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## Interrogating 'Home' in National and Transnational Spaces: A Study of Taslima Nasrin's *Lajja* and Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*

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### **Abstract:**

A study of various works by Diaspora writers reveals that the issues of home, homing desire, longing and belongingness have been discussed and analysed by them time and again in their works but an analysis of the fictional works chosen in this paper i.e. Taslima Nasrin's *Lajja* (1994) and Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* (2003) shows how these writers have interrogated the issue of changing concept of 'home' across times in national and transnational spaces. The paper aims to analyse the issues like where is one's place and where does one actually belongs to and what happens to the concept of 'home' when one feels at home in more than one place. Taslima Nasrin and Monica Ali have very aptly problematized these issues in their novels selected for study here. An attempt is also being done in this paper to study the relationship between diaspora and transnationalism and how both are related to each other. Thus, Taslima Nasrin's *Lajja* and Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* are juxtaposed in this paper to discuss the ways in which the experiences of characters portrayed by them are similar or different from each other while living in national and transnational spaces. Taslima Nasrin, who is an ever diasporic writer, has shown how an individual pines for his 'home' in the motherland itself i.e. within the national boundaries and starts feeling displaced with changing circumstances. On the other hand, Monica Ali, in *Brick Lane* problematizes the concept of 'home' by depicting the characters of Nazneen and her husband Chanu and shows that for both of them the meanings of home and relocation are different while living in transnational lands.

**Keywords:** diaspora, home, transnationalism, belongingness, dislocation, relocation.

The diaspora writers make an attempt to retrieve their identity by looking back at their original home and despite the multiple spatial and cultural locations; the concern for origin remains a predominant aspect in the writings of these writers that reflects the ambivalent relationship of diasporas to their homelands. Describing this dilemma of displacement of these migrants, Homi Bhabha says, ". . . 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 became part of each other, forcing upon us a vision that is as divided as it is disorienting" (312).

In fact, 'home' not only means a physical, tangible space but also a social environment in which people feel accepted and loved for who they are and where they are. According to Donnelle Dreese, "in order to define home, one must have a sense of boundary

and an identifiable notion of what lies beyond the boundary” (21). In order to understand the self, one must know what one is not (speaking in a deconstructionist idiom), similarly to realize home one must know how home is not present in a diasporic space. The importance and the impact of home-ambience is mainly realized when one is uprooted from one’s culture and is transplanted in an alien cultural soil. For diasporic community, the concept of ‘home’ is always a “mythic place of origin” which further gets split up (Brah 192).

A study of various works by South Asian Diaspora writers reveals that the issues of home, homing desire, longing and belongingness have been discussed and analysed by them time and again in their works but an analysis of the fictional works chosen in this paper i.e. Taslima Nasrin’s *Lajja* (1994) and Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane* (2003) shows how these writers have interrogated the issue of changing concept of ‘home’ across times in national and transnational spaces. The concepts of nationalism and transnationalism are associated with the concept of ‘home’ in every way. The paper aims to analyse the issues like where is one’s place and where does one actually belongs to and what happens to the concept of ‘home’ when one feels at home in more than one place. Taslima Nasrin and Monica Ali have very aptly problematized these issues in their novels selected for study here. In order to study the diasporic sensitivity and diasporic consciousness represented by these writers, an attempt is also being done in this paper to study the relationship between diaspora and transnationalism and how both are related to each other and to know further how the diasporas especially from third world countries have to undergo various problems associated with the process of dislocation from homeland and relocation in host lands while occupying the ‘diasporic space’ which is the “intersectionality of diaspora, border and dislocation as a point of confluence of economic, cultural and psychic processes” (Brah 208).

Transnationalism is a multi-faceted process which has swiftly migrated across disciplinary boundaries in the past decade. For Stuart Hall, the condition of diaspora or transnationalism is comprised of ever changing representations that provide an “imaginary coherence” for a set of malleable identities (224). Robin Cohen develops Hall’s point with the observation that:

Transnational bonds no longer have to be cemented by migration or by exclusive territorial claims. In the age of cyberspace, a diaspora can, to some degree be held together or re-created through the mind, through cultural artefacts and through a shared imagination. (516)

Dwelling on this concept further Donald M. Nonini and Aihwa Ong describe that a wealth of personal and collective meanings and perspectives may subsequently be transformed, such that, transnationalism presents us with “new subjectivities in the global arena” (5).

According to Robin Patterson, “transnationalism is an emergent field of study with a focus on citizens who, through migrating from poor to rich countries, manage to construct and nurture social fields that simultaneously link their respective homelands and their new

diasporic locations” (112). So, the image of transnational migrants as deterritorialized, free-floating people represented by the popular statement “neither here nor there” deserves a detailed and closer analysis. In short “transnationalism refers to a recent shift in migration patterns. Since the 1980s migration used to be a rather directed movement with a point of departure and a point of arrival. It is nowadays increasingly turning into an ongoing movement between two or more social spaces or locations. Facilitated by increased global transportation and telecommunication technologies, more and more migrants have developed strong transnational ties to more than one home country, blurring the congruence of social space and geographic space” (Wikipedia).

The relations between immigrants, home country and the host country have always been complex as the ‘politics of homeland’ affects the members of diasporas or transnational communities in a variety of ways. The phenomenon of transnationalism changes people’s relations to space particularly by creating ‘social fields’ that connect and position them in more than one country. Elaborating further on this concept Nancy Foner opines that “some groups (and places) are likely to be more transnational than others . . . and within immigrant groups; there is also variation in the frequency, depth and range of transnational ties” (23). This applies as much in the context of forced migration as with other forms of migration. Different relations between diasporas, homeland and hostland may emerge which may be strong or weak and may vary with the passage of time and changing historico-political situations.

Dislocation is an acute crisis in the contemporary context, which involves not only long distance national borders but can also be within the borders i.e. within a city or district, from one village or neighborhood to another, sometimes to economically, socially and culturally different settings. In fact displacement or dislocation, most of the times, is a reality that is forced upon the people and as a result, they are left sundered from homes and professions, which is not necessarily across international borders but may also be a sort of ‘internal displacement’ i.e. within the national spaces. In each case, there is often a feeling of being “caught between two places, educational systems, and ways of growing up that conveys one of the risks of transnational childhood- feelings marginal in both places” avers Orellana (583). So, there is a dire need to observe transnationalism occurring across the boundaries as well as within too, which has tremendous impact upon the daily lives of individuals.

Whereas transnationalism helps the migrants adopt new ideas in their host countries, some migrants may keep on holding to the lifestyles they associate with their places of origin. Thus, Taslima Nasrin’s *Lajja* and Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane* are juxtaposed in this paper to discuss the ways in which the experiences of Suranjan (*Lajja*) and Nazneen (*Brick Lane*) as the main protagonists as well as of other characters are similar or different while living in national and transnational spaces. Taslima Nasrin, who is an ever diasporic writer, has shown how an individual pines for his ‘home’ in the motherland itself i.e. within the national boundaries and starts feeling displaced with changing circumstances. On the other hand, Monica Ali, in *Brick Lane* problematizes the concept of ‘home’ by depicting the characters of

Nazneen and her husband Chanu and shows that for both of them the meanings of home and relocation are different while living in transnational lands.

In fact, for being a transnational identity, the ideas and people should flow back and forth and the home identity of migrants should not be locked to the time when they left their country of origin. In *Brick Lane* also, Monica Ali portrays the life of Nazneen and her husband Chanu in the British suburbs of London and blends it with transnational sisterhood between Nazneen and her sister Hasina living in Bangladesh, who despite living in her own country always remained homeless and dislocated in one or the other way and throughout the book, there are frequent references to 'back home'. Whereas the connections in transnational spaces can become vehicles for social and cultural exchanges for the migrants, which may be in the form of ideas, cultural practices and values as well as political mobilization and financial contributions, they can also result in the loss of a sense of identity and belonging for some individuals, especially for second and third generation who feel attachment to a different country than that of their parents.

Monica Ali, in *Brick Lane* delineates how for Nazneen, the transition from the slow rhythms of village life in Bangladesh to the transnational space i.e. accelerated London of 1985 proves very difficult to manage in the beginning. On the other hand, Ali presents how the life of some individuals like Hasina, also remains always dislocated and disturbed despite living in their own national spaces. The novel explores not only the problems involved in immigration and transition from one country to another, but the issues of dislocation, relocation and 'home' in these spaces have also been interrogated through the excitement, trauma, disillusionment & disappointment arising from the same. Through the example of Chanu, Ali presents the dilemma of those individuals who shift to the developed countries from the third world countries in the hope of becoming 'respectable' not only in their own community living there but also among the native people of that country. These members of a transnational community, on the one hand seek to acquire the citizenship of their host country, on the other hand they also want to retain the country of their origin. The educated individuals segregate themselves deliberately from the other uneducated migrants as Chanu does in the novel. He desires integration within White society assuming this place as his own 'home'. To become part of this community completely, he even starts consuming alcohol in the 'forced' company of Dr. Azad. Thus, Ali presents those transnational identities who try to relocate and assimilate themselves in alien environments to be socially self-sufficient. But these diasporas, when faced with the policy of assimilation in a transnational space, are not assimilated properly because they "maintain important allegiances and practical connections to a homeland or a dispersed community located elsewhere" (Clifford 307).

The nature of diasporas and their transnational connections are required to be understood better to further acknowledge their relation to homelands or hostlands. Whereas Monica Ali in *Brick Lane*, while delineating the problematics of 'home' in transnational lands, talks about the serious repercussions of 9/11 attacks on all the South Asians living in various parts of the world, Taslima Nasrin in *Lajja* portrays different forms of "othering" experienced by the members of Hindu Community living in Bangladesh after the incident of

Babri Masjid which took place in 1992. These individuals feel themselves suddenly dislocated even in their own homelands where they were born and brought up and assumed themselves always as part of the major community living there. In the aftermath of 11 September 2001, transnational movements and the particular links between diasporas and homelands have come under ever greater scrutiny. As a result, the loyalty of diasporas has become increasingly suspicious and the transnational connections and circulation are coming under a close watch. Thus the phenomenon of transnationalism is gaining new dimensions and meanings in the contemporary scenario. Nancy Foner rightly observes that:

Modern technology, the new global economy and culture, and new laws and political arrangements have all combined to produce transnational connections that differ in fundamental ways from those maintained by immigrants a century ago. (360)

Due to these changing historical conditions, the writer presents such individuals who undergo the trauma of being alienated in their own national spaces in the present world and are gradually deprived of their rights in these lands that ultimately lead to their displacement and further 'forced' migration to another country.

Raising the issue of 'home' and 'belongingness', Nasrin seems to be saying that one belongs where one cannot be and one is where one does not belong to. Suddenly the individuals like Suranjan and his father who always feel proud and safe while living in their homelands, start feeling unwanted and unsafe there and time and again, are forced to seek refuge in others' homes. In spite of belonging to a minor Hindu community while living in Bangladesh, Suranjan's family feels itself safe and secured there. But due to the mental, physical, social and psychological impacts of communalism which took place in Bangladesh after the demolition of Babri Masjid in Ayodhya on 6 December 1992, the historico-political situation in the country changed and these individuals became unknown and alienated in their own homelands, which Nasrin has very poignantly expressed. They feel themselves in "exile state- mentally as well physically and the constant fear of dislocation and humiliation are the factors which lead to creating an inhospitable environment" (Jain 98).

In the above circumstances, it is quite ironical to see that Suranjan and his sort of individuals are hurt very deeply. Taslima Nasrin has highlighted this plight of these individuals saying "It was as though he was not a human being any more, not a Bengali; but just a two-footed creature called a Hindu. Suranjan felt like a foreigner in his own country" (Nasrin 185). This experience gives a feeling of dislocation and rootlessness to the native citizens of a country and that too, when in spite of their desire to be there they are not supposed to do so. Such a dilemma forces one to ponder over many questions related to 'home'. Moreover, how can a marginalized community try to relocate itself in its own national boundaries - is also a pertinent question interrogated by these writers.

By portraying the mental agony of these individuals, Nasrin initiates the readers to ponder over the fact that the politics of homeland can take a variety of forms in changing

social, political and historical conditions. To leave one's own native land and to relocate again to other transnational spaces for survival is not easy in the forced circumstances. Nasrin expresses the same through the reaction of Suranjan's father at this idea of getting relocated in other country, when he says, "Do you want to run away from your own homeland? Doesn't it make you feel ashamed?" (Nasrin 213). The thought of leaving one's own national space is really excruciating for such individuals because "the pull of the past" is very strong (Jha 11).

Transnationalism is often as much about the people who stay behind as it is about those who move. Nasrin has incisively dealt with the issue of displacement and relocation within the national lands by portraying Suranjan and his father, who even after trying their best to adjust in the prevailing circumstances in their homeland are forced to face numerous failures one after the other and are ultimately impelled to relocate themselves in other transnational spaces. In the same way, in *Brick Lane*, Monica Ali also presents incisively that there is no other way left for Chanu except to return to Dhaka with his family whereas Nazneen makes resolution to settle down in London only, without her husband. Here Ali once again raises a very pertinent question in the minds of the readers asking which place can be defined as 'home', and that if "home is a place of return" and also a "lived experience of a locality" as Avtar Brah says (192) then how far all this is true for the people like Hasina, Chanu or Karim who never feel located properly at any place, whether it is home or abroad and for the people like Nazneen and her daughters who never want to return to their so called original homelands. Moreover, Ali also takes the reader inside the Muslim community's experiences in the UK after 9/11 attack which make them feel displaced in the same environment. Transnationalism also induces the dilemma of belonging to two places at one and the same time which further tends to generate stress and conflict within small migrant communities as well as between these communities and the host country.

Ali also explores the gravity and the complexity of dislocation in reference to the second generation through Nazneen's daughters Shahana and Bibi, who along with their mother refuse to leave for Bangladesh. The relocation to homeland for the second and third generation immigrants which they have visited only a few times or never, becomes questionable as they do not desire to return. This sets up a generational tension between parents and children who find themselves entrapped in an intermediate and ambiguous position ultimately, which can also be seen by the plight of Chanu's daughters who are born and brought up in London and want to live there permanently but Chanu wants them to come along with him to Bangladesh.

Through Nazneen, Ali also talks about some other consequences of dislocation and displacement due to migration, which can play an important role to transform or proclaim the identity of the individuals, particularly the women within the story. The writer also suggests that for some individuals belonging to diasporic population, it becomes difficult to relocate or return to homeland even after they aspire to do so. They always find themselves in an ambiguous situation and their realities can only be understood properly "by taking into consideration the linkages between home and host countries and the simultaneity of flows with which these linkages are created and maintained" (Mazzucato 205). This simultaneous

engagement further leads one to understand qualitative differences in the lives of the migrants and the city in which they live besides knowing how the home communities are affected by migration or how migrants relate to their countries of origin in their practice. Thus, living in transnational spaces means that the factors which affect the lives of migrants will have repercussions in more than just one country. By means of one's social, political and emotional interaction with one's communities away from home, with one's homeland and with one's hostland, one thus "enhance(s) the articulations between the past and present, homeland and hostland segments of the transnation" (Tololyan 30).

So, Taslima Nasrin in *Lajja* and Monica Ali in *Brick Lane* compel one to interrogate various issues pertaining to dislocation, relocation and 'home' in national and transnational spaces. For the individuals like Chanu, Karim and Suranjan's father, the feeling of rootlessness is "one of the saddest faces" as says Edward said (Reflections 47). He also calls it 'dislocation' or an 'in-betweenness' (Representation 52-58), "away from family and familiar places . . . always at odds with the environment, inconsolable about the past, bitter about the present and the future" (Reflections 47). But Ali in her novel also talks about the emancipation of a few characters like Rajia, Nazneen's daughters Shahana and Bibi and above all Nazneen herself who cope with their failures by relocating themselves in London itself. In *Lajja*, Suranjan is also optimistic about his future in the new country where being a Hindu, he will no more be treated as a marginalized one and will be able to get justice and equality. But this metamorphosis in these characters comes at the cost of losing family ties as in *Lajja*, Suranjan has to lose his sister, his relatives and all friends and in *Brick Lane*, Nazneen has to separate from her husband and even their children are bereft of father's love and care forever.

Both the novels explicate that the relationships between diasporas, 'home' and transnational spaces have their own specificities which differ from one individual to another, according to their position in the host country and which generation one belongs to at any particular time. The practice of living in transnational spaces also depends upon various constraints as well as opportunities of the lands and the localities where the diasporas find themselves. Both the writers have very pertinently tried to raise and interrogate the issues of dislocation, relocation and 'home' in national and transnational spaces showing that the notions of 'home' and when a particular location becomes 'home'- are linked with the issues related to inclusion or exclusion of an individual which tend to be subjectively experienced by him depending upon the circumstances which always remain in a state of flux in this globalized world.



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