



***Home in the Clouds: Fluid Identity and Diasporic Belonging in a
De/Reterritorialized Space in Leela Dhingra's Amritvela***

Jemima Rahaman

Doctoral Research Scholar,

Department of English,

Aliah University, Kolkata.

jemimarahaman1998@gmail.com

 <https://orcid.org/0009-0008-6411-3676>

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Abstract:

In an increasingly globalised world, the themes of identity and belonging present complex challenges, particularly for writers emerging from the Global South who address issues of displacement and colonisation. This paper will undertake an analysis of Leena Dhingra's novel *Amritvela*, with a specific focus on the protagonist, Meera, as well as characters such as Bibiji and Aunt Daya, who navigate and seek to reclaim their identities within the fluid, *de/reterritorialized* contexts of home in postcolonial and transnational frameworks. The study will examine how these characters confront feelings of displacement and belonging within *de/reterritorialized* environments. It will delve into their experiences of *acculturation* and *hybridisation* in *liminal spaces*, emphasising themes of trauma, identity crises, and discrimination. Through Meera's journey, Dhingra articulates the intricate complexities of identity and home amid migration, illustrating how both concepts are continually negotiated within shifting contexts. The analysis aims to elucidate the nuances of diasporic identities within *Amritvela*, where Meera's experiences accentuate the intricacies associated with identity and belonging in a deterritorialized environment. Her decision to return to India alone in contemplation of a potential permanent relocation with her daughter encapsulates her ongoing negotiation of identity and her struggle to reconcile diverse cultural and geographical backgrounds.

Keywords: displacement, identity, migration, belonging, home.

Introduction

In today's globalised world, questions about identity and belonging have become complicated, especially for migrants and displaced people. For these individuals, navigating their identity within a Western colonial context is a layered process. Displaced writers often reflect on their past experiences and memories as they consider who they are now. Their original cultural identity can no longer capture all the changes and new experiences they face in their new cultural environment. To feel whole, they may need to reconstruct, translate, or adapt their identity because of the lingering sadness over what they have lost, which keeps them disconnected from the present. This paper examines how identity is continually negotiated within *de/reterritorialized* spaces where traditional notions of *home* are disrupted and then reconfigured into new, hybrid forms. It focuses on the concept of cultural hybridity through characters like Meera and her Bibiji, highlighting the intersection of past and present, as well as Eastern and Western traditions. It positions transitional spaces, especially the “home in the clouds” as a metaphorical third space where diverse identities converge and find solace and peace away from cultural disruptions.

Leena Dhingra is a renowned Indian-American writer and actor. She was born in Lahore in 1943 and then moved to Europe following the Partition of India. She grew up on the edges of different cultures and traditions. She took her education from France, India, England and Switzerland. She appears in shows such as *East Is East*, *EastEnders* and *Doctor Who*. Dhingra's 1988 novel *Amritvela* portrays the story of Meera, a young woman taken from India to England as a child, and now she is returning home to India as an adult. There she got married to an Englishman and became the mother of ten-year-old Maya. Dhingra explores the emotional and cultural complexities within the South Asian Diaspora. *Amritvela* offers a nuanced portrayal of immigrant life through Meera and Bibiji in the home/host land. Dhingra portrays Meera's heartrending

journey back to India, grappling with her complex dual identity and the impact of her family dynamics. Meera, who was taken to England along with her parents during the partition, is now married to an Englishman and living apart due to her husband's job. She finds herself at a crossroads. The sense of isolation she experiences in her current surroundings prompts her to seriously contemplate the idea of relocating permanently to India with her daughter, Maya. She yearns to rediscover her sense of belonging and inner peace during the flight, as she gazes out at the ever-shifting clouds, "I have always been on my way. One day, I will surely get there! This morning, I woke up at home in London, tomorrow I will awaken at home in Delhi...and for now, I can sleep, safely, in my space; my home in clouds" (Dhingra 2). *Amritvela* redefines home as more than a fixed, geographic location. Instead, home becomes, for Meera, a shifting, affective space shaped by memory, longing, and cultural translation.

In a critical moment of her married life, she decided to return to her family, but being skeptical whether to return to permanently with her daughter Maya. The novel focuses on presenting the struggle of the second-generation migrants who struggle to hold both the identities of being an Asian and a British. After her marriage, Meera struggles to create a home without walls and distances. Meera is consistently in pursuit of a liminal space, characterised by a fluid and dynamic site of cultural translation, rather than a predetermined, fixed location. (Bhabha 53-6). Meera grapples with the dichotomy of her genealogical and geographical ties to India while navigating life in England, "Now I'm here, I'm grateful for this much-needed spell on my own, and even though the jet lag I'm aware of the mixture of feelings – of memories and emotions that India arouses in me – a sort of trepidation and wonder!... I feel the need to reconnect" (Dhingra 13).

The crisis of identity as a theme has been handled by numerous reputed writers. In the novel *Amritvela*, Meera's experiences highlight the complexities of identity and belonging in a deterritorialized space. Her choice to travel back to India on her own to explore the potential of permanently relocating with her daughter demonstrates her ongoing effort to negotiate her identity and reconcile the various aspects of her cultural and geographical background. These aspects have been shaped in different spaces, which are interconnected yet sometimes distinct and competing. Each space is associated with a shared sense of belonging and a yearning for connection. They forge a unique environment that transforms into a hybrid space, where diverse and simultaneous experiences of travel, settlement, and cultural development converge (Cohen 64). Here, each element reflects the fluidity of identity and culture, especially for the migrants, focusing on how past and present memories, experiences, and nostalgia intertwine as people navigate through and across different landscapes. Thus, their identity gradually formed through "mutual transformation with its surrounding structures" (Papastergiadis 2).

The intricacies of identity persist, particularly within postcolonial South Asian literature in today's globalised landscape. According to cognitive psychologists, identity denotes an individual's capacity for self-reflection (Leary & Tangney, 3). Whereas for Social psychologists, identity is the process of negotiation through which human beings learn to know various social roles, through personal experiences. The ongoing tension and conflict between memory and lived experience have shifted the focus of home from a bounded place to a more fluid and affective space. The following section examines how the reimagining of home emerges through Meera and Bibiji's evolving sense of identity.

Home as an Affective and Multilocal Space

This paper argues that in *Amritvela*, Dhingra reimagines home not as a fixed geographical location but as an evolving, affective space that emerges through the continuous negotiation of identity; as Meera moves across cultural, emotional, and spatial boundaries, her shifting sense of self does not lead her back to a singular origin, but instead allows her to construct a more fluid, multilocal understanding of home not as a destination, but as a process, grounded in memory, experience, and belonging.

Amritvela rejects the idea of home as a fixed, singular location, instead portraying it as a space continually shaped by emotions, memories, cultural translation, and movement. Meera's journey underscores that home is not bound to a particular geography. Chandra Mohanty asked, "What is home? The place I was born? Where I grew up? Where my parents live? Where I live and work as an adult? Is home a geographical space, a historical space, and an emotional, sensory space?" (Mohanty 5). This resonates with Meera's quest for a place she can call home, where she experiences a feeling of belonging and connections. For those who have migrated, the concept of home is a highly debated territory. Meera perceives the aeroplane as her sanctuary, a space where she finds security. For a fleeting moment, the aircraft becomes a haven of safety and a sense of belonging.

For Susheila Nasta, home can be conceived in many ways: "Home is both here and there, past and present, local and global, traditional and modern. It may provoke a referential construction of a past lost, but may also be a deliberately invented construct, extending and reshaping the boundaries of both the familiar and the strange" (Nasta 244). Meera constantly tries to find a sense of belonging and attachments that she feels are missing in her two homes. She is continuously oscillating between home, the birthplace filled with childhood memories and home, the place that

gives her a new identity. She is not sure whether she is leaving her home in London or returning to her home in India, “Most of them are Indians, from America, Canada, England. Are they visiting? Or returning home? What am I doing? Who knows! But here, on a plane, in my space – I feel safe . . .” (Dhingra 11). Meera’s journey in this text starts with her decision to return to her roots and ends with her journey back to London. It embodies the continuous negotiations of identity and belonging. Meera’s flight reflects the unending movement between spaces.

For Sara Ahmed, home is a space constructed through feelings of comfort (Ahmed 87). Meera feels the same position on the aeroplane travelling from London to Delhi, “I feel myself suspended between two cultures, then this is where I belong, the halfway mark. Here in the middle of nowhere, up in the atmosphere, is my space—the halfway point between East and West” (Dhingra 118). Therefore, the airspace becomes a third space, “... and for now, I can rest peacefully in my realm; my dwelling in the clouds . . .” (Dhingra 12). In this context, home becomes a place of comfort, respite, and solace that resides among the clouds, situated between London and America, where discussions of culture and identity are absent. It’s as though the airspace transforms into a convergence point for two identities, crafting a hybrid identity that can challenge the notion of singularity in identity.

Dhingra tries to portray the dual sense of identity through Meera, the *hyphenated* one, that connects both states for the migrants. While living in India, she tries to experience home through the senses, “When I was a child and even later when I would come to India, it was like magic, so full of promise and possibilities and idealism. It was like a cake full of layers, colours, aromas, flavours, soft and light and rich with infinite possibilities” (Dhingra 153). For her, India becomes a mythical place full of desires, “Lahore! I silently sound the word in my head and plummet into the mythical meanings of the city of my origins and ancestors” (Dhingra 32). She attempts to

recreate the home she lost after her marriage, now that she's settled in London, using baths, massages, the sound of Bibiji's prayers, and the fragrance of sandalwood. The aroma of milk (Dhingra 82) brings back old and forgotten memories of her mother, compelling her to drink it from a cup adorned with a picture of a queen. She recalls how her mother's gentle, cool hand would tuck a stray lock of hair behind her ear while coaxing her to drink. This is how a sense of home is formed. The previously mentioned sensory experiences become ingrained, resulting in a comfortable environment where people experience a feeling of belonging. But Meera's illusion of India as a mythical place soon lost its appeal,

For me, India has something to do with being a child. Something to do with feeling loved, protected and belonging. Maybe even something to do with my parents' own longing to return. For the child in me, it is warm and familiar, and for the grown-up that I am, it is a strange land, in which I don't know my way around. (Dhingra 114-115)

For Meera, her childhood experiences in India evoke a sense of familiarity and warmth, while for her adult self, India transforms into an unfamiliar place where she struggles to find her sense of belonging. Her hope of discovering a singular, fixed, and defined home proves to be "a false notion of India as a homogeneous unit, a false belief that some sort of harmonious, idyllic, Gandhian India is there [...] to be rediscovered" (Dhingra 9). Meera progressively gains assistance in her journey of establishing a sense of home and understanding different aspects of India from her great aunt, the matriarch Bibiji, whose insights provide crucial support in resolving Meera's crisis and alleviating her increasing discomfort in defining home: "India is all the things you feel it to be." (Dhingra 115). Meera has cultivated an unchanging, timeless perception of India and envisioned Indian identity as "singular and static" (Hall 223), which has led her to anticipate finding the India of her childhood intact. Upon recognising the diverse realities of the country, she must confront

the truth that the past resembles a “foreign country” (Hall 223) and that she is no longer the child she once was.

The novel presents a cyclic movement, starting and ending with journeys across the borders. It reflects the very notion of home as not a fixed and exclusive space, but rather a space with movement and multiple localities. Here, home and identity are inextricably linked, moving away from the static and fixed definition of “where one is from” to a fluid definition of “who one is becoming”. At the very end of the novel, when Meera returns to London, she finally understands home exists “across territorial, cultural, and psychic boundaries” (Buonanno 19), thus making her understand the multiplicity of identities and homes. Meera’s aunt Bibiji represents the concept of cultural hybridity. She serves as a link between the past and the present, tradition and transformation, embodying multiple identities and affiliations. Her drawing room is full of “the familiar mixture of India and Victoriana” (Dhingra 17). She also holds onto the possessions from Lahore, their ancestral home, before the partition of India. This reflects Bhabha's assertion that ‘pure’ is a myth. Consequently, home transforms into a location where various cultures converge, leading to the formation of a new cultural identity, which aligns with Bhabha's concept of *hybridity*. Spaces in this novel have been utilised effectively to repudiate the idea of home and identity as a singular entity.

The novel shows home as a changing and complex place, and this change is closely linked to how identity shifts. To understand Meera’s feeling of belonging, we need to look at how her identity is constantly shaped by these changing environments.

Identity in Flux: Belonging and the De/Reterritorialized Home

The concept of home is a location that evolves and holds emotional significance. This raises the issue of identity, which is crucial for comprehending how we construct and interact with our living environment. In the context of a diasporic or migratory experience, such as in Leena Dhingra's *Amritvela*, searching for identity plays a vital role. The concept of identity has been theorised widely across multiple disciplines. Identity is not a fixed or innate essence; it is continually constructed and reconstructed. According to Stuart Hall, identity can be understood as a "production" that is constantly shaped by history, culture and spaces (Hall 225-6). His idea has been further extended by Bhabha, who states that there is no 'pure' or single identity. He talks about hybridity where identities get negotiated through cultural interactions (Bhabha 36-9). Meera's internal struggle to merge her divided self presents a contemplative analysis of the nature of identity and the sense of belonging, "What's running? ... the fever? . . . Meera? Meera! . . . Who is Meera! Who am I? I am running . . . where to? Where from? Who could tell me? Do I know? Follow the fever. Follow me (Dhingra 141)!" After returning to India, she endeavours to reconcile the conflict between her East-West identity. On one hand, India represents her birthplace, while England is her current residence. She struggles to determine which of her identities is dominant and overlooks the fluid and dynamic nature of her sense of self amidst the cultural dissonance of migration. Meera's identity is continually shaped by her memories of India and her experiences in England, reflecting the dual consciousness common in diasporic narratives.

I wondered who was visiting, who was returning, and what I was doing. Possibly my rambling reflections and half-voiced questions were the surfacing of that need, which I must now explore. Could I . . . actually return? Yesterday, the talk of Lahore awakened my

whole feeling of uprootedness and loss of my parents, city, home, country; the years of feeling suspended. I need to change that (Dhingra 37).

Growing up in England, Meera balances her Indian heritage with her British upbringing, embodying the *hybrid* identity that emerges in a *de/reterritorialized* space of home. This ongoing negotiation of identity highlights the continuous process of self-reconstruction that migrants face. She at once gets fascinated by the passions and sensory experiences of the ‘sacred land’ in her memory, “When I was a child, and even later when I would come to India, it was like magic, so full of promise and possibilities and idealism. It was like a cake full of layers, colours, aromas, flavours, soft and light and rich with infinite possibilities” (Dhingra 153).

But soon, the harsh reality of the present situation begins to inflict deep pain and suffering. She understands that her views are purely based on her memories of the past, and that cannot be regained in the present. India holds a special place in her heart, evoking memories of her childhood and the deep sense of love, protection, and belonging that she experienced there. It also symbolises her parents' yearning to return to their homeland. As a child, India felt warm and familiar, providing a sense of comfort and security. Her ambiguity of *in-betweenness*, situating herself simultaneously belonging to both here and there. After she arrives in India, she tries to evaluate her past and current experiences. This reflective practice, spurred by her ambivalent feelings, leads to a deeper understanding of her motivations and the path she wishes to pursue. Meera frequently reflects on the purpose of her existence and her role in the world. Dhingra narrates her predicament thus:

Lying in bed, the sound swirls in my head. Lahore . . . Lahore ... As though the repetition would unlock the mystery and free my thoughts from being stuck in the torturous conditional: if . . . What would I be and what would my life be if, if and if . . . And now?

Could I return? What would it mean? What would I need to know? Who to ask? What questions? (Dhingra 33)

Appadurai insightfully argues that identities are becoming more fluid and hybrid in our increasingly interconnected world. The interconnectedness of our world is driven by the movement of capital, goods, data, technologies, images, and belief systems across international boundaries (Appadurai 32). Thus, identities are shaped by a web of interconnected relationships. Meera discovers herself managing the intricacies of diasporic communities, the vibrant cultural legacy of her roots, and the practices and traditions of her new environment. Balancing the expectations of both cultures, Meera frequently finds herself mediating between the roles, values, and beliefs from each side. This negotiation leads to a profound sense of displacement and a search for a transnational sense of ease: “What about my name? Meera! What does Meera mean? Me? What is Me, and who am I? Who ... am ... I? To my surprise, the question overwhelms me with an intense feeling of restlessness, impelling me to get up from my chair and leave - to leave it all behind, the question, the feeling, the restlessness” (Dhingra 128). Naik’s concept of "negotiation" is particularly pertinent in understanding how Meera and Bibiji navigate their multifaceted cultural identities. In this context, identity is not seen as a static construct but rather as a continually evolving entity shaped by memory, displacement, and the pressures to assimilate into new socio-cultural environments. For Bibiji, this journey involves transitioning from Lahore to New Delhi, while for Meera, it encompasses a movement from India to England and back to India. This aligns with Naik’s argument that diasporic individuals inhabit a liminal space, consistently balancing their connections to their homeland with the expectations of their host country (Naik 2019).

In *Amritvela*, Leena Dhingra explores the issues of identity and belonging within a *deterritorialized* space (Deleuze et al. 224) of home, which refers to a concept where the

traditional, fixed notion of "home" as a stable geographic and cultural territory is disrupted (*deterritorialized*) and then reconfigured or reconstructed (*reterritorialized*) into a new, dynamic, and often hybrid space (Deleuze et al. 224). *Deterritorialization* is the process where the home loses its original, fixed meaning and boundaries—its "codes" and stable relations are broken down or displaced, primarily through the diasporic experiences of her characters. As the novel unfolds, identity becomes fragmented and fluid. The transformation of space into both deterritorialized and reterritorialized forms further complicates the very essence of belonging and identity: "And what the hell and who the hell am I ... so far away? Talking like a visitor, as Savitri would say (Dhingra 138). These phrases reflect Meera's struggle with her self-identity. She is distanced not just from a location but also from a feeling of connection. Her British accent causes others to perceive her as a foreigner. Although she exists here physically, she is mentally far away. In this context, identity becomes performative and ambiguous, resonating with Butler's idea that the self is formed through repeated actions rather than rooted in any inherent essence (Butler 25-34).

Meera's life in Britain after marrying an Englishman leans towards the feeling of being an outsider in both countries. In Britain, she is seen as an immigrant, while in India, her relatives treat her as a *firangi*, a person shaped by the features of the West. Thus, she was caught in a flux that led her to a sense of a fragmented self. Departing for England, she carries with her cherished mementoes of India, transforming into a living embodiment of her homeland. She carries the shawl of her great-grandmother from Lahore, which provides comfort during the most unsettling period in the flight. She also brings along Bibiji's diary, packed with moral stories shared by the family members. At the same time, she leaves two of her most valued belongings – the epistolary journal and the statue of Parvati. The text reflects the idea that a woman inherits a sense of identity from her mother and the people with whom she feels a sense of home provide her with a comforting and

welcoming feeling, allowing her to establish her place in the lineage of women within her family. This connection gives her a profound feeling of belonging and a diverse sense of identity. According to J. Y. Chu, individuals develop a sense of belonging by forming attachments to both people and objects in specific locations (Chu 397). However, this sense of attachment is not limited to a single place, as it encompasses movement, linking individuals and locations across different periods and geographical areas. Sahoo and Sheffer (2015) have focused on the fluid, hybrid, and often contested nature of South Asian identity in the context of migration. They emphasise how memory, displacement and cultural retention shape diasporic consciousness (Sahoo et al. 21). The novel explores identity through the experiences of the Indian diaspora, where individuals constantly renegotiate their sense of self between their past and present, as well as their homeland and the country they currently reside in. This is particularly noticeable when she embarks on her journey from London to India and back.

Amritvela, a time where past, present and future are for a brief moment magically one, compels Meera to embrace her dual identity and appreciate her Eastern and Western selves. She attempts to integrate herself with the experience of having various identities. As she watches out of the plane window and takes in the early morning, she thinks to herself, “I am on my way home. From my home in the East to my home in the West, travelling safely through my space – my home in the clouds. Yes, I come – and I’m going – home. For now, I can rest peacefully on the plane. For a plane is always a haven: no matter where I am headed, it always leads me home” (Dhingra 177). Meera enfolded and explains an active vision of her identity and sense of belonging. She acknowledges the multiple aspects of her identity and the plurality of herself and no longer views India as a distant, idealised place to which she longs to return. Instead, in her work, she joyfully embraces and explores the ever-shifting connections between India and England, establishing her

place within the ongoing narrative that links these two countries. According to Das, survival is both a physical and cultural struggle, especially in postcolonial societies where identities are fractured and constantly redefined (Das 2013). In this novel, the idea of survival is internalised through cultural displacement and the tension between inherited traditions and contemporary realities. *Amritvela* embodies a framework for identity formation across borders that reflects the instability of fixed identities.

Meera's realisation that she feels "at home in the clouds"—a transitional space above the national boundaries of East and West—highlights how the concept of belonging is more about emotional connections than about physical territory. The aeroplane, serving as a direct symbol of movement and pause, transforms into a metaphor for belonging within the diaspora. Bibiji's home, on the other hand, is full of hybridised cultural signifiers and memories of Partition, and serves as a symbol for both tradition and transformation. By placing herself within this genealogy of women and family stories, Meera forges a sense of home that is multilayered and dynamic, transcending geography. In Berry's terms, Meera's journey is one of reducing *acculturative stress* by moving from the isolation of Marginalization to the psychological balance of Integration (Berry 12). In this way, identity does not merely respond to displacement but actively shapes the meaning of home, turning it into a space that is constantly reimagined through lived experience.

Conclusion

Dhingra intricately portrays Meera's journey by offering a profound exploration of the reconstruction of identity and the quest for belonging in a world shaped by migration, memory, and cultural dislocation. The foregoing discussion demonstrates that the questions of identity and home in *Amritvela* are deeply intertwined, each shaping and redefining the other across shifting cultural and emotional landscapes. Through Meera's journeys, Dhingra throws light on the concept

of home as not merely a fixed geographical location, but rather a dynamic and fluid construction, influenced by the complexities of diasporic consciousness. Dhingra skillfully presents the evolving nature of identity as Meera and other characters, including Bibiji, navigate the tensions between their past and present lives, the traditions they hold along with their roots, and the modern realities they face in a de/reterritorialized space of home. This touching interaction illustrates the challenges faced by diasporic individuals, who frequently suffer as they attempt to reconcile their heritage with their present situation. Meera's internal conflict serves as a focal point of the narrative; she seeks solace in her cultural practices while simultaneously grappling with a sense of alienation from the broader society surrounding her. This conflict encapsulates the intricate negotiation of identity that many experience in multicultural and transnational settings. The author redefines the concept of home, transforming it into a shifting landscape of emotional and cultural significance. Ultimately, Meera moved from the state of marginalisation to integration. She embraces her dual selves to create a new orientation that does not require a fixed territory, thus reflecting Ahmed's view of home as a "shifting, affective space" (Ahmed 87).

In this reimagined space, belonging is continually explored and reconstructed, highlighting how it can be both a source of comfort and a site of tension. The narrative underscores that identity is built not only through connections with one's heritage and community but also through moments of disconnection and estrangement. Dhingra effectively illustrates how these dual experiences contribute to a richer understanding of oneself and one's place in the world. As readers journey through this rich tapestry of experiences, Dhingra invites them to contemplate their own encounters with displacement, memory, and the evolving meaning of home within an increasingly globalised society. Ultimately, *Amritvela* emerges as a compelling and resonant study of the diasporic condition, encouraging reflection on the myriad ways individuals construct their

identities amidst the complexities of modern life. Ultimately, the novel suggests that home is not something one simply returns to, but something one continuously creates through the evolving understanding of the self.

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