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Blending Worlds: Mapping Home and Belonging in the Short Fiction of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni

Basudhara Roy

Abstract

The idea of home, as every postmodern individual will realize, contains within itself a great deal of complexity for home as a linguistic signifier can, indeed, lay claim to no unitary signified but must be experienced in as many ways and in as many forms as there are individuals. In the case of women, the concept of home gains in complexity as the domestic sphere, regulated by patriarchy, becomes a locus of female suppression and control rather than a space of affection, warmth and freedom of the self. In Divakaruni's fiction, women-centric as it is, issues of home

and belonging occupy a central focus. Her female characters in her stories, irrespective of their location and their present or potential mobility, are all constructed as migrants who constantly shift between their lived and scripted cultural identities, attempting to build home in the bridges that connect the various experiental aspects of their lives together, a process that is not charted out and defined but which must go on, just as life goes on, with hope derived from the future. Home is thus, for Divakaruni's women, a space constantly provisional and constantly in the making, to be cherished both for the moment and for the future.

Keywords: home, location, belonging, culture, marriage, identity.

As a linguistic signifier, 'home' has always been easily communicable. Tell a person you are on your way home or that you long for home and s/he will instinctively understand but ask a person who has never been away from home what home is and s/he will be at a loss for words, for home is an idea inordinately complex when it comes to the articulation of signification. Home, in fact, may be labeled as a floating signifier that can lay claim to no unitary signified but must be understood and experienced as a dense complex of hopes, feelings, assumptions and expectations that constellate around the idea of the self and its placed-ness in the world. From a metaphysical and religious standpoint, home is the archetypal quest for the regaining of Paradise, a life-journey towards physical death and our spiritual home. In the most emotively familiar sense of the word, home is a space of privacy and intimacy, intrinsically associated with family and loved ones, with warmth, affection, security, freedom and assured belonging. In the most primary and prosaic sense of the term, home is experienced as a physical location, a place from which one derives a sense of the self and around which are relentlessly constructed boundaries of private/public and self/other. But home is also, many a times, a place learnt about, shared and

inhabited only in narration. Lost permanently to the present and beyond reclamation in its original form in time or space, home is, for many individuals, forever experienced as a 'lack' in the Freudian sense, to be sought, imagined and re-built in memory and fantasy. "Home," writes Carole Boyes Davies, "can only have meaning once one experiences a level of displacement from it". (Davies; 1994; 113) Displacements and dislocations caused through migrations, and exile bring home to one the true meaning of home. But the signification of 'home' does not close itself here for there are many homes which fail ultimately to become homes for their inhabitants, betraying them by bringing into its closed frontiers the hostility, uncertainty, insecurity and emotional dis-ease associated with the larger public world. For many such individuals then, homes can, at best, be provisional, re-built every moment on the frail hope and possibility of their sustenance.

It may be said then that home is experienced in as many ways as there are individuals. Homes are built in places, both real and fantastical; in people, loved and often lost; in moments and memories of a lived past; in the provisional security of a temporary present; and in the hopeful possibilities of a promising future. Trinh T. Minh-Ha writes:

> "Home and language tend to be taken for granted; like Mother or Woman, they are often naturalized and homogenized. The source becomes then an illusory secure and fixed place, invoked as a natural state of things untainted by any process or outside influence (by 'theory' for example), or else, as an indisputable point of reference on whose authority one can unfailingly rely." (Minh-Ha; 1994; 13-14)

Home, whether real or imagined, is a space forever in the making and forever incomplete. To characterize it with fixity is a folly since if home, in the broadest sense, may be understood as the nesting place for the self and if, the self is, by nature, in constant flux, the idea of home being a site of constant flux necessarily follows. Homes are re-fashioned every moment not merely in their concrete physicality and their emotive configurations, but also in their fantastical associations; in dream, desire, memory and imagination. Home encompasses the idea of not only what *was* once dear, precious and intimate but what *is* precariously so today and what *shall*, in fervent hope, be so tomorrow. Homes, however provisional, are built on this temporal intersection between past, present and future and must be constantly negotiated amidst life's changing circumstances and demands. They must, when required, be stretched across cities, countries and continents; across life and even death; across lost loves, new intimacies and future prospects. "Home then", as Gary Snyder puts it, "is as large as one makes it." (qtd. In Minh-Ha; 1994; 16) A home may be made or found, and again lost in a person, place or prospect but the very necessity and possibility of creating home again and again, impels us onwards in our journey, for homing is as archetypal a motif as exile, the Fall being not just an exile or un-homing from Paradise but also a re-homing upon Earth. No home, it must be remembered, can ever be perfect but must become sooner or later, a limit to rather than a harbor of the self. As Jamaica Kincaid puts it, through her metaphor of garden as home:

> "A garden, no matter how good it is, must never completely satisfy. The world as we know it, after all, began in a very good garden, a completely satisfying garden – Paradise- but after a while the owner and the occupants wanted more."
>
> (Kincaid; 2000; 169-70)

Blending Worlds: Mapping Home and Belonging in the Short Fiction of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni

The short fiction of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni takes one by surprise in its sensitive and mature handling of the idea of home. A versatile and prolific Indian American writer, Divakaruni aspires to capture in her fiction the idea of home in all its rich complexity and nuanced texture. Unlike the usual trend in diaspora writing, she is seen to examine home not merely from the point of view of the native-turned-immigrant but to explore its various, subjective meanings as experienced by individuals everywhere in their everyday lives and as carried forward, with inevitable transformations, from one phase of life into another. In her two volumes of short fiction *Arranged Marriage* (1995) and *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives* (2002), Divakaruni forays into the lives of women, both native and immigrant, and explores their complex notions of home and at-homeness as they shift within and between the worlds that they are led to by the unpredictable circumstances of their lives. It is characteristic of Divakaruni's fiction that her lenses as a storyteller are focused incessantly on women. "It appears that writing with the intent to place women at the center of my work has been (another) one of my enterprises," states the writer. (Zupancic; 2012; 91) Her fiction canvas is dense with women - adolescent daughters, independent working women, newly-wed brides, abandoned wives, mothers and widows, each uniquely different from the other and yet, astonishingly similar as they discover solidarity among themselves through the intrinsic sameness of their experiences. While men too, are a pervasive a presence in her fiction, they are mostly constituted as agents of female victimization and are, in most of the stories, relegated to the margins of the narrative. Many of Divakaruni's characters are immigrants into the New World of America and must struggle, additionally, with the confusion and isolation of living on alien shores. Immigration, however, surfaces only as a secondary theme in her work, the central idea around which they are

built being her women protagonists' search for meaningful relationships in their lives and of finding and making home within them.

For women, the idea of home has always been a severely contested one with the domestic sphere being historically constituted in feminist thought as the most significant site for women's control, regulation and exploitation. Feminist thought argues that the traditional limiting of women within the private sphere of home has led the public sphere to be dominated by a masculinity that defines itself against the feminine. The direct result of this is that family and home which are, after all, no insulated private spaces but permeable (and vulnerable) social units constituting major stakeholders in the nation and its policies, come to be mapped and regulated by strict patriarchal ideology and practices. Home, thus, ceases to be a private space that allows the blossoming of individuality and becomes a significant site for the establishment and negotiation of power relationships that are vital to both national culture and nationalism with the result that it came to be viewed by Third-wave feminists, "not as a sanctuary but as a prison, a site from which escape was the essential prerequisite for self discovery and independence" and '"homesickness," came to be de-nostalgically coded as "sick of home." (Rubenstein; 2001; 2) Further, nationalism requires that women as guardians and cultural keepers of the nation within the frontiers of home and as the begetters of national citizenry should be kept under close surveillance at all times. They are, to use Edward Bellamy's words "…the wardens of the world to come, to whose keeping the keys of the future are confided." (Bellamy; 1890; 192) However, while women are exalted on the one hand as representatives of the nation and as marking its boundaries, on the other, their reality and individuality are brutally denied, they being fantasized by the nation as Zillah Eisenstein asserts, in a "homogenized, abstracted, familial order" becoming transformed into "a 'metaphor' for what they represent, rather than what they are."

(43) "As symbolizations," argues Eisenstein, "they become static and unchanging like the constructions of timeless motherhood. Their representation, as the nation, defines them fictively, and reproduces the fiction." (Eisenstein; 2000; 43) It is because of such constructions of national femininity that women's bodies become an important site for assertions of masculine fanaticisms and for the battles of national and cultural power to take place. "The raping of women in war," states Eisenstein "defiles the nation of which she is a part, while marking nation-ness." (ibid; 47) Giti Chandra, similarly observes, "…women in ethnic conflicts the world over are raped as much to reap the political capital of the possible child as in violent vengeance to redress perceived grievances." (Chandra; 2009; 2) In the face of a relationship so fraught with ambivalence then, the prospect of women finding a home within the nation too becomes subject to serious doubts and questions.

Within the contours of her fiction, however, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni manages to touch the heart of all these complexities concerning home. In her short fiction particularly, home takes the form of a quest for all her protagonists, forever attainable, yet forever beyond reach. Through her stories, Divakaruni poignantly throw into relief the inadequacy of objective notions of home as adequate social housing, for a large number of her characters, though perfectly well-housed, fail to find a home within their dwellings, home for them, constantly manifesting itself as a yearning to be fully accepted as who they are. Betrayed and hurt in their most intimate relationships, home, for Divakaruni's women, is a concept in constant flux, evolving and changing as new layers of experience unfold and old values come

into frequent clash with newly emerging facts, knowledge and ideas. Within her fiction, all women are constituted as migrants, forever in motion between their shifting cultural identities as daughters, wives, widows and mothers and forever vagabondish in their search for home. Forever dislocated between physical places traversed through marriage, temporal frames within which their identity fluidly travels, and culturally scripted roles assigned to them, at-home-ness for Divakaruni's women, is a feeling at worst, illusive and at best, provisional. The eleven stories of *Arranged Marriage* have as their central theme, their women protagonists' listlessness and insecurity within the boundaries imposed by marriage and domesticity and their search for a home beyond home. Not all marriages described in these stories are traditional, loveless marriages in the generally understood Western sense of the term but they are all marriages among Indians and are governed therefore by the same cultural codes of patriarchy. The first story of the collection 'Bats' presents the tragic plight of a family wrecked by domestic violence. Narrated by the young daughter, the story describes the frequent battering that the girl and her mother were exposed to at the hands of her father and how in a fit of desperation, the mother had one day, deciding to flee her husband, taken her daughter away to a distant uncle's village. The time spent at her mother's uncle's house seems to offer the narrator her first sense of at-home-ness for she is given here all the warmth, affection and security that life with her father had denied her. However, for the mother, her uncle's house, despite the love, protection and security that it offers can never be accepted as home since she has been traditionally socialized into cultural ideas that for a married woman, her husband's house is the only place to be called home. Upset by the insinuating glances and whispered conversations of the village women behind her back, the narrator's mother decides to write to her husband and is overjoyed to have him answer back in tones of regret and apology. And although both the daughter and the mother know that

the abusive husband and father can never change, for the mother, home lies in hopelessly holding on to her socially sanctioned role and in the remote possibility that it shall secure for her daughter a fulfilling home in future. The story interestingly derives its title from the incident of bats repeatedly attacking fruits in the orchard that the narrator's grandpa-uncle is in charge of and though he even uses poison to ward them off, the bats still insist on coming back to the place. "They don't realize that by flying somewhere else they'll be safe," states the narrator's grandpa. "Or maybe they do, but there's something that keeps pulling them back here." (Divakaruni;1997;8) Although in the story Divakaruni denies readers direct access to the narrator's mother's consciousness, what keeps on driving her back to the place of danger and insecurity is amply clear. The writer too sheds light on it through another one of her stories. In the story 'The Ultrasound', when Arundhati is being coerced by her orthodox marital family to abort her foetus, revealed in the aminocentesis to be a girl, her cousin Anju living in the U.S., advises her to leave her husband's house in order to save her child. However, the practical realities that such a radical measure involves, are unthought of by Anju. "That's easy for you to say from here," states her husband Sunil, pointing out the obvious.

> "Runu's the one who'll have to face it every day. Even if money isn't a problem, what kind of life will it be for her? She certainly won't have the chance to remarry. She'll be alone with her daughter the rest of her life, a social pariah, someone the neighbours point a finger at every time she walks down the street." (ibid;227)

The social consequences of living without a husband are also referred to in the story 'Meeting Mrinal' in which the protagonist Asha, living in America, describes how after being abandoned

by and divorced from her husband, she had gradually come to seclude herself from all social gatherings.

> "I'd be the only woman in the room without a husband, and the other wives, even those too well bred to whisper, would look at me with pity, as though at something maimed, an animal with a limb chopped off. Behind the pity would be a flicker of gratitude that it hadn't happened to *them*, or a gleam of suspicion because now I was unattached and therefore dangerous." (ibid;277)

In such a social context then, homes for women are reduced to mere dwellings and at-home-ness becomes an experience that can be realized only in fantasy or hopeful possibility, just as Anju fantasizes about Runu being sponsored to America by her husband.

Domestic violence is an issue often explored intricately and from several viewpoints in Divakaruni's fiction. In the story 'The Forgotten Children' from her second volume, for example, the two siblings within a violence-wrecked family build a home for themselves in the fantasy of being forgotten by their parents. Dragged from one place to another by their father's inability to hold onto a job, the brother and sister are haunted by a deep sense of insecurity and out-of-placeness both within home and in the public sphere outside it. At school, on the streets and in the market place, they imagine themselves being self-consciously subject to the deep scrutiny of strangers who, they are sure, associate them in their abjection, with their abusive, ill-tempered and violent father on the one hand and their harassed and helpless mother, on the other. In their private fantasy, however, the siblings being forgotten by their parents and left behind during one of their hurried departures are set free to build for themselves a home just as they had always expected and wanted it to be - a haven of love, comfort, affection, warmth and security.

> "In our fantasy, no one drags us over the cracked driveway so that its exposed brick scours our backs. In the dark garage, no one lights a match and brings it so close that we can feel the heat of it on our eyelids. In our fantasy, entire sections of words have disappeared from the dictionary: *fear, fracture, furious, fatal, father.*" (Divakaruni;2002;153)

Physical abuse also features in the story 'Silver Pavements, Golden Roofs' where the narrator's uncle Bikram lashes out at his wife in his helpless frustration directed at an unequal and discriminatory America. Denied a glimpse into the narrator's aunt's consciousness, the reader can only conjecture that Aunt Pratima too, like Jayanti had had naively earnest hopes in marriage and America, hopes that never materialized and have constantly been deferred to a prospective tomorrow. Like Jayanti, Pratima too had been socialized into dreams of maidenhood through the same cultural fiction:

Will I marry a prince from a far-off magic land

Where the pavements are silver and the roofs all gold?(Divakaruni;1997;56)

But such homes, as Pratima and Jayanti both discover, are to be sought and found only in the realms of the imagination, just as the snow falling on Jayanti's outstretched hands, imaginatively grants her the whiteness that she desperately needs to feel at home in this alien land. Besides physical abuse, emotional abuse of women within the bounds of home is also a frequent theme in Divakaruni's stories. In the story 'The Disappearance', for instance, the narrator describes a conjugal relationship from the point of view of a husband who looks upon his dealings with his wife as faultlessly liberal and sees no flaw in their relationship, though there have been times when he has had to pressurize her to do things which were right. Sexual intimacy was one such

area where "her reluctance went beyond womanly modesty" and though he had to force himself on her on those occasions "he was always careful not to hurt her".

> "He prided himself on that. Not even a little slap, not like some of the men he'd known growing up, or even some of his friends now. [...] But that was nothing new. That could have nothing to do with the disappearance." (ibid;173)

His complacent assumptions, however, suffer a rude jolt when he discovers his wife's wedding jewelry missing, transforming the act of her disappearance from a probable crime into a shocking mystery of bold transgression. In the story 'Affair' too, Divakaruni presents the narrative of women in unsatisfactory marriages and the difficulty of feeling at home within their socially allotted homes. It is only when Abha's best friend Meena, decides to leave her husband for another man that Abha for the first time realizes that she too was living "in a house that had never, for all its comforts, been my home." (ibid;271) and decides to write that very night, a letter to her husband Ashok explaining the imperative need for their separation. In several of Divakaruni's stories, at-home-ness for her characters becomes synonymous with the mother, the first home from which the sense of belonging with the world was negotiated. The loss of the mother then either physically or emotionally as in stories like 'The Word Love', 'The Love of a Good Man', 'The Intelligence of Wild Things' and 'The Blooming Season for Cacti' create a fracture in the character's sense of self and home, a fracture that can be healed only by re-uniting imaginatively with the mother.

"If I were asked to make a definition of domestic space," writes Jamaica Kincaid, "I would say that domestic space is any space in which anyone might feel comfortable expelling any bodily fluid." (Kincaid; 1990; 23) For Divakaruni's women, it is precisely this discomfort that renders homes unhomely for their most intimate fluids like tears, blood, etc. are

discharged here not naturally but perforce. According to Bhabha, unhomeliness is a state in which the borders between private and public are erased.

> "The recesses of the domestic space become sites for history's most intricate invasions. In that displacement, the borders between home and the world become confused; and, uncannily, the private and the public become part of each other, forcing upon us a vision that is as divided as it is disorienting." (Bhabha; 1997; 445)

The search for home then in Divakaruni's fiction is a continually deferred search for that sacred place in which the difference between the private and the public can be preserved and where the personal and the intimate are not betrayed by complicity with the forces of patriarchy and power.

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About the Author : Basudhara Roy is Assistant Professor in the Department of English, Karim City College, Jamshedpur.