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In-Between Homes: Hybridity, Ambivalence, and the Construction of Diasporic Subjectivity in The Escape

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Abstract

This paper discusses the short story Qaisra Shahraz titled The Escape. The story was published in 2009 in the collection titled "The Concubine and the Slave-Catcher: Stories From Around the World". It explores the emotional world of an elderly immigrant, Samir, who has been living in Manchester for decades. Struggling to attain inner peace and existential stability especially after the death of his wife in the host land. He attempts to escape to Pakistan to visit familiar places with familiar people in search of emotional comfort; however, he fails to find psychological settlement in any geographical space. The story is analyzed through the postcolonial theoretical perspective of Homi K. Bhabha, particularly through the concepts of hybridity, ambivalence, in-betweenness, unhomeliness, and negotiated diasporic identity. These theoretical constructs are important for understanding migrant subject formation within postcolonial spatial and psychological displacement. The paper argues that Samir's continuous search for selfhood and inner peace reflects the condition of fragmented postcolonial migrant consciousness. The study concludes that Samir's journey toward finding home does not lead to absolute belonging in either homeland or hostland but results in a negotiated and ambivalent diasporic subjectivity, where identity is reconstructed within third-space cultural and emotional spaces. Thus, the narrative represents the existential condition of the migrant subject who exists within postcolonial psychological and spatial uncertainty.

Keywords: Diasporic identity; Hybridity and ambivalence; Unhomeliness; Migrant psychology; Third space; Belonging and displacement.

Background

The sentiment of alienation or dislocation plays a major role in affecting the psychology of people, especially immigrants. Although they do not belong to the host land, these dislocated people continually attempt to establish a sense of belonging or affiliation because human psychology is fundamentally motivated by the need to belong and to form enduring interpersonal attachments. According to Baumeister and Leary, "human beings are fundamentally and pervasively motivated by a need to belong, that is, by a strong desire to form and maintain enduring interpersonal

attachments" (1995, p. 522).

Immigrants experience existential and spatial uncertainty associated with migration and displacement. The statement "To be an immigrant … is about straddling two homes, whilst knowing you don't really belong to either" (Shukla, 2016) reflects the lived psychological experience of migrants who remain emotionally divided between homeland and hostland. It illustrates how migrants physically occupy one geographical space while emotionally retaining attachment to another, resulting a continuous internal negotiation of identity and belonging.

Being torn and bewildered between two geographically and culturally different places while belonging fully to neither produces a profound sense of alienation among immigrants. Shahraz also expresses this condition of cultural and psychological dislocation through her writing. She describes herself as "weaving in and out of two worlds and cultures… During moments of identity crisis, I can sometimes feel like an alien in both Britain and Pakistan and feel as if I belong to neither place" (Shahraz, p. 64). Her experience illustrates how migration generates persistent psychological estrangement, where the migrant carries memories of the homeland but struggles to achieve complete social and emotional integration in the host society

Introduction to Author

Qaisra Shahraz (1958) is a British-Pakistani novelist, scriptwriter, freelance journalist, and educator. Born in Pakistan, she has lived in Manchester since she was nine years old, where she later pursued her education, obtaining a BA in English Literature from the University of Manchester and two Master's degrees in European Literature and Scriptwriting from the University of Salford. Shahraz is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts and is widely recognized for her contributions to literature, culture, and community cohesion. In 2017, she was listed by Lovin Manchester among the most influential women in Manchester, and her literary work mainly focuses on rural life, women's experiences, migration, and cultural and social divides (Shahraz, n.d.).

Summary of *The Escape*

The story opens with Samir performing 'Eid Namaz, where he prays for her deceased wife and for himself to escape. Outside the mosque, after prayer he realizes he knows no one whom he wants to greet to hug. The community area has changed, with new

migrant groups, separate mosques, and vanished landmarks from his past. Thus, he becomes aware of both social and spatial transformation. After his wife's death, his loneliness deepens; despite being surrounded by family, he still experiences emptiness and alienation, even among his children who belongs to different culture and generation.

Feeling emotionally restless, he begins to think that Manchester is not his home and plans to escape "back home." He informs his family of his plan to visit Pakistan, hoping to find comfort in his birthplace, Lahore. He visits his village, ancestral home, parents' graves, and sacred places. However, instead of peace, he feels estranged and soon decides to return to Manchester, which now seems more like home. The story ends with him ultimately realizing that he belongs fully to neither homeland nor hostland, but somewhere in between. He chooses to settle in an old people's home in an attempt to escape his persistent loneliness.

Literature Review

The concept of Hybridity, mimicry, ambivalence, and unhomeliness by Homi K. Bhabha has been widely exploited by researchers to examine psychological estrangement within transnational spaces depicted in diasporic fiction. Akçeşme (2021), in her study Exploring Un/homely Lives in Mohsin Hamid's The Reluctant Fundamentalist, employs Bhabha's concept of unhomeliness to study emotional displacement depicted in The Reluctant Fundamentalist. Her study concludes that unhomeliness represents a state of existential alienation in which familiar spaces become culturally and emotionally foreign, which can be understood in the light of Bhabha's postcolonial identity framework. Ashraf (2025) analyses Burnt Shadows as a transnational narrative where characters inhabit liminal spaces that deconstruct fixed notions of belonging. Her analysis concludes that unhomeliness manifests not only as migration-induced displacement but as an ongoing crisis of cultural identity shaped by historical trauma and global migration. Similarly, Solangi, Soomro, and Awan (2023), in their study of Homeland Elegies, apply Bhabha's hybridity, third space, and ambivalence as analytical tools to study cultural displacement and identity issues. Their study demonstrates how narratives portray experiences of diasporic subjects living fractured identities within American socio-political frameworks. Likewise, Dhivyapriya and Jagadeswari (2025), in their comparative analysis of The Namesake

and Wife, explore how cultural dislocation and culture shock intensify identity dilemmas among first-generation immigrants. Their study underscores how naming, domestic spaces, and marital relationships become sites where identity is negotiated and contested. These works collectively highlight the emotional and psychological tensions embedded in diasporic subject formation. Khan, Riaz & Aslam (2025) in their study apply Bhabha's hybridity, third space, and liminality as the main theoretical framework for identity negotiation portrayed in Maroo's Western Lane. Their study concludes that diasporic identity is constructed through continuous cultural negotiation within liminal spaces rather than through fixed cultural belonging.

From the above literature, Bhabha's concepts of ambivalence, third space, and hybridity are crucial to understand diasporic experiences presented in literature, as they explain the fluid and psychologically fragmented nature of migrant identity formed in liminal transnational contexts.

Conceptual Framework

Post colonialism as a theory reads aftereffects of colonialism. This has been discussed and analyzed by various theorists and critics differently. Hence there are numerous concepts related to post colonialism. The study is designed on the concepts of Homi K. Bhabha. The story is read and analyzed through his perspective of different terms which occupy significant place in the theory of post colonialism, particularly hybridity, ambivalence, the Third Space, and unhomeliness.

Colonization also has a strong effect on the psychology and thereby the identities of the colonized, which becomes central in the works of various postcolonial writers such as Frantz Fanon in Black Skin, White Masks (1952) and The Wretched of the Earth (1961), Edward Said in Orientalism (1978), and Homi K. Bhabha in The Location of Culture (1994). When the colonized migrate to the colonizing countries, this psychological impact continues to shape their identities in new social and cultural contexts, which later becomes central in Bhabha's analysis of colonial discourse and subject formation.

For immigrants, Bhabha argues that identity is constructed within the "Third Space of enunciation," where cultural meaning is negotiated rather than inherited as fixed (Bhabha 1994). This has been discussed and analyzed by various theorists and critics differently. Hence there are numerous concepts related to post colonialism, but

this study specifically applies Bhabha's framework to understand the migrant's fragmented and hybrid identity.

Homi K. Bhabha's Hybridity and Ambivalence

Homi K. Bhabha is an Indian English theorist and scholar. He works as a Professor at Harvard University's Humanities Center. His scholarship is grounded in postcolonial theory; therefore, he developed concepts such as Mimicry, Hybridity, Ambivalence, and Unhomeliness. In recognition of his academic contributions, the Government of India awarded him the Padma Bhushan.

According to Bhabha, hybridity is the process by which the colonial governing authority attempts to translate the identity of the colonized into a singular universal framework but ultimately fails, producing something that is familiar yet new (Papastergiadis 1997). In this context, identity is formed on the basis of the difference between two source cultures, representing "neither the One nor the Other" completely (Bhabha 1994, p.25).

Hybridity is conceptualized within postcolonial theory in a specific way that highlights the crucial discursive relationship between the colonized and the colonizer. Bhabha first uses this term in his book *The Location of Culture* (1994). However, Bhabha describes it as "this new mutation replaces the established pattern with mutual and mutable" (Bhabha 1994). Bhabha further explains that the liminal or in-between space is an "interstitial passage between fixed identifications [that] opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy" (1994, p.4). Primarily, the term is employed to analyze the transformation of culture and customs among previously colonized societies. The colonizers, being politically and culturally dominant, imposed their customs and lifestyle. Moreover, Bhabha states that "the colonial presence is always ambivalent, split between its appearance as original and authoritative and its articulation as repetition and difference." As a result, a new cultural formation emerges among the colonized; a mixture of cultural practices and values. Hence, for the most part, they develop a specific hybrid cultural orientation that affects their political perspective, social structures, as well as psychological subjectivity.

Bhabha's concepts of hybridity and ambivalence discuss how the colonized subject experiences tension and conflict due to the power differentials between colonizer and

colonized. In addition, according to Bhabha, "the unhomely moment creeps up stealthily as one's own shadow" and suddenly one finds oneself "in a state of incredulous terror"; it is "a condition of extra-territorial and cross-cultural initiation" (2012). These concepts are applied here to examine how a migrant negotiates identity after leaving their native land. They also explore how migrants attempt to situate themselves in interstitial spaces, which Bhabha calls the "Third Space." In the meantime, they place themselves in a condition where they no longer fully belong to either culture. The ambivalent state creates a situation in which individuals feel that their culture and behaviors belong to a kind of "in-between" space. This hybridization produces an ambivalent condition for people living in a foreign land, resulting in a sense of misfit within a society structured by a different culture. They are torn between elements of two divergent societies i.e. their birthplace and their adopted land. As a result, intense problems are experienced because they lose their sense of a 'whole' identity and do not fully regain it in either place.

In Shahraz's narrative, the protagonist is portrayed as being immersed in a river of complex emotions related to displacement, belonging, and existential uncertainty. The central themes include emotional attachment, loss of belonging, and psychological as well as spatial disturbance in the postcolonial migratory context. Close reading is a textual analysis technique that focuses on semantics, syntax, imagery, symbols, narrative structure, and point of view (McClennen, 2001). Since the study is based on constructivism, which states that meaning is not fixed but is formed by individuals through interpretation and experience, this article adopts an interpretive approach (Gray, 2004). The guiding theoretical framework of this study is based on Homi K. Bhabha's concepts of unhomeliness, liminality, the Third Space, and ambivalence, which are examined through close reading.

Analysis and Findings

1. Psychological Dislocation and Unhomeliness

The psychological dislocation and postcolonial unhomeliness of Samir's character is constructed through lexical choices that foreground loneliness, nostalgia, and existential distress. The expressions in the text highlight Samir's gloomy and isolated mental state through negative connotative fields such as abyss, sorrow, suffocation, desperation, and loneliness, which function as markers of his fragmented diasporic

consciousness. The rhetorical questions he asks about Manchester and Pakistan "Was Manchester not his 'home'?" (2009, p.162), "Was not this his home, the place where he was born?" and "Which homeland are you trying to escape from?" (2009, p.162) underline his ontological uncertainty regarding homeland and belonging.

The story begins with Samir's desire for existential escape, expressed in the prayer-like plea, "And let me escape!" (2009, p.151). This longing for escape continues to shape his diasporic experience throughout the text. His experience after congregational prayer in Manchester demonstrates social and generational dislocation within urban diasporic space. Outside the mosque, "there was no one he sought to greet or hug, and most of the men were strangers belonging to the younger generation" (2009, p.151). Although the mosque represents cultural familiarity, it fails to provide intimate social emplacement as most of the people around him were strangers from young generation. This unfamiliarity highlights the condition of the migrant subject who remains culturally situated but emotionally displaced.

The transformation of the area, where he is living, into a multicultural migrant neighborhood reinforces postcolonial metropolitan hybridity. The coexistence of Pakistanis, Bengalis, Irish, and Somalis along with ethnic shops and mosques catering Muslim needs illustrate the formation of a diasporic third-space urban space (2009, p.152). However, despite this spatial cultural coexistence, Samir experiences psychological emptiness. Within these socially dense environments, physical multicultural proximity does not ensure emotional integration; they are all familiar and foreign to each other at the same time.

Samir's migrant life embodies ambivalent postcolonial identity formation because his desire oscillates between homeland and host land. His early migrant experience in London was motivated by economic security; however, it also produced social anonymity among "intimidating huge buildings" and "mad evening traffic" (2009, p.157). References to homeland were sources of happiness as he smiled when he saw "brown faces, mainly of Sikhs and Indians" (2009, p.157). His recalling of conversations where people often spoke about "going back home" (2009, p.158) reflects collective diasporic nostalgia and the imagined temporality of return. Samir's character represents the migrant consciousness shaped by longing, displacement, and uncertainty of belonging.

Samir's deceased wife represents sense of belonging to him as they belonged to same generation. After his wife's death, Samir becomes metaphorically an interloper within his own domestic and familial structures particularly in relation to his sons "of a different generation and attitude" (2009, p.154). The absence of traditional Eid food such as channa chaat and sewayian, replaced by hard-boiled eggs and cornflakes, symbolizes the erosion of ritualized cultural memory and domestic affective continuity. (2009, p.153). The daughters' adoption of British-style hospitality reflects hybrid diasporic adaptation, (2009, p.153). Yet for Samir the absence of traditional festive food signifies symbolic loss of cultural intimacy.

Transgenerational displacement is an important dimension of immigrant experience. The graveyard episode foregrounds this transgenerational displacement and hybrid heritage. The ancestral graveyard in Pakistan Samir's parents are buried represents his genealogical continuity and historical origin; however, his children's sense of home is firmly located in Britain (2009, p.156). He is a plant whose ancestral memory and second-generation belonging are in different geographical locations. The thought of being buried continents away from one's own parents, or from his children who may not travel back to Pakistan to visit his grave, reflects his anxiety about posthumous unhomeliness (2009, p.156). The possibility that his children may not return to Pakistan a "foreign land" to visit his resting place further indicates the rupture of intergenerational homeland memory. Burial in Manchester's Southern Cemetery, despite being away from his parents' resting place, is not merely pragmatic but represents the reconfiguration of diasporic heritage across temporal generations.

2. Third Space of Enunciation and Hybrid Identity Construction

In the theoretical framework of Homi K. Bhabha, Samir's diasporic subjectivity is located within the Third Space of enunciation, where identity is continuously negotiated rather than fixed within national boundaries. Immigrants belong to both homeland and host land yet belong to none completely. After years of living in Manchester, while informing his family about his plans to visit Pakistan, Samir unconsciously calls Pakistan his "home". His calling Pakistan his "home" and describing his visit to Pakistan as a "return home" puzzles him. The moment "back home" again slips out of him brings realization that after spending many years, he does belong to Manchester. "For a few seconds he was lost in thought. Why did he

say that? Was Manchester not his 'home'? After all, he had spent over forty years of his life in this city?" (2009, p.155). He interrogates his own identity construction, demonstrating the postcolonial ambivalent state where cultural belonging is continuously deferred rather than conclusively achieved. This moment reflects the instability of homeland perception in diasporic consciousness, where living in a geographical location for long does not guarantee emotional settlement.

His return to his birthplace Pakistan also does not bring a sense of belonging; instead, it deepens his unhomeliness. Communal familiarity, an important part of belonging, is missing in his homeland, as "there was no one he recognized" (2009, p.161). He feels like a stranger, unwelcomed in Lahore among his brother's family, where there is "no waiting upon ceremony" and only restrained warmth in hospitality (2009, p.161). Curiosity about his sudden arrival and silent exchanges of glances emphasize his being partially foreign within his birthplace (2009, p.162). This situation represents reverse alienation, where the homeland itself becomes a site of estrangement for the long-term migrant like Samir. This alienation reflects his fractured relationship between identity and homeland in Pakistan. While he physically returns to Lahore, emotional recognition is absent. The space he calls his homeland, which should restore a sense of belonging, instead intensifies his sense of unhomeliness.

His sense of estrangement becomes more profound when he informs his brother's family, "I think a week is enough – time to go home!" revealing the instability of homeland perception in diasporic consciousness. He again says, "Don't worry, Bano! I'll get my clothes washed at home." (2009, p.162). His calling Manchester his home surprises him and makes him recall his daughter Rosie's surprised face when he called Pakistan his home. This linguistic slip reveals the subconscious negotiation of identity and belonging. In the graveyard when he thinks to be buried in Manchaster for his children to visit his grave (2009, p.162) acknowledges that "home" has shifted across generations. His final resting place must be where he will be remembered, not merely where he was born.

On his way back to Manchester his asksing himself "Which homeland are you trying to escape from? The one that you have just visited, or the one that you are returning to?" (2009, p.163). exposes the paradox of migrant belonging, illustrating

double displacement where the migrant subject becomes emotionally disconnected from both origin and host country. While planning his visit to Pakistan, he intended to visit the places he once felt connected to and to meet the people with whom he felt he belonged. However, he returned home "without meeting his two college friends or walking down the tall nineteenth-century corridors of Government College, Lahore. Strangely, it really did not matter to him" (2009, p.163). This indifference is significant because the spaces that once symbolized youthful belonging no longer carry the same emotional meaning. The emotional distance he experiences reveals that belonging is not automatically guaranteed by birth or ancestry. Although the land is familiar, the social environment has changed, and he no longer fits naturally into it. Thus, his return exposes the fragile and constructed nature of "home" in diasporic consciousness.

Samir's experience demonstrates that cultural production becomes meaningful within zones of ambivalence. As stated, "Cultural production is most productive where it is most ambivalent", because hybrid identity formation emerges through uncertainty rather than binary separation (Bhabha, 1994). After living in liminal space and longing to find belonging, he eventually finds a negotiated and dynamic sense of belonging in the elderly people's home where he can say, "I am home" (2009, p.163)., while continuously negotiating his fragmented and hybridized cultural identities within a postcolonial diasporic condition. Ultimately, Samir's acceptance of both identities reflects Homi K. Bhabha's notion that in-betweenness and hybrid positionality are not negative or deficit states but rather productive and generative spaces of cultural translation, where new postcolonial subjectivity emerges through ambivalent identity formation.

The gloomy, lonely, and melancholic atmosphere associated with Samir's earlier experience of being torn between two spatial and cultural spheres, where he persistently questions where his home is and where he truly belongs, is gradually transformed into a more reconciled yet still ambivalent emotional state. In the old people's home, after finding new companionship with Penny and others, "his gales of laughter echoed down the corridor. Pure joy raced through Samir, lifting his spirit as he rushed to show his friend around the home" (2009, p.163). His calling himself an "English babu" (2009, p.163) symbolically reflects his acceptance of his position as a

postcolonial metropolitan subject who inhabits a hybrid cultural consciousness, negotiating between British social norms and his inherited South Asian cultural memory.

This transformation though does not erase his earlier dislocation but softens its intensity and gives it a lighter form. He does not fully create a sense of belonging to one homeland, yet he creates a space of belonging within his present liminal state. Thus, home for him like first generation immigrants becomes less a fixed geographical location and more an emotional and negotiated state of being and belonging.

Conclusion

The study is carried out from the perspective of Homi K. Bhabha's theory of hybridity and ambivalence. According to Bhabha, hybridization produces an ambivalent postcolonial subjectivity in which identity is constructed within an in-between cultural and psychological space rather than within fixed national or cultural binaries. The story analyzed primarily explores themes of belonging, displacement, and existential uncertainty associated with migrant identity. Samir's experience reflects this hybrid consciousness as he attempts to escape existential loneliness by moving between homeland and hostland yet fails to achieve absolute emotional settlement in either location.

Bhabha's notion that identity emerges within the "Third Space" and that cultural production is most productive where it is most ambivalent is reflected in Samir's life trajectory. The protagonist's sense of home is reconstructed psychologically rather than territorially, demonstrating the postcolonial migrant condition of unhomeliness and negotiated belonging. Samir's self-identification as an "English Babu" symbolizes hybrid metropolitan subjectivity, where cultural memory and social adaptation coexist. Ultimately, his experience illustrates that diasporic identity is neither completely rooted in the homeland nor fully assimilated into the hostland. Instead, it remains situated within a continuous process of cultural translation and ambivalent subject formation.

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