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Understanding the Idea of Home: A Reading of Select Contemporary Refugee Poetry from the US

Shubhanku Kochar

Assistant Professor

University School of Humanities and Social Sciences
Guru Gobind Singh Indraprastha University, New Delhi
ORCID ID: 0000-0002-6172-9781



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Abstract

Home is not a simple word. Neither is it a linear construct and concept. As a term, it is loaded with meaning. It is theoretical and metaphorical in nature and different from house. Whereas a house is a tangible reality and a physical structure, contrary to that, home is both metaphoric and philosophical in nature, depending on interpretation. This paper attempts to understand the idea of home with reference to contemporary refugee poetry from America. The aim is to apply social scientist Helen Taylor's model of home, which is categorized as physical, relational, temporal, and material. She evolved her model regarding migrants from Cyprus living in England, whereas the present paper focuses on Africans, Asians, Latinos, Mexicans, and Pacific Islanders who all came to the United States post-1970s to find a new home and used poetry to share their understanding of their own experience as refugees. For this, the primary text of reference is *Ink Knows No Borders*, 2019, edited by Alyssa Raymond and Patrice Vecchione, as it contains around 64 refugee poets who try to put forward their own humanity in front of the anti-immigration stance of President Trump's administration.

Keywords: Refugee, Home, Poetry, America, Migrants

As sociologists Tony Chapman and Jenny Hockey observe,

Until now, the 'home' as a space within which domestic lives are lived out has been largely ignored by sociologists. Yet the 'home' as idea, place and object consumes a large proportion of individuals' incomes, and occupies their dreams and their leisure time while the absence of a physical home presents a major threat to both society and the homeless themselves. (2)

Before a detailed analysis of selected contemporary refugee poetry from America regarding home is undertaken, it will be pertinent first to understand the concept of home.

In his poem, "Off-Island Chamorros," Craig Santos Perez, poet, professor, critic, editor, and an environmentalist from Pacific Island writes, "When we gather, remember: home is not simply a house, village, or island; home is an archipelago of belonging" (67). To quote Mechthild Hart and Miriam Ben-Yoseph, "The very notion of 'home' calls

forth deeply lodged feelings in almost everyone. While it seems to be attached to a universal human yearning for being grounded, for being safe, for belonging, it cannot be fenced in by a single definition" (1). One famous proverb rightly states, "Home is where the heart resides." Home is different from a house. A house is, as Witold Rybczynski remarks, a physical structure with doors, windows and rooms. It has a shape, a dimension and is tangible. It can be measured and explained in terms of size and shape. It can be counted as if there are five houses in a particular street or thirty huts in one specific locality. Out of seven houses, only three houses are populated in a particular building. It is of a specific colour and appearance. It can grow old; one can renovate, destroy, or convert it into a home. Quite contrary to the idea of a house is the idea of a home. A home is conceptual and metaphorical rather than physical. A house is just one subcategory of home; it becomes home when it is inhabited, and emotions are invested in it. House is the place from where the idea of home starts evolving. It is a manifestation of one's emotions. It is an expression of one's subjectivity and defines people. It gives the inhabitants a feeling of belonging. They want to come back to their home again and again. It is a source of comfort and joy. It is a place of rest and happiness. The inhabitants bring their perspective and meaning to it. They remember it fondly. And talk about it enthusiastically. Deborah Chambers, Professor of Cultural Studies, wittingly maintains that home is a place where culture and history react and interact at a personal and social level. It is in this context that people who are forced to migrate elsewhere are not able to relate easily to their new place. It is quite common to come across such people in migrant communities who argue passionately that they have left their homes behind. For them, the new place is just a place as they cannot add the weight of their emotions to it. They remember fondly and talk garrulously about where they were born, where they first went to school, where they had friends, and where they would go swiftly if they could return. For example, Kunta Kinte in *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* by Alex Haley tries at least four times to return to his native home in Africa before being forced into absolute

submission by the white planters. For him, the new world is not more than a trap he tries to escape at his own risk. Likewise, Deewan Maulvi in *Sleepwalkers*, a novel on the partition of British India by Joginder Paul, is not able to relate to Karachi as it does not resemble his homeland back in Lucknow, therefore he tries to recreate his Lucknow home in Karachi with his imagination and memory.

According to Antony Easthope, "Home is that place where our habitus develops. And when we feel 'at home,' it is through that relation between self and place that we come to know in our bones how home is tied to our identity" (Lesa 4). Rosemary Marangoly George articulates, "homes are manifested on geographical, psychological and material levels. They are places that are recognized as such by those within and those without" (9). Bell Hooks reminds us that "at times home is nowhere. At times one only knows extreme estrangement and alienation" (Chancy 19). To quote R. M. George, the importance of home "lies in the fact that it is not equally available to all. Home is the desired place that is fought for and established as the exclusive domain of a few. It is not a neutral place" (9). In short, home is not simply an upgrade of the house. It is more than that. It is a place where life gets meaning and perspective and a place that one owns emotionally and physically. The idea of home is not restricted to a tiny unit. It depends upon one's capacity to relate to one's surroundings. For saints and sages, the entire world is their home, as they can identify with everyone. In this context, a hostel can become home for the batchmates; a prison might become home for inmates; the workplace becomes home for the workers; and a nation becomes a homeland or motherland for the inhabitants. Wherever people go, they carry their own meaning and cultural baggage. They transfer their ideas, beliefs, and perspectives into the external reality. It is in this manner that they try to create their new home. For this, they always need a reference point. They may name the new place by the old names of their towns, cities, streets, and states, like Ukrainian Village and Chinatown in the United States, Gujranwala town and Miawali Nagar in New Delhi. They may start living together with members of their communities, cities, tribes, clans, or nationalities,

thereby giving birth to the idea of either a ghetto or a mini-nation like Brick Lane in London is populated by Bangladeshi community and Southall in London is heavily peopled by Indians. In this new nation, they feel at home or try to feel at home because of its proximity to the past in its configuration. They celebrate their festivals and carry out rituals like they used to do back home. They try to live in proxy with that of their back home life, giving them a sense of belonging and a feeling of being at home. Kwanzaa festival, celebrated from 26th December to 1st January by African American communities to honour pan-African culture and heritage, is one of many examples.

As social scientist Helen Taylor remarks, the meaning of home is always in flux. It is not possible to classify home into one category. It is multi-dimensional. One cannot reduce it to just a physical place or a single person; it includes everything, and it keeps evolving. According to Lisa Gundry, there was no such distinction between home and workplace in pre-industrial societies. People used to live together, hunt together, and move together. Those communities were their home, and they would work with the other community members in and around their settlements. With the onset of the farming and industrial revolution, home and workplace became distinct. Human beings were required to go to farms, factories, and offices and return home in the evening. As Gundry further points out, in the last two decades, these boundaries have blurred again. The idea of working from home has reshaped the notion of home altogether. Working from home has become the new normal in the present age of the COVID-19 pandemic from 2020 to 2023. Now, one can attend classes from home, deliver talks, organize seminars, and take meetings from the comfort of one's home, further thinning the boundary. The present paper will focus on the selected contemporary refugee poems from the United States of America from the perspective of home. In this paper, I unfold various dimensions/categories of home as formulated by social scientist Helen Taylor in her seminal book *Refugees and the Meaning of Home: Cypriot Narratives of Loss, Longing and Daily Life in London*.

Taylor interviewed the first-generation migrants from Cyprus who were forced to leave their Island during the communal violence of the 1950s and 60s, which culminated in the partition of 1974. As a result, people left their homes and came to London. Taylor interviewed these migrants in the early 2000s when the border dividing Cyprus was reopened, and people revisited their homes after almost thirty years. Here, I intend to apply the model formulated by Taylor, where she has theorized home into four distinct parts: spatial, temporal, material, and relational, referencing contemporary refugee poetry from the United States of America. The aim is not to test or vindicate the model conceptualized by Taylor but to enrich my understanding of the concept of home. Taylor has postulated this model of home regarding Greek and Turkish migrants from Cyprus living in London, whereas I focus on Africans, Asians, Mexicans, Latinos, and Pacific Islanders who had to migrate to the United States post-1970s. Their context is totally different yet united. These migrants had to leave their motherland because of poverty, persecution, unemployment, famine, flood, war, lack of education and other essential resources, but they are all united as they all reach the United States and face 'otherization'; they are all either first-generation migrants or have grown up listening to the tales of departure and crossing from their parents. They are also united in one more aspect: they all have used poetry as a weapon to express their idea of home and the related joys and sorrows of being in and out of home. These poets from multiple ethnic backgrounds challenge and debunk the romantic notion of America being the land of opportunities and present a counter-narrative of torture and suffering, both physical and psychological. To impart cohesion and compactness to my arguments, I remain focused on only one anthology titled *Ink Knows No Borders* (2019), edited by Alyssa Raymond and Patrice Vecchione as my primary text. This volume of poems is very significant because of two factors. First, it brings together around 64 poets of different nationalities searching for new homes, which they try to find in the United States of America. Secondly, the timing of the book is historically significant. This anthology came out in 2019 when the anti-immigrant policies

of President Trump were in full swing and were executed vehemently. All the poets in the volume are contemporary and are vocal in presenting their case of humanity amidst the hostile and unsympathetic attitude of the political establishment of Trump's administration.

Having explained the context and backdrop of my arguments, it is now pertinent to move towards the analyses of individual poems.

As postulated by Taylor regarding home, the first category is spatial home. She argues that spatial home is a certain space, land, or tangible structure as part of geography. It could be a village, city, town, neighbourhood, locality, or society. It is like referring to a place as— I was born here; I went to school there; this is my room, our playground, our place of worship; the window in my bedroom opens towards the sun. In other words, a spatial home is a well-defined space where both place and the inhabitants interact. One always remembers such spaces as part of the good old days. Home, in this classification, is loaded with emotions and perspectives. One brings one's aesthetics to define and design it. There are many occasions in these poems when one comes across various characters remembering or recalling their home in spatial terms. For example, Sholeh Wolpe, an Iranian-born American poet, dramatist, and translator, recalls her room in Tehran in her well-known poem "Dear America" (Wolpe 9-10). The persona in the poem remembers her room in spatial terms. The tangible structure is vividly printed in her memory. She recounts how she had heard about America on her radio and had felt drawn toward her. As the time passed, as the speaker continued, she would feel more and more towards America. Unfortunately, her dreams and desires were set back when she actually arrived in America. She remembers:

You used to creep into my room,
remember? I was eleven and you kept
coming,
night after night, in Tehran, slid in
from inside the old radio on my desk, past
the stack of geometry homework, across
the faded Persian carpet, and thrust
into me, with rock and roll. (Wolpe 9)

Likewise, "My Father Takes to the Road" by Jeff Tagami, a US-born poet, and editor to parents from the Philippines, can also be listed here for illustration (47). In the poem, the speaker narrates how his father brings a car home for a test drive every Friday. He cannot afford to buy it, but he relishes the ride as it gives him momentary joy. While driving, he takes the car near the ocean he had crossed as a boy of thirteen. He still remembers his home and childhood, which he had left behind. The speaker says:

He points the car west
toward the ocean, the same one
he crossed on a steamer at thirteen,
leaving behind an island boyhood
of bare feet, a bamboo hut with floorboards
you could see through. (Tagami 47)

Craig Santos Perez, a poet, professor, critic, editor, and environmentalist from the Pacific Island of Guam, also in his famous poem "Off-Island Chamorros," points at a geographical aspect of a home. Here, the speaker pinpoints the particular location of his home (66-7). Here, the speaker is a small boy attending his class in the United States. He has just migrated from his Island. His teacher inquired about his place of origin. First, the narrator is a little bemused; later, having understood the gravity of the situation, he points at the world map:

When I stepped in front of the world map on
the wall, it transformed into a mirror: the
Pacific Ocean, like my body, was split in two
and flayed to the margins. I found Australia,
then the Philippines, then Japan. I pointed
to an empty space between them and said:
"I'm from this invisible archipelago" (Perez
66-7)

The above examples indicate how migrants often recall their homes in spatial terms. It is difficult to unlearn the past; one remembers and revisits it repeatedly. Home is an essential aspect of the past, occupying a central space in memory. Whether it is a first-generation experience like that of Sholeh Wolpe and Craig Santos Perez, or a second-generation experience like that of Jeff Tagami. When one leaves one's home behind, it is not just a structure that one parts from; it is also what is in the

structure, which is crucial for one's identity. While leaving, one must also leave possessions like utensils, books, radios, cycles, clothes, etc. Carrying everything is impossible when one is compelled to travel light and fast. As a result, one observes that reference to once-owned items becomes essential in the poems written by refugees. Here, home becomes home regarding tangible aspects related to it; it may be a Bamboo hut like in "My Father Takes to the Road," or radio and carpet in "Dear America" and the whole Island on the map as in "Off-Island Chamorros."

The second category of home introduced by Taylor is that of temporal home. She opines that home can also be approached in terms of time. She states that time is usually viewed as linear, like past, present, and future, or childhood, adulthood, and old age. However, time with reference to home in the context of migrant communities is often cyclic or repetitive. For example, one encounters refugees in these poems exclaiming thus: we used to pray daily before going to bed at home, I would often take a nap after lunch when I was a kid, every year, we went on vacation during the first week of spring, and I used to celebrate my birthday every year with pomp when I was at home or by this time, we would all get up from bed and would go for running daily when I was at home. These poems are full of such stanzas where characters remember or recall their home regarding time. For example, the protagonist in "Immigrant" by Lena Khalaf Tuffaha, a poet, translator, and essayist with heritage from Palestine, Jordan, and Syria, also recalls her home concerning time and day-to-day habits (2-5). Here, the protagonist is going away from her native Amman to the United States. Later in her life, while recalling her hometown, she remembers vividly and accurately:

I want to float through the window and into yesterday when August was just late-afternoon ice cream and late-night card games and the crinkle of brown paper and tape covering copybooks, fresh as this morning's bread, ready to receive the school year ahead—math equations, poems, histories of battle. (Tuffaha 5)

Likewise, Hafizah Geter, a Nigerian-American poet, in her masterpiece "The Break-Inn," presents her father and mother repeating the day-to-day ritual at their home in Nigeria again in the U.S. as if their home is before them and they had never left it (26-7). The speaker is flustered at her parent's behaviour. She cannot understand their feelings as she is too young for that. They have lived the best years of their life in their homeland, Nigeria, and their heart and mind are full of their experiences back home. The speaker reports enthusiastically:

I close my eyes and see my father sulking like a pile of ashes, his hair jet black and kinky, his silence entering a thousand rooms. Then outside, trimming hedges as if home were a land just beyond the meadow, the leaves suddenly back. (Geter 27)

In the same breath, the speaker paints her mother as confusing the present with the past. She does not remember that now she is in the United States, and her Nigerian home is left behind. Geter narrates:

When I close my eyes I see my mother, mean for the rest of the day, rawing my back in the tub like she's still doing dishes. (27)

Like physical objects, habits, routines, rituals, and other activities are very important to give meaning to home. How one lives one's life is always at the core of one's relationship with one's home. When forced to leave home, one also leaves the entire ritual of living behind. In the host nation, one remembers one's past with nostalgia while living life again. It is impossible to replicate the past exactly. Therefore, the contrast between past and present heightens the suffering of the first-generation migrants. As a result, one feels sympathy and pain for the participants, like the narrator's father and mother in "The Break-Inn" and for the protagonist herself in "Immigrant."

The third kind of approach regarding home, as listed by Taylor, is that of material home. She points out that often, we remember home through sensory perceptions. These sensory reminders of home are enshrined in memory and are an inextricable part of one's identity. For example, one finds migrants often remembering their home in

these poems: this particular smell reminds me of mornings in my hometown, this flower looks like the flower with the same hue in my mother's kitchen garden back home, your tea tastes exactly like that of my sister's tea back home, here, birds do not chirp the way they did when it was spring back home. To recreate another home in the present, which is not similar but like the home left behind, as Taylor maintains, one tries to plant the same fruits, vegetables, and flowers, one tries to cook food in the same manner, and, if possible, with the same spices. Examples of people recreating homes with sensory perceptions are also to be found in abundance in these poems. For illustration, one can cite the highly anthologized poem "First Light" by Chen Chen, a Chinese American poet born in Xiamen in China and brought up in Massachusetts in the United States of America (6-8). In this poem, the protagonist records how he had to leave his home twice. First, when he was just three years old, he and his family were compelled out of China because their ideology was anti-establishment. Afterward, when they are settled in the United States, the persona in the poem has to leave his home again for some untold reason. It is this second leaving that irks the persona. Now he is grown. He had accepted the reality and started making memories in his newly adopted home. When he is forced to leave again, he carries the sounds and smells of the place with him as part of his memory. Though this proves to be difficult for him, he has to move on. He cannot do anything; therefore, he decides to leave with the sounds and smells of his home as part of his consciousness. He describes:

It was spring & I could smell it, despite the sterile glass & metal of the airport—scent of my mother's just-washed hair, of the just-born flowers of fields, we passed on the car ride over, how I did not know those flowers were already memory, how I thought I could smell them, boarding the plane, the strange tunnel full of their aroma, their names I once knew, & my mother's long black hair—so impossible now. Why did I never consider how different spring could smell, feel, elsewhere? (Chen 6)

"Mama" by Emtithal Mahmoud, a Sudanese American poet and activist hailed for her work on

refugees, imparts a spiritual dimension to sensory remembrance (86-7). Here, in the poem, the speaker is a small girl. She is walking down a street. She encounters another immigrant from her motherland. He notices a familiar flavour in her. Here, the stranger is reminded of his homeland not by any smell, sound, or sight but by the spiritual and physical flavour of the girl. Here, the flavour is not used in its conventional terms, like taste or smell, but regarding the overall demeanour of the girl. To the stranger, she looked like a girl back home, talked like a girl, walked like a girl, and resembled any other girl back home. Mahmoud writes:

I was walking down the street when a man stopped me and said, *Hey yosistah, you from the motherland?* Because my skin is a shade too deep not to have come from foreign soil Because this garment on my head screams Africa Because my body is a beacon calling everybody to come flock to the motherland I said, *I'm Sudanese, why?* He says, *'cause you got a little bit of flavor in you.* (Mahmoud86)

Like tangible and temporal aspects of home, the material or sensory perspective of home is also indispensable for one's connection with one's home. Home becomes home because of all the sights, sounds, and smells in and around it that are integral in defining it. Here, the migrant communities carry these sights and sounds as part of their possessions in their heart and mind. In the new nation, they try to recreate their home with the same sensory perceptions, and when they fail to do so, they also evoke sympathy and pain, like in "First Light" with the protagonist and with the young girl and a stranger in "Mama."

Relational home is the last classification propounded by Taylor. She regards home as a place of social and communal networking. We, as Taylor retains, are part of the community and society. Our relations give us meaning and a sense of belonging. We often remember home with reference to our kin. The people who live in the home give it the texture of home. It is common to hear such expressions from the people who cross borders in these poems as "my home is where my family members are." We are

incomplete without our relations. Our mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, friends, cousins, partners, and spouses are the ones who give wholeness to the idea of home. It also includes, as Taylor continues, even outsiders like drivers, house cleaners, guards, gardeners, fruit and vegetable vendors, etc. Taylor elaborates that we are dependent on them, and they are dependent on us. This interdependent community also includes our pet birds and animals. There is a constant give and take of services among all the members of a particular community.

One often remembers fondly when one is forced away from home, how one used to buy candies and stationery from a fixed shop, how the priest in the temple often gave one blessing whenever he would see one, how the dairy never cheated us with milk, how we had a family doctor who would come rushing whenever there was an emergency. These poems are also loaded with examples where people remember and approach their homes regarding their relations. For example, "Departure: July 30, 1984" by Joseph Legaspi, a poet who came from the Philippines when he was twelve years old, can be cited to illustrate this (19). Here, the protagonist remembers his departure from his home in Manila with grief and nostalgia. His memory of the home brings back all the relations that provided edifice to his life back home. He recalls with pain how, on the day of departure, when he and his parents were to leave for the United States, they were visited by all their relatives. He also remembers how their various belongings were given to relatives; he narrates:

Days prior to the date, things disappeared in the house: the display cabinet taken away by an aunt, the wedding gift china wares in it sold, except for the blue plates and swan-shaped bowls that would not survive the journey. The rice bin was given to a family friend; knives to Uncle Leo; school uniforms, cousins; roosters divided among the men; floral fabrics for the women; dried mangoes and stale squid candies for the neighborhood children. (Legaspi 19)

As noted above, our relations make our home a real home. We are incomplete without our near and dear

ones and depend upon them for joy and sorrow. They join us in celebration and mourning. Home does not become a full-fledged reality without kith and kin. In the present poem, the protagonist also feels the pain of separation more because his memory of home is loaded with all the relations that gave him life and wholeness when he was in Manila. He cannot extricate his home from his relations. Whenever he mentally revisits his home, his relations are there to complete the entire picture. That is why he remembers accurately who was given what when they departed.

Similarly, Tuffaha, in "Immigrant," records how her protagonist remembers her home regarding her relations (2-5). The protagonist is about to board a plane bound for the U.S. She is so engrossed in the experience of pain because of impending separation that she confuses the landscape of her town with that of the colours and shades of her parents. She observes:

Amman looks like a tender little place the color of my teddy bear's fur. Its houses crowded into one another on its seven parched hills are the shades of my family's skin—almond of my mother's brow, the wheat of my father's arms, tea-with-cream of my grandmother's palms. (Tuffaha 4)

Similarly, Chen Chen, revisits his home in China in "First Light" records with pain that he remembers nothing about his relatives (6-8). His memory fails him, but he has to accept the reality; after all, he was just three years old. He laments:

What is it, to remember nothing, of what one loved? To have forgotten the faces one first kissed? They ask if I remember them, the aunts, the uncles, & I say Yes it's coming back, I say Of course, when it's No not at all, because when I last saw them I was three. (Chen 6)

Here also, one finds that home is incomplete without its people. One cannot live in a vacuum; one needs people to talk to, fight with, express love to, shout at, and share with. These people, who come in and go out regularly from the tangible structure, make home a real home. When migrant

communities leave their motherland, they leave these people behind. Some die on the way, some do not travel, some go elsewhere, and others are just lost on the way. Here also, one feels pain and sympathy for those who have left their kith and kin behind, as with the small boy in "First Light" and "Departure: July 30, 1984" and for the young girl in "Immigrant."

To conclude, a home is not a one-dimensional object. It is different from a house and has multiple meanings attached to it. On the one hand, it is spatial, whereas on the other, it is temporal. It is both material and relational as well. These categories are constantly in flux as places are incomplete without reference to their inhabitants. Likewise, the material often references some time-bound act or ritual. For the migrant community, it becomes more than a living metaphor. They often think about it, recall it, revisit it, re-visualize it, talk about it, sing about it, and try to create it wherever they go, as shown in the above analysis. However, this is not an absolute or final model of home; as one travels from one discipline to another, one will find more ways of looking at home. Readers can try those perspectives on these poems and find their conclusions. The present paper is just a modest attempt in this direction.

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