

Unanchored Lives: Negotiating Grief and Unhomeliness in Thrity Umrigar's *If Today Be Sweet*

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Abstract

Migration driven by individual agency is commonly theorized as a purposive and goal-oriented process, shaped by human aspirations for economic advancement, professional opportunity, and upward social mobility. Across diverse disciplinary perspectives, such voluntary movements are consistently understood through a structural framework. In this framework, individuals leave environments with limited opportunities in search of greater prospects for prosperity, security, and long-term stability. This article critically analyses various aspects of migration with particular emphasis on how internal conflict influences the decision to relocate in Thrity Umrigar's *If Today Be Sweet*. The novel centers on Tehmina Sethna, a Parsi widow whose migration to America is precipitated by the death of her husband in Bombay and sustained by the presence of her son Sorab in Ohio. This characterizes her journey as an act of grief and relational obligation rather than aspiration. Drawing on Homi K. Bhabha's concept of unhomeliness as a theoretical framework, the study examines the factors that influence Tehmina's decision to relocate, arguing that migration precipitated by personal imperatives defies the structural and systemic frameworks through which it has conventionally been theorized and analysed. Through close textual analysis, the study identifies the primary determinants of migratory decisions in Umrigar's fiction. While this framework has demonstrated considerable durability within postcolonial studies, it aids in comprehending the personal, relational, and existential dimensions of migration. This study addresses that lacuna by arguing that Bhabha's unhomeliness, when applied to literary narratives of migration, offers insight into the varied experiences of human movement.

Keywords: Voluntary Migration, Internal Conflict, Belonging, Origin, Destination, Displacement.

Introduction

Migration, in its most fundamental sense, is an act of crossing the boundaries. It is a movement across geographies, cultures, and the boundaries of selfhood that define identity and belonging. As one of the most pervasive features of human civilization, migration has shaped the course of history, reconfigured national boundaries, and has exerted lasting effects on the lives of those who undertake it. From the earliest nomadic movements of ancient people to the complex transnational displacements of the contemporary world, migration has remained a defining condition of human existence. It is simultaneously a rupture and a renewal, a loss and a beginning.

Literature has long served as one of the most significant sites for interrogating this experience, giving voice to the subjective experiences of those who move, the worlds they leave behind, and the uncertain terrains they come to inhabit. Within the literary domain, migration is understood as a distinct human experience that extends beyond its sociological dimensions that raises fundamental questions about identity, memory, home, and the human need to belong. Recent critical paradigms have shifted from structuralist approaches to migration toward more nuanced interrogations of subjectivity, affect, and identity.

Literature Review

The study of migration and diaspora has produced a substantial and diverse body of scholarship within literary studies. This encompasses a wide array of theoretical frameworks that interrogate the complexities of displacement, identity formation, and notions of belonging. Vijay Mishra distinguishes between two distinct formations of the Indian diaspora: the “old diaspora of exclusivism,” rooted in plantation labour and classical capital, and the “new diaspora of the border,” aligned with late modernity and postmodernity. The old diaspora presents a case history documented from its moment of inception, with each labourer's emigration pass containing detailed personal histories of caste, age, marital status, and location. The new diaspora, by contrast, has been theorized as a powerful source for postcolonial discourses of disarticulation such as abandonment, displacement, dispersion. It is further recognised as a site where intercultural identity is rearticulated, enabling interrogation of global migration and the construction of identities (22). Ernest George Ravenstein's “The Laws of Migration” is one of the earliest and most foundational attempts that systematically theorizes why people move. Ravenstein identifies a set of recurring patterns in migration, arguing that most migrants move short distances (182). Migration proceeds step by step, and every migration current produces a counter-current (187). Central to his framework is the idea that economic motives such as the desire for better material conditions are the dominant drivers of human movement. Stephen Castles and Mark J. Miller, in *The Age of Migration: International Population Movements in the Modern World*, argue that migration has been a constant feature of human history, accompanying demographic growth, technological change, and political conflict across centuries. It is further asserted that contemporary international migration is unprecedented in its scale, political significance, and its connections to global security and instability. Arjun Appadurai in *Modernity At Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, argues that “electronic mediation and mass migration mark the world of the present not as technically new forces but as ones that seem to impel (and sometimes compel) the work of the imagination” (4).

While these frameworks offer valuable insight into the structural, economic, and imaginative forces shaping human migration, such approaches do not adequately address the personal dimensions such as grief, loss, and relational obligations that often influence an individual's decision to relocate. It is crucial to examine the subjective factors that drive human migration, as these have received comparatively little scholarly attention within the domain of literary studies. While existing frameworks account for the structural, economic, and imaginative forces behind migration, grief and internal conflict as an unhomely condition within a literary narrative remain comparatively undertheorized. This article is an attempt to examine the subjective dimensions of human migration, focusing on grief and relational obligation as simultaneous push and pull forces.

Methodology

The study employs a qualitative approach, drawing on close textual analysis to demonstrate that migration, as depicted in Umrigar's *If Today Be Sweet*, emerges through personal imperatives that elude the analytical purview of structural migration paradigms. Thrity Umrigar's *If Today Be Sweet* serves as the primary literary source of this study, with specific focus on Tehmina Sethna's migration from Bombay to Ohio. The study is grounded in close reading of the central character's migratory experience, examining the personal loss that precipitates her departure from her place of origin and the relational obligations that draw her toward her place of destination. By employing close reading, the study is a nuanced examination of the affective and psychological dimensions of migration as depicted in Umrigar's narrative.

Homi K. Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* provides the primary theoretical framework through which this study examines the unhomely condition operative in Umrigar's narrative. Bhabha's concept of unhomeliness aids in understanding the ways in which Tehmina's subjective experience is represented within the novel. The study draws a distinction between external circumstances and the internal emotional factors that influence Tehmina's migration, with particular attention to how personal loss and relational obligation contribute to her decision to relocate. Key narrative events, including Rustom's demise, Tehmina's widowhood, and Sorab's earlier departure, are examined as critical textual sites that foreground the personal, relational, and existential forces shaping Tehmina's migratory experience. These events trace varied dimensions of human mobility that remain inadequately conceptualized within conventional structural frameworks.

Analysis

Thrity Umrigar's *If Today Be Sweet* offers an insight into the diverse factors that shape and drive patterns of human migration, foregrounding the subjective and relational dimensions of an individual's decision to relocate. Umrigar's narrative delves beyond abstract notions of displacement by foregrounding the everyday realities through which Tehmina negotiates her unhomely condition. Tehmina Sethna's relocation from Bombay to Ohio exemplifies voluntary migration that significantly diverges from the aspirational and economic motivations through which voluntary migration has conventionally been theorized. Umrigar constructs a narrative in which migration is reconstituted through the convergence of personal loss, relational obligation, and the search for belonging. Tehmina's migratory experience foregrounds grief and relational bonds as simultaneous and competing forces of displacement. Bombay, once a site of warmth, familiarity, and shared memory, is irrevocably altered by the death of her husband Rustom. Homi K. Bhabha in *The Location of Cultures* writes, "To be unhomed is not to be homeless" (13). It is that sense of displacement, felt in one's own space. Tehmina recollects her life in Bombay after her husband's demise by stating, "I well remember how lonely I was in the months after Rustom's death. She paused, willing herself to not remember the difficult days that had followed her husband's funeral" (31-32). Despite her lifelong ties to Bombay, Tehmina's relationship with her surroundings is marked by estrangement after Rustom's demise. The loss not only strips her of companionship but also challenges the roles and routines that once anchored her daily life. The city that once constituted home turns into a landscape of absence, its familiar surroundings inseparable from the grief that pervades Tehmina's daily existence. The once familiar cityscape now appears alien, its streets and buildings are now shadowed by memory and absence.

Rustom's presence functioned as the central organizing principle of Tehmina's life, with her sense of home, belonging, and identity closely intertwined with her marriage and the life they had built together in Bombay. Rustom's demise operates as a key push factor prompting Tehmina's departure from her place of origin. His death transcends the condition of widowhood, divesting Bombay of its existential and affective significance. Following Rustom's death, Bombay, for Tehmina, is reconfigured as a space that can no longer be inhabited, thereby ceasing to function as a home. The city's transformation from a site of belonging into one marked by absence and loss signals a shift in her spatial and emotional orientation. Her Bombay apartment seems emptied of warmth and purpose. It is this reconstitution of Bombay as a locus of displacement that constitutes the initial and most significant impetus for her progressive loss of belonging within her homeland. The city that had once embodied warmth, familiarity, and belonging is reconstituted in his absence, into a landscape of loss and irrecoverable memory. Her home, once a space of comfort, is now marked by loss and its very familiarity is now strange, thereby making it feel uncanny. This is the essence of unhomeliness as defined by Bhabha "relocation of the home and the world—the unhomeliness" (13).

Tehmina's decision-making process is marked by hesitation and anxiety, revealing the psychological toll that unhomeliness can exact on an individual. These moments of introspection illustrate that migration, for Tehmina, is not simply an act of departure but a confrontation with the boundaries of her own identity. The narrative demonstrates that her eventual movement is as much about seeking a sense of coherence and renewal as it is about escaping absence. This highlights the layered complexity of voluntary migration driven by personal loss.

The pull factor attracting Tehmina to America is grounded in relational dynamics rather than economic or structural determinants. The presence of her son Sorab and his American wife Susan constitutes the primary impetus for her relocation to the United States. "Sorab, especially, is worried that with Rustom gone, there's nobody in Bombay to care for me" (Umrigar 31). Within the narrative, America is depicted less as a site of aspiration or material opportunity and more as a space characterized by the tangible presence of familial obligation. Tehmina's movement from Bombay to America resists the conventional characterization of migration as precipitated by economic disparity, political instability, or the promise of upward mobility. Her choice to relocate is driven by the irrevocable loss that pervades her life in Bombay after Rustom's death. This is further exacerbated by her son's established presence in America. Rustom's demise operates as a moment of catastrophic rupture, instantaneously divesting Bombay of the positive elements through which it had functioned as a space of belonging. "Memories of the homeland can be both comforting and debilitating, offering a sense of continuity while reinforcing a feeling of loss" (Upadhyay 119). Tehmina's experience involves both mourning her beloved and mourning a lost world, a world in which her identity, belonging, and sense of self were once secure.

Tehmina's disruption in Bombay stems from the erosion of relational bonds rather than socio-spatial exclusion. This

renders Bombay as an unhomely space, a place that no longer offers belonging or continuity. Instead, it intensifies Tehmina's sense of rootlessness. Likewise, America functions for Tehmina initially as a site of socio-spatial exclusion, gradually transforming into a space of familial continuity and relational sustenance. Marco Antonsich in "In Search of Belonging: An Analytical Framework," writes that "One's personal, intimate feeling of belonging to a place should always come to terms with discourses and practices of socio-spatial inclusion/exclusion at play in that very place and which inexorably conditions one's sense of place-belongingness" (12). The relational bonds of marriage and shared domesticity that had limited Tehmina's migratory impulse are dissolved with an abruptness that structural migratory determinants have consistently overlooked. This foregrounds the personal and affective dimensions of migration.

Results and Discussion

The results of this study reveal that migration in Umrigar's narrative operates along a distinctly personal and relational axis. Unlike the migrant who moves in pursuit of economic advancement or professional opportunity, Tehmina Sethna's relocation from Bombay to Ohio is precipitated by an internal conflict rooted in grief, loss, and relational obligation. The familiar objects that once offered warmth and togetherness become constant reminders of loss, deepening her sense of alienation. This indicates that familiar objects that once represented comfort and belonging now serve as continual reminders of loss, thereby increasing Tehmina's sense of alienation in the homeland.

The findings of this analysis reveal that Tehmina's decision to migrate is fundamentally rooted in the unhomeliness that permeates her existence after her husband's demise. Rather than being motivated by external opportunities or social mobility, her movement arises as an existential response to the transformation of her home into a space marked by absence and discomfort. The narrative foregrounds on an individual's internal conflict like how the loss of a spouse can unsettle even the most deeply ingrained attachments to place, making familiar environments feel inhospitable. Tehmina's journey demonstrates how emotional rupture and the breakdown of intimate relationships can serve as powerful catalysts for migration. In this context, movement is depicted as a necessary step away from a world irrevocably altered by loss, reflecting a search for renewal and belonging elsewhere. The analysis demonstrates that the forces operative in Tehmina's migration is grounded in the psychic fractures and creative possibilities of unhomeliness, an experience that transcends the structural and economic parameters of traditional migration theory.

Two primary push factors are identified as driving Tehmina's disengagement from Bombay. Rustom's demise transforms the city into a space marked by profound absence, stripping it of its emotional and existential significance, while Sorab's earlier relocation to America and subsequent settlement in suburban Ohio intensify her sense of isolation. The combination of these forces ultimately makes Tehmina's continued residence in Bombay unsustainable. The primary pull factor identified is Sorab's presence in America and Tehmina's migration to Ohio is exclusively motivated by the presence of her son, as opposed to the prospect of economic opportunity, professional advancement, or an improved quality of life. For Tehmina, Bombay ceases to be a home, as the human relationships that once provided a sense of belonging are lost.

Literature offers valuable insights to migration discourse, highlighting how fiction can represent the inner lives and emotional realities behind demographic shifts. Tehmina's journey highlights the importance of recognizing the often invisible emotional currents that drive migration decisions, particularly among individuals facing significant personal loss. Umrigar's narrative, in this regard, operates as a significant literary intervention within migration discourse, foregrounding the affective dimension of human movement. This demonstrates the capacity of literary analysis to enrich and expand the theoretical framework of migration studies. These findings invite scholars of both migration studies and diasporic literature to reconsider the boundaries of existing theoretical frameworks, recognizing that the most revealing accounts of human movement necessitate a more humanistic scholarly purview. And by illuminating these dimensions, Umrigar's work challenges prevailing assumptions about voluntary migration and prompts a more holistic understanding of belonging and displacement.

Conclusion

The migrant figure in literature defies uniform characterization, emerging instead as a composite of histories, desires, losses, and longings, navigating worlds that are simultaneously familiar and foreign. It is through this representation that literature most compellingly illuminates migration as a negotiation between selves, between inherited and reconstituted identities, a process that transcends the spatial and geographic frameworks through which it is conventionally theorized. "Contemporary Indian literature emerges against this backdrop of migration and diaspora,

reflecting the evolving realities of a globalized world” (Wanjari 9514). The present study foregrounds the subjective drivers of migration, demonstrating that grief and relational obligation function as consequential determinants of human movement. By integrating Bhabha’s theory with close literary analysis, the article establishes that a literary engagement with migration offers a more comprehensive understanding of the migratory experience, one that finds its resonant expression within the realm of literary representation.

Migration emerges as a creative and transformative act, compelling individuals to continually remake their sense of identity and belonging. The migrant’s journey is not a passage across borders; instead, it is an ongoing negotiation with the unhomely spaces of the self and the world. It is a negotiation that is at once fraught, generative, and deeply human. The literature of migration thus becomes a vital space for exploring questions of loss, resilience, and the reconstruction of home. As global migration continues to reshape societies, literary studies will remain crucial in capturing the interior landscapes and lived complexities of the migrant experience.

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