

Building homes and patching-up identities to belong: reading women protagonists' life choices in the short stories of Adichie and Lahiri

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Introduction

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Jhumpa Lahiri are eminent figures of world literature whose works, though differing in nature, echo in delivering a unique insider-look upon women's experiences of immigration. Despite the cultural *décalage* between Nigeria and India, the women characters in these short stories are all trying to attain self-realisation. The present analysis will look at selected works from Lahiri's *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008) and Adichie's *That Thing Around Your Neck* (2009)ⁱ as they explore the possibilities and limits of alternative homes and belongings from within the confines of their protagonists' personal spaces and daily lives. Patterns such as home cooked food, mixing of languages, religious beliefs and ritualised habits ornate the short stories in varying tones and layers; aligning the works discussed to the prevailing homes and belongings identified in most literature on immigrant writing (Shaden 2015, Cavalcanti 2018).ⁱⁱ Small details of everyday lifeⁱⁱⁱ that keeps one inside women's domestic sphere and world while at the same time negotiating borders of cultural and political identity.

1) Home-making as the centre of transferable rootedness

Both Adichie and Lahiri allude to home as the location of the continuum between rootedness and new dreams. A reconnection that is materialised through an intergenerational transmission of values and habits; allowing the women characters to transcend the fixity of time and space. This home also carries two worlds in the nomadic sense of *in-betweenness*^{iv} that Edward Said describes as an imagined, fantasied ideal home, a space “between hope and loss.”^v Characters are often trying to advance, to re-invent their lives in a new context, and yet keep their feet anchored into the past by faithfully clinging to ways and beliefs of another time and place.^{vi} They use familiar details of home making, family histories and traditions to channel a renewed and revived sense of self through the continuation of a lived heritage enfolded within a feminine bonding. Adichie depicts one such significant intergenerational connection with Afamefuna who spends her professional life reclaiming the history of her grandmother's people. "Sifting through archives, (she) reimagines the lives and smells of her grandmother's world" (TAN: “The Headstrong Historian”). The fact that she changes her English name back to Afamefuna (“my name will not be lost”) somehow completes her home-making by asserting her belonging. There is also the example of Ruma who upon becoming a

mother, tries hard to recollect and reproduce her deceased mother's homecare (UE: "Unaccustomed Earth"). Seeing her brother moving on with his life and her father having a new relationship, Ruma fears that a part of her identity will disappear along with the fading memories of her mother. Thus, she copes by making her own son eat the same home cooked food and singing the same lullabies. When her father spends some time at her new place, he soothes her anxieties by teaching his grandson some Indian words and stories. Together, the grandfather and grandson plants seeds in the garden and thus, metaphorically sets a new anchorage that will render the new house a location of belonging. Home here is one's life, the lived memories build piece by piece like new furniture in a new house.

Lahiri attributes a key role to the father as a bridging agent who mends the rupture caused by the death of the mother in the feminine transmission continuum. His active presence induces the possibility of memory agency crossing the traditional gender-assigned roles. The burden of tradition as a woman's duty shifts to make room for a different kind of rootedness that is healthier, without guilt or resentment. Lahiri sets the tone for her collection and draws a path for her characters by quoting Nathaniel Hawthorne in the opening of the story:

"Human nature will not flourish any more than a potato, if it be planted and replanted, for too long a series of generations, in the same worn-out soil. My children have had other birthplaces, and so far, their fortunes may be within my control, shall strike their roots into unaccustomed earth" (*The Custom House*, 1850).

Although she acknowledges the importance of memory and cultural heritage in the immigrant's self-making, Lahiri wants to move forward by making her characters overcome the confusion of their dual homes, the *in-betweenness* with new signposts. Home becomes a site of change and conscious construction where the sense of rootedness does not have to keep one stuck on the same ground but on the contrary, to sprout some "transferable roots" that can be transplanted elsewhere. A concept that moves away from the feminist exclusivist tendency, separating men and women.

2) Home as sustained bounding and meaning-making

The works of both authors depict a sense of bonding at varying levels as a way for characters to define their relation with the world and others. In this construct, home takes a relational and emotional aspect, which requires a shift in the other's acceptance of self, a collective journey, for the process to work. A speaking example would be Ugonna's mother who refuses a new life on other people's terms. She aborts the visa application for asylum as she realises that her homing is intimately linked with her son. It was

"Ugonna who gave her a new life, a new identity. She is a new person made by him, she would be Ugonna's mother" (TAN: "The American Embassy"). The new life she desires and which fits her new self takes her back to the ancestral hometown where she will plant flowers on her son's plot and wait for it to bloom instead of starting an empty and senseless life in America.

Marriage as home to relations and emotional battles is an appropriate space where homing and self-transformation are devised, imagined and embodied. Most of the time, the bonds of marriage and ensuing gendered duties are lived as a binding tie for women. Home, thus can be a space for self-imposition in the need to counter erasure and disappearance. A deep desire that haunts to the point where physical pain is obliterated in order to sustain a sense of being. Nonso's sister soothes her guilt at killing her brother through self-inflicted pain. Her desire to "exist" in the eyes of her parents and grandmother was so intense that she committed a crime. "You knew that something had to happen to Nonso, so that you could survive" (TAN: "Tomorrow is Too Far"). The home as a domestic space does not always remain a refuge or a haven of peace when weighed down under social norms and conventions. Somehow, facing an obstacle outside home makes the characters instinctively look inward and realise that something is amiss there too. For Kamara (TAN: "On Monday Last Week") who needs to physically get away, "to leave the apartment each day" and metaphorically escape, home is the prison of her nightmares where she only sees tokens of her failed marriage and barren broken womanhood. It was facing Tracy's indifference, the Black American woman for whom she works, which made her realise that she has come to loath the woman she has become.

3) Homing as inner construct and self-representation

Home as inner construct represents a set of emotional ties and familiar happenings that generates well-being and growth for the women characters depicted. They are seeking a type of bonding that goes beyond family ties and ethnic or racial community in order to inhabit a broader space of self-expression. Yet, they also apprehend the loss of singularity assimilated with the suppressive homogenising label suggested by cosmopolitanism, which remains an unconvincing alternative.^{viii} Most women characters in TAN advocate clear-cut opinions about who they are and where they belong and do not conceive of any possible space for compromise or middle grounds. Ujunwa, a young aspiring writer is battling a whole system in the person of the British workshop director Edward for her story, that of a woman resisting sexual harassment, to be accepted as a "plausible narrative." Although she resists other male participants' urge to accept her status of victim: "as a woman after all (she) has no other choice" (TAN: "Jumping Monkey Hill");

curiously, she finds unacceptable Edward “ogling” the two other participants, including the lesbian Senegalese because that would put them all into the same bag of “just women.”

In UE, however, despite an eagerness to shake off the collective “we”, the characters are more passive in the process of self-affirmation. Sudha is an example of the ever-hesitant woman, unable to stand for her life choice as she finds herself in the middle of the conflict between her drug-addict brother and their conservative parents. Even if she has created a new life to “disconnect” from her past, she could not prevent her family issues from intruding into her present, “cracking open the fledgling family” (UE: “Only Goodness”). The same latent resignation can be traced in Hema’s choice to settle for a “dead life,” an arranged marriage with a man her heart will never accept. She justifies this choice as “her unwillingness to abide indefinitely” and to “own her present” (UE: “Going Ashore”). She wishes to free herself from the past – her teenage passion for Kaushik who never matured and her deceived love for Julian who had no place in his life for her except that of a mistress – and the future, holding an imagined self and happiness that will not come to life. If Adichie conceives of a space for personal expression where women can “speak up” and “do it alone” (TAN: “That Thing Around your Neck”) as a heritage from the American culture; Lahiri, opposes some reserve as to the possibilities offered to these immigrant women outside of “performing” their lives in a still hostile environment. Home as an individual construct is volatile, something performed and “inauthentic” (Cavalcanti, 2018).

Conclusion

Both Adichie and Lahiri use a certain sense of distance and movement in their narratives, relying on culturally specific moments to convey the malleability of their characters’ sense of belonging and identity building. Overall, the aspects of home developed in those stories are parts of one long process of self-realisation that often intersect and overlap to bring the characters to a destination that they have neither imagined nor desired. This uncertainty confirms the flexible and fluid nature of the characters’ homing journey. However, where Adichie sounds affirming in her characters’ choices, Lahiri opts for the caution of re-formulation. The tentative aspect reflects well the uncertainty of human relations and experiences; hence, the notion of permanent negotiation allowing for evolution and change.

Though most women characters we encounter in the short stories discussed here seem to embody the nomadic subjectivity in Braidotti’s feminist model^{viii}, their journey toward belonging is an inward one. Making home for these women, whether they are Nigerian or Indian, is to come to terms with a dual representativeness. They are seeking to understand and to be understood, to find some sense of

concreteness for their idealised and imagined subjective self amidst the overwhelming collective body of recognised experiences in their two homes. In a sense, they are seeking a sense of *being*, an inward-bound recognition that will ensure the existence of an “I” in contrast to the alluring collective “us” and the brutal rejection carried by the otherness of “them.” Trying not to lose oneself into the boxed and reducible collective image and representation of the hyphenated identity that the American context offers. The strength of those women’s stories lays in the fact that they speak from a sincere and vulnerable subject-location that includes rather than differentiates.

ⁱ Throughout the text, the collections of short stories will be referred to as “TAN” for *That Thing Around your Neck*, 2008 and “UE” for *Unaccustomed Earth*, 2009 (UE).

ⁱⁱ 1) Nasser Adel Shaden (2015). “Searching for home: A reader’s response to Lahiri’s *Interpreter of Maladies*.”(Official Conference Proceedings from The Asian Conference on Literature and Librariship, Ain Shams University, Egypt) ; 2) Cavalcanti Sofia (2018). “Unreal Homes: Belonging and Becoming in Indian Women Narratives” in *Humanities*, 7:133. doi:10.3390/h7040133

ⁱⁱⁱ Bigot Corinne (2018). “By Way of Their Fingers”: Making Sense of Self and Home in Selected Short Stories by Edwidge Danticat, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie”. In *Women on the Move: Body, Memory and Feminity in Present-day Transnational Diasporic Writing*. Silvia Pellicer-Ortin & Julia Tofantšuk (Eds). London, New York: Routledge. (Chap. 5).

^{iv} Al Azmeh, Zeina (2014). “Nomadic feminism: four lines of flight.” *European Scientific Journal*, June, Vol.02. (Special edition). Pp. 98-107.

^v “...an interstitial space between the hopes promised by the present, the new home and the lost past representing the homeland left behind” Qtd. in *Routledge Guide to Edward Said*, edited by Ashcroft and Ahluwalia, Routledge Critical Series, 2001.

^{vi} Leigh Swigart evokes the deep imprint of memory in immigrant lives through the reenacting or reproducing of home culture and kinship preservation in order to provide a sense of belonging in his paper: “Extended Lives: The African Immigrant Experience in Philadelphia”, Balch Institute for Ethnic Studies, 2001, pgs. 4-8.

^{vii} Tofolletti, Kim (2004). “Catastrophic subjects: Feminism, the posthuman and difference.” *Third Space* 3:2, Special issue on Representation and Transgressive sexualities.

^{viii} Braidotti, Rosi (2014). “Writing as a nomadic subject”. *Comparative Critical Studies* 11. 2–3 (2014): 163–184. Edinburgh University Press, DOI: 10.3366/ccs.2014.0122