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**Between Two Worlds: The Politics of Home and Displacement in Postcolonial Migrant Narratives**

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**Dr. Ruchika**Doctorate in Philosophy (English), From Baba Mastnath University, Asthal Bohar, Rohtak  
E-mail: balhara.ruchika@gmail.com

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**Abstract**

This paper examines the complex concepts of "home" and "displacement" within postcolonial migrant literature. Focusing on how migrants navigate the tension between their countries of origin and their host nations, the study explores how the home becomes a highly politicized, fluid space rather than a fixed geographic location. Through a close reading of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* and Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*, this paper analyzes the psychological and sociocultural impacts of displacement, including identity fragmentation, cultural hybridity, and the phenomenon of "unhomeliness." Ultimately, it argues that postcolonial migrant narratives reconfigure the traditional understanding of belonging, framing home not as a return to a static past, but as an ongoing negotiation of a hyphenated present.

**Keywords:** Postcolonialism, Migrant Narratives, Displacement, Hybridity, Unhomeliness, Diaspora Identity, Intertextuality.

**Introduction: The Unmooring of Home**

In the contemporary globalized landscape, the traditional equation of "home" with a singular, stable geographical territory has been fundamentally disrupted. For the postcolonial subject, migration is rarely a simple journey from Point A to Point B; rather, it is an ongoing process of negotiation, cultural translation, and psychological balancing. In postcolonial migrant narratives, "home" ceases to be a comforting sanctuary or a static point of origin. Instead, it transforms into a highly contested geopolitical and emotional battleground. Migrants constantly find themselves caught "between two worlds"—the

remembered, often idealized homeland left behind, and the alienating, frequently hostile host country.

Edward Said remarks in *Reflections on Exile* that exile is "the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home." However, contemporary postcolonial literature frequently challenges the tragic finality of Said's rift. While acknowledging the profound grief of displacement, modern migrant narratives use the diasporic experience to dismantle essentialist notions of identity, proposing instead a fluid, hybrid model of belonging. By investigating how characters construct domestic spaces and navigate hostile public spheres, writers show that "home" is not an inherent right or a physical destination, but an active, ongoing performance. This paper explores the politics of home and displacement through the theoretical lenses of Homi Bhabha and Salman Rushdie, grounding these theories in a comparative analysis of Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*.

### **The Concept of "Unhomeliness" and Spatial Politics**

To understand the politics of displacement, one must look to Homi Bhabha's articulation of the "unhomely" (*unheimlich*), a concept borrowed and adapted from Sigmund Freud's psychological essay on the "uncanny." Bhabha posits that the unhomely condition is not merely a state of being homeless or lacking a physical roof; rather, it is the unsettling psychological displacement where the domestic space becomes deeply intertwined with historical, racial, and political trauma. Bhabha writes in *The Location of Culture* that in the unhomely house, "the borders between home and world become confused; and..., the private and the public become part of each other."

In migrant narratives, the home is frequently invaded by the realities of racism, xenophobia, and the structural pressure to assimilate. The domestic spheres in postcolonial literature are rarely safe havens. Instead, they are spaces where the ghosts of colonial history and the anxieties of present-day marginalization collide. The migrant's house in the host nation often acts as a microcosm of their societal exclusion. Every micro-aggression experienced in the public sphere bleeds through the front door, rendering the domestic space "unhomely." Consequently, the migrant is forced to realize that their physical dwelling does not guarantee a psychological or cultural home.

This spatial politics is vividly illustrated in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2000), which follows the lives of two wartime friends, Samad Iqbal (a Bangladeshi Muslim) and Archie Jones (an Englishman), in postwar London. Samad's domestic life in Willesden is a textbook study of Bhabha's unhomeliness. His house is not a sanctuary from the alienating streets of London; rather, it is a pressure cooker where his cultural displacement manifests

as domestic dysfunction. Samad is trapped in a low-paying job as a waiter at an Indian restaurant, despite his education and proud lineage as the great-grandson of Mangal Pande (a historical figure from the 1857 Indian Mutiny).

When Samad returns to his cramped, damp terrace house, the public humiliation of his minimized status follows him. His domestic space is constantly disrupted by the encroaching Western culture that threatens to strip his twin sons, Magid and Millat, of their Islamic and Bengali heritage. The living room becomes a battleground over television programs, school curriculums, and dietary choices. For Samad, the house is unhomely because it cannot keep the secularizing forces of London at bay. His response to this unhomeliness is a desperate attempt to rigidify the domestic space, enforcing an absolute, dogmatic adherence to religious and cultural purity that ultimately alienates his family. Smith illustrates that the migrant's home is never insulated from the history of empire; the colonial past dictates the terms of the postcolonial present inside the very walls of the living room.

### **Cultural Hybridity and the Third Space**

Faced with the impossibility of fully returning to the past or completely integrating into a resistant host culture, the postcolonial migrant adopts what Bhabha terms "cultural hybridity." This hybridity emerges within the "Third Space of Enunciation"—an ambivalent, interstitial zone where cultural signs, traditions, and identities are continually negotiated and redefined.

Rather than viewing this state of in-betweenness purely as a tragedy of loss or a fracture of the self, postcolonial migrant narratives often reframe it as a site of radical agency and creative resistance. The Third Space breaks down rigid binaries:

[World of Origin: The Past / Memory]

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▼  
[The Third Space: Hybridity]

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[Host World: The Present / Alienation]

By existing within this intermediate zone, the migrant writer challenges the host culture's demands for a pure, homogenous national identity. The hyphen itself—whether British-Indian, Nigerian-American, or Arab-French—becomes a home.

In *White Teeth*, the younger generation born in Britain exemplifies the turbulent negotiation of this Third Space. Millat Iqbal, caught between his father's demands for traditional Islamic piety and the seductive, consumerist street culture of 1990s London, inhabits a deeply fractured hybrid identity. He forms a crew with other second-generation immigrant youths called Raggastani, a subculture that blends Jamaican Patois, American hip-hop aesthetics, Bruce Lee movies, and Islamic rhetoric. Smith describes them as: "A new breed, hybridists... They knew that they don't look right in the pubs, and they don't look right in the mosques."

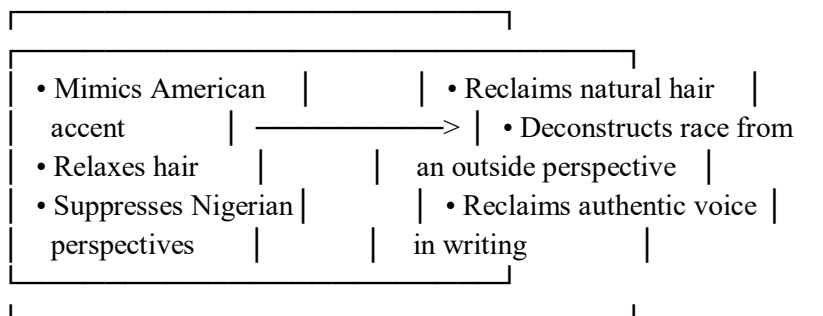
While Samad views this hybridity as a catastrophic failure of cultural preservation, Smith's narrative reframes it. Millat's creation of the Raggastani identity, though chaotic and defensive, is an exercise of agency within the Third Space. He refuses to be neatly categorized either as a traditional Bengali or as a standard white Englishman. The hyphenated space he occupies becomes a sanctuary of its own—a fluid, vernacular culture carved directly out of the cracks of London's rigid class and racial structures.

Similarly, in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* (2013), the protagonist Ifemelu navigates the complex racial landscapes of the United States. As a non-American Black person, Ifemelu discovers that her identity is not an organic reality but a heavily coded sociopolitical construct that she must learn to perform. To survive and thrive in academia and American society, she initially adopts an American accent and straightens her natural hair—acts of forced assimilation aimed at making her physical and linguistic presence feel "at home" in a whitedominated landscape.

However, Ifemelu's true agency emerges when she steps into the Third Space by launching her anonymous blog, *Raceteenth or Various Observations About American Blacks (Those Formerly Known as Negroes) by a Non-American Black*. The blog becomes her digital Third Space, an intellectual homeland where she can analyze the absurdities of American racial dynamics from an observational distance.

Assimilation Phase

The Third Space (The Blog)



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By writing from the margins of both Nigerian and American cultures, she rejects the pressure to blend in completely. When she stops relaxing her hair and lets it grow naturally, it is a physical manifestation of her reclamation of space. Her hair becomes a localized site of home—a refusal to alter her body to fit the domestic aesthetic of the host nation.

### **Nostalgia versus the Reality of Return**

A recurring motif in migrant narratives is the "myth of return"—the comforting illusion that one will eventually go back to the homeland and resume life exactly where it left off. However, displacement fundamentally alters both the migrant and the land they left behind. Salman Rushdie famously captured this dilemma in *Imaginary Homelands*, noting that exiles and migrants are haunted by an urge to look back, but they inevitably create "fictions" or "imaginary homelands" built from the broken shards of memory. Rushdie writes:

"Our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind."

When migrants do return, they are frequently met with profound disillusionment. The homeland has evolved independently of them, and they are viewed as outsiders or "tourists" in their own places of birth. This double alienation—being a foreigner abroad and a stranger at home—solidifies the permanent nature of displacement. The politics of home therefore shifts from a physical quest for a homeland to an internal, narrative construction of selfhood.

Adichie's *Americanah* explicitly deconstructs this myth of return through Ifemelu's eventual journey back to Nigeria after thirteen years in America. Upon her arrival in Lagos, Ifemelu discovers that she can no longer fit seamlessly into the society she once called home. She is instantly labeled an "Americanah"—a socio-cultural term used by locals to describe Nigerians who return from abroad with affected American manners, wealth, and hyper-critical attitudes toward Nigerian infrastructure and social norms.

Ifemelu finds herself out of sync with Lagos life. She complains about the oppressive heat, judges the submissive attitudes of local women toward wealthy men, and realizes that her old friends view her as an exotic, slightly arrogant outsider. Her nostalgia had preserved a static, frozen image of Nigeria that did not exist. Lagos had grown into a hyper-capitalist, chaotic metropolis that had moved on without her. She notes the irony of her displacement: in America, she was too African, but in Nigeria, she is too American.

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This double alienation is captured during a meeting of the "Nigeropolitan Club"—a group of returnees who gather at upscale Lagos restaurants to complain about the lack of organic grocery stores and proper customer service in Nigeria. Ifemelu realizes that these returnees are performing a new kind of displacement; they have formed an insular community that protects them from the raw reality of the country they supposedly returned to save. This realization forces Ifemelu to understand that "return" does not cure the fracture of migration. The homeland of her youth is gone, and her sense of self must be anchored in her present, hybrid reality rather than a nostalgic past.

#### Narrative Architecture: Writing as the Ultimate Home

Because physical geographies prove unstable and local cultures remain exclusionary, the postcolonial migrant writer frequently turns to textuality itself as a site of habitation. When physical houses turn "unhomely" and homelands become "imaginary," the act of storytelling becomes the only truly portable architecture available to the displaced subject. Writing operates as a space where fractured memories can be gathered, hybridized identities can be legitimized, and conflicting worlds can coexist without the threat of physical violence or political deportation.

In *White Teeth*, Zadie Smith uses a maximalist, polyphonic narrative style to construct a literary space large enough to hold the disparate histories of her characters. By weaving together the British working-class history of Archie, the colonial history of Jamaica through Clara, and the anti-colonial history of Bengal through Samad, Smith builds a narrative architecture that mirrors the multicultural reality of contemporary London. The text itself becomes the Third Space that English society refuses to formalize. On the page, these conflicting histories collide, argue, and ultimately find a fragile equilibrium. Smith's writing does not seek to resolve the contradictions of her characters' lives; instead, it provides a sprawling home where those contradictions are allowed to live out loud.

In *Americanah*, Ifemelu's blog posts serve an identical function. The blog is a literal text-home. It does not belong to the physical geography of America, nor does it require a Nigerian passport; it exists in the borderless ether of the internet. For Ifemelu, writing is an act of architecture. She builds sentences to house the observations that she cannot express in her daily life as an immigrant student. When she returns to Nigeria, she shuts down the American blog and starts a new one focusing on Lagos life, signaling that her true home is not a city, but the digital page where she processes her experiences. Her identity is not anchored to the soil of Nigeria or the concrete of America, but to the language she uses to describe them.

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**Conclusion: Redefining Belonging**

Ultimately, postcolonial migrant narratives demonstrate that displacement is not merely a physical relocation across borders, but a profound ontological shift—a fundamental reordering of how a human being experiences existence. The politics of home in these texts reveals that belonging can no longer be defined by rigid national boundaries, ancestral bloodlines, or native soil. By depicting characters like Samad, Millat, and Ifemelu, who live fractured lives between two worlds, postcolonial authors expose the deep limitations of nationalistic and essentialist frameworks.

Home is reconfigured not as a physical architecture or a specific geography, but as a portable, linguistic, and emotional construct. It is built out of fragmented memories, sustained through hybrid day-to-day practices, and articulated through the very act of writing. The postcolonial migrant does not merely occupy the painful, liminal space between two worlds; they actively synthesize their fractured experiences to create a third world entirely their own. In this context, the literature of migration becomes more than an account of loss—it stands as a testament to the human capacity to build a home within the very state of transition.

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