

**“A Place Called Home”: Reading Ravinder Randhawa’s *Kulwant in A Wicked Old Woman***

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**Abstract:**

In the last few decades, emerging postcolonial literature and its concern with the ideas of home, nation and identity have witnessed a proliferation of writing on such themes and varied meanings in other disciplines like psychology, history, philosophy, and sociology. Many researchers and postcolonial writers have understood and acknowledged home as a multidimensional concept. Their approaches towards home has made the notion of home complex. Besides comfort and safety, the idea of home is also associated with sense of belongingness in postcolonial literature.

The idea of home is widely associated with migrants and becomes a major reason for the felt nostalgia and identity. In the context of diaspora, a restricted geographical space cannot be discussed as Home; rather, it is characterized by the multiplicity of spaces interpreted as Home due to the experience of ‘multiple belongings. A sense of belonging to the motherland has influenced the entire life of the earlier generation of migrants in some way or the other. The link of migrants with the place of origin is commonly marked with psychological anxieties and ambivalence majorly because the migrants are torn-between two or more homes. Such nostalgic values diminish gradually with the passing generations as the later migrants or second- generation diasporas visualize their ancestral land through their parents’ perspective. For them, the ancestral land remains more like an idea but since, their roots lie there, it play a crucial role in shaping their identity. The second- generation diasporas consider themselves as British and hence, England is their home country.

With some pre-defined concepts of Home in diasporic studies, the paper aims to investigate the perceptible shift in the perspective of second generation South-Asian Diaspora in Britain and explore the possible reasons for this shift by tracing the issues of the loss of Home, displacement, nostalgia and identity in both the generations through a close reading of Ravinder Randhawa’s *A Wicked Old Woman*. The paper will focus on the relationship of

Kulwant, the second generation South Asian Diasporas, and her relationships with indigenous British group of people.

**Keywords:** Home, Nostalgia, Identity, Cross-cultural attitude, Migrant

At times, home is nowhere. At times, one only knows extreme estrangement and alienation. Then home is no longer just one place. It is locations. Home is that place which enables and promotes varied and everchanging perspectives, a place where one discovers new ways of seeing reality, frontiers of difference. (16)

Bell Hooks, *Talking Back (Thinking Feminist-Thinking Black)*

Where are you from? It is one of those most common questions we are asked when we meet someone for the first time. The answer takes us to our place of origin. The traditional idea of home is related to a fixed place, but migration has made it difficult to answer the questions of being and belonging. The notions of comfort, shelter and safety comprise the idea of home; the place where we are welcomed and we belong. It is the place which belongs to our ancestors and defines our route to the roots. An individual's strongest bond with his/her home is beautifully expressed in Agha Shahid Ali's poem "Postcard from Kashmir" when Kashmir, his home shrinks to the pictures on a postcard: "This is home. And this the closest / I'll ever be to home." (5-6). These lines ideate the poet's deep love for his homeland. Although he was no longer living in his homeland and somehow lost touch with Kashmir, he sublimes his nostalgia in the form of poetry.

The idea of home has one of the most important functions in an individual's life as it constructs a sense of safe haven on earth, further developing strong bonds with one's socio-cultural and political roots. But from the course of colonization till today, many people have left their country of origin. The world has witnessed indentured labour, slavery, forced migration, voluntary displacement, and postcolonial migration from the Third World Countries to the First World Countries. These migrants have to create a psychophysical space in the adopted country but their emotions are still dedicated to their homeland. The process of migration introduces a new home to the migrant in the adopted land, taking him/her away from their real home. This multiplicity of homes for a migrant sometimes makes the question of belongingness complicated for the migrant.

Elvis Presley's song "Home Is Where The Heart Is" supports the idea that for a migrant, home denotes comfort, remembered pasts, memories of landscape, and connection

with the surroundings. The absence of these in the hostland is responsible for arousing the sense of loss within a migrant. The lack of belongingness and differences of language and colour in the alien surroundings are some pertinent differences that mark a migrant's struggle for adjustment in the foreign land. It further complicates his attempt to seek answers to the questions of existence and identity also.

Home is a complicated concept for migrants for whom the idea of home is translocated as the place of origin inevitably parted from the place of being (Ahmed 329-47). For a migrant home reflects the idea of transience in life. The idea of home is more complicated for the earlier generation as the journey from their home country to the adopted country is burdened with uncertainty, contradictions, psychological anxieties and conflicts because they are torn between the two homes. Their inner conflict and lack of belongingness is promoted to alienation and isolation, thus weakening the process of amalgamation with the host society.

The experiences of migrants towards settling in the host country resonate with their own importance and values that narrate the journey of shaping their identity. With the passage of time, improved migration has also widened up the meaning of Home. The present times are pulsating with cross-cultural amalgamation when human self and identities are defined within the new paradigm created due to crossing the international borders and living with multiple identities. The current spurt in the global migration has been supported and eased by improved communication facilities, transportation, and multicultural environment. Migration has given new citizens to the world who have transcended the defined bordered spaces and created a home in other countries of the world away from their homeland and/ or motherland. The presence of migrants in the host country today is much stronger and confident. Their upbringing in the host country is long enough to be aware of the enduring struggle of anti-racism, and struggling bipolar attitude in institutional policies.

The second generation has not experienced migration and is devoid of any memories to develop bonds of association with the motherland. This generation is heir to the history of migration, nostalgic moments, diasporic memories, and stories that are told, retold, reinterpreted and re-appropriated in the light of here and now in the foreign land. As the former migrants have experienced marginalization where one is supposed to compromise with his/her expectations, it also leads to experiencing alienation and identity crises. It also forms the contextual background for the former diasporic writers to discuss the issues of physical, mental, economic, and cultural loss of home. The questions of home and homelessness that often arise

in a diasporic study are fading away for the later migrants. Homi K. Bhabha in *The Location of Culture* (1993), delineated that “to be ‘unhomed is not to be homeless” (13). The thought of being unhomed is traumatic and thoughts travel down the memory lane to suddenly transcend the international borders enormously. But for the second generation, home is not which he/she and his/her parents left behind; it is the place in the present where he/she has settled today.

For the second-generation diasporas, the idea of home is not different, but the home itself is different from their parents’ idea of home. For them, their parents’ home becomes a second home or the foreign country which they visit during vacations. The first generation’s host country becomes the home for the later generations. Although the earlier migrants are often seen as divided between two different homes and cultures, the consciousness of the second generation is defined by numerous factors like religion, gender, age, sexuality, race, location, and class that defines their “being” and “becoming” South Asian British. The consciousness distinguishes the second generation from the first generation, which is still largely traditional and exclusive in relation to socio-culture behaviour.

The novel *A Wicked Old Woman* (1987) by Ravinder Randhawa is about expat Indians living in the United Kingdom. Randhawa has described the relationships of Kulwant, her protagonist, with Whites, non-whites and her family and how it is to live in a country where the cultural experiences are different from the ones with which you are nurtured in the homeland. Kulwant, was born in India and migrated to England with her family at the age of eight and received her education there. Her school days were the times when she grew up fresh as an easy recipient of socio-cultural experiences and hence, those times played a prominent role in shaping her identity.

In any immigrant’s life, childhood is also the toughest phase to deal as he/she is trapped between the double dilemmas of two homes; one that belongs to her family and relatives and the other one is the space where she desires to belong, represented by streets, school, teachers, schoolmates, playground, and the mainstream community. Kulwant was very young when she moved from her old home to her new home and inadvertently, there was a comparison between the two places or the imagined and real homes in her mind. The comparison is more related to differences in terms of culture, language, and colour with people around her in the new vicinity. In the ocean of white students, she was the only brown. The character of Kulwant is more inclined towards exploring her new world, rather being afraid of her new surroundings and

people. She was not afraid of rejection or violation of her personal space by the dominant community.

Sara Vannini and Ricardo Gomez opine, “Home is not just a place; it is a feeling. Home is not only a physical space, it is also an imagined one” (1). Kulwant is not in any state of dilemma. She freely brings her school friend Caroline, a British white and her “mother had always liked Caroline,” (15). They belonged to a later chronological era and more affluent socio-cultural background. Kulwant’s friendship with Caroline, a white, lasted throughout years. Caroline initiated friendly relations with Kulwant and “had adopted the newcomer in junior school” (54). She took Kulwant under her wings so that she was not treated as an outsider or ‘other’ at school. Kulwant’s assimilation in Caroline’s community can be understood as the creation of a new home for Kulwant; comfortable, safe, and secure.

Kulwant was a curious subject for everyone in the school as she “had probably been the first Indian girl they’d ever seen, and for many years the only one in the class. She was an interesting curiosity and for the first few months the centre of attention” (54). Caroline was “her self-appointed guardian” and like a driving force for Kulwant to make sure she is happy and comfortable (54). In fact, she decided who will help Kulwant with Maths, “and who was to be her partner in the playground game” (54). Kulwant never had the fear of rejection. When Kulwant scored the highest in Maths, “Caroline relished her power,” (55). In this relationship Kulwant was not required to be more English or less Indian. There was a sense of fulfilment and achievement which Kulwant and Caroline derived and enjoyed equally.

Kulwant’s mind-set opposes the traditional ideology of tolerance and her balanced perception towards acceptance of the new world abandons the ideological principles based on cultural exclusivity and allows her to embrace the fresh wave of cultural blend and assimilation. Although the second generation draws the line that distinguishes and parts both the cultures, they also step ahead to bridge the gap. The separation in both the worlds is often advantageous as it licenses the second generation to explore the host society. It is not disrespect for home by the second-generation South Asians. It is their effort to not discourage any cultural practice at home or alienate themselves from the mainstream community.

Randhawa has also portrayed the characters of other women migrants. The former ones are preparing *samosas* and speaking Punjabi, and the later ones are expected to help them in their work. The newer generation is more educated, secured and liberated in thoughts, away from the monotonous drudgery of home which the former generation considers as the sole

periphery for women. This journey beyond the four walls of home to exploring the outer world is creating a personal space for the second-generation diasporas where they are more independent and feel at home. 1970s was the era when British Asian women were portrayed as bearers of heavy domestic work, arranged marriages, submissive, and unable to act as independent agencies. This portrayal was against the victimized South Asian women constructed by the mainstream. The later era of 1980s witnessed females who stepped out for education and gradually participated in social activism. Kulwant, the woman of this second generation “was avid with hunger to learn, experience and experiment, to step out from her insulated, closed-off home life and dip her feet into the world’s whirlpool” (5). Her involvement in the British society is visible through her friendship with Caroline and lover relation with “Michael the Archangel, she called him” so (5).

“Home, I will argue, along with gender/sexuality, race and class, acts as an ideological determinant of the subject” (George 2). Kulwant’s idea of home is well ideologized when she encountered a lady in an Asian centre searching for something more than authentic. When she saw an “exotic bric-a-bric” from her native country she felt like home, but for Kulwant it was “nothing more than a distant childhood memory” (33). For those who were born here or migrated at a very young age it is “a patchwork land transmitted through parents’ stories of places, people, happenings: an infrastructure kept alive with letters, imbibed baby milk, mixed with *rotis* and savoured with the mature taste of chillies” (33).

For Kulwant “Freedom become an English patent and to be free was to imitate an Englishness. In those days of immigration when she was the only Asian in the sea of white skinned people, she was continually and constantly different, yearning to be the same and being the same for her then meant to “having a boyfriend.” (5). Her relationship with Michael “erased forever her given position as that old-fashioned, traditional Indian girl in pig-tails” (5). Kulwant’s relationship with Michael displays her efforts towards such amalgamation with the dominant society. This effort stabilizes and strengthens her presence in the host country. Michael’s devotion to their relationship and his commitment provides a comfortable room for Kulwant, thus, erasing all thoughts rising due to the differences of identity, colour or language. Her relationship with Michael was the most discussed topic in the school because of the racial differences in the relationship of a white man with a brown woman. The most common form of the White gaze since colonialism has also been reflected and highlighted in the novel by the presence of students who used to tease Kulwant rather than passing harsh slangs. However, Michael’s involvement in this relationship reflects the comfortable presence and equal space

for both of them. Gail Low in her paper, “Separate Spheres?: Representing London Through Women in Some Recent Black British Fiction”, examined the works of later generation South Asian women writers and opines that they “register a new confidence by which young Black British women negotiate different aspects of their identity and their rights as citizens of Britain” (30). Through Kulwant’s relationship and amalgamation, Randhawa presents her choice, comfort, and confident recognition of Britain as her home.

Home can be represented as a postcolonial trope and Randhawa arrays this trope, delineating its connection with nation, culture and identity to anticipate place, location, homelessness, belonging, and the relations of the second generation South Asian Diasporas with the group of indigenous British. He has also transformed the previously stagnant concepts of ‘home’ or ‘abroad’ into a chain of differently perceived prospects set within the contested territory of ‘Englishness’ itself. Therefore, ‘Home’ in this text no longer represents a physical place; it signifies multiple locations and a visionary ground for opportunities and new improvisations.

The terms “home” and “abroad” are imperative and blended in the concept and understanding of diaspora. “Home” is “abroad” and vice versa; and both the first and second generations relate to them with a different perspective and ideology. An immigrant constantly moves between the two spaces created by different nations, religions, cultures and languages. They do not project “a single unified self”. The second- generation characters in the novel are completely syncretic boundary individuals as they effortlessly reach out to a home while being at one with both the cultures.

*A Wicked Old Woman* presents syncretic immigrants acculturating as they positioned themselves in a liminal space between the two homes, suggesting the intricacy of the concept of home for diaspora. Probably Salman Rushdie means the same when he says, “our identity is at once plural and partial, sometimes we feel that we straddle two cultures: at other times that we fall between two stools.” (15).

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