bengali: for all practical purposes, she is an American, whose first language is English. She simply becomes aware of her 'roots'. Ultimately, she belongs to the West, and "her home is where the Oracaella are" (400). After all, she is from the West, and so, an 'outsider':

> As with many of her peers, she had been drawn to field biology as much for the life it offered as for its intellectual content – because it allowed her to be on her own, to have no fixed address, to be far from the familiar, while still being a part of a loyal but loose-knit community. (126)

One might argue that Piya veritably finds her way 'home' on Fokir's boat, "they were almost lost to her, those images of the past, and nowhere had she less expected to see them than on this boat" (81). She begins to assimilate the spirit of Fokir's Bangla and to revise the use of her own native English about the rediscovered mother tongue. They begin the conversation and Dutt understands that both are on a journey – from Calcutta to Canning in the Sundarbans. The railway station, train and journey placed at the beginning of the novel impart metaphors of movement and they promise human movement across many boundaries. Further, Dutt's role as a translator implies an interlingual, cross-cultural theme of the novel.

Apart from this, some deliberation needs to be paid to the characters and

situations of Kusum. How she was being displaced again and again as the victim of the situations and searching for something good in future? But she has to suffer a lot and finally dies for the cause of dispossessed and dislocated refugees in Morichjhaphi. It is her personality and courage amidst of these traumatic situations which impress Nirmal a lot and he gets the words and courage to pen down his experiences. Kusum has the dare to question authority even on the verge of death; she considers Morichjhapi the home for her and thousands of refugees living there. The coming together of these refugees is an effort by them to find out new identities for themselves.

Through the examples of Piya, "home is where the Orcellas are," and Nilima, "home is where I can brew a pot of good tea" (Ghosh 400), Ghosh tries to show that home is not fixity. It can be anywhere in the world. Wherever you make friends and it becomes home. It is just a matter of warmth and bonding, not of borders and lines. Ghosh attempts to find the links between people rather than dwelling on the differences and the myth of separateness that keep them divided across borders, cultures and languages.

The connection between Fokir and Piya is also a border crossing as it transcends the limits of cultures and languages. At the close of the novel, Piya says that for her, "home is where the Orcaelia are" (329). It may be Piya's commitment to her research or her ability to find out the new possibilities of life in the tide country that Piya finally decides to stay in Sundarbans. The relocation of Piya is the start of a new life full of fears and excitement. She is committed to her work, even if it will not change the world, she will live a life of means, without the certainty of an end. Though she is relatively alien to the place, she uses sensory perceptions and memories to build familiarity with the space around her. Ghosh describes how Piya mixes her memories with the space making and acculturation strategies. During a time in her childhood, she would smell home spices on her mother and in the lift. They (smell of spices) greeted her like domesticated animals, and she would flow back with ferocity, shutting them away with closed doors. But here:

> The ghosts of these creatures seemed to be quieted by their surroundings. The spell of Fokir's fingers was broken only when a breeze carried the acrid odour of burning chillies directly into her face. And then suddenly the phantoms came alive again, clawing at her throat and her eyes, attacking her as though she were an enemy who had crossed over undetected. (Ghosh 96-97)

After this discussion, one can seriously question if a fixed and stable home has ever existed. In a generalized way, leaving home or homelessness can be seen as not living up to the definition of discrete individualistic registers of home.

In today's global nay glocal world people's awareness of being involved in open-ended global flows seems to trigger a search for fixed orientation points and action frames, as well as determined efforts to affirm old and construct new boundaries. The dialectic processes of global flow and cultural closure usher to schizophrenia among diasporas. In a nutshell, if a home is where one feels most safe and at ease, instead of some concrete space or point on the map, then it is more than clear that home is an imagined concept which may be always with one or may not be, depending upon one's accepted definition of it. One may be homeless in one's birthplace feeling isolated and ostracized and feel at home even without a roof over one's head.

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