

# **REFUGEE, MIGRATION, DIASPORA**

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## **Lecture 30**

### **Lecture 30: Theorizing Diaspora: Home and Identity**

Thank you. Good morning and welcome back to the lecture series on refugees, migration, and diaspora. So, today we are going to theorize diaspora, home, and identity. We will be understanding home—the meaning of home—in the context of diaspora. Like the term diaspora, home in diaspora studies as a concept has evolved in a way that can be called problematic.



So home as a concept is very discursive and very complex when placed against the backdrop or context of diaspora. So home, when placed against the backdrop of diaspora, is seen as a complex, multitudinous, and discursive concept. It can have multiple connotations. The notion of home now is therefore more fluid when we mention it in the diaspora context

than it was, let us say, several decades back. A critic like William Safran, in his 1991 definition of a diasporic community, underlined this concept of diaspora in terms of its connection with the original homeland. However, Safran did not want to categorically differentiate between the concept of home and homeland. In his 2004 essay titled 'Deconstructing and Comparing Diasporas,' Safran problematizes the concept of home and

suggests a vivid distinction between home and homeland, thereby stating, 'The members of a diaspora may or may not have adjusted to life in the hostland.' But they have a spiritual, emotional, and/or cultural home that is outside of the hostland.

So, home is not necessarily the original homeland from where one has migrated. It may, in fact, not be the ancestral homeland. For second-generation diaspora, for example, a place where one was born and brought up is considered home, and this home overlaps with the host land, which is a diaspora. So, they do not have any cognition, any understanding of a home or a homeland outside of the diaspora space, the host land where they were born and where they grew up.

Their immediate surroundings mean home for them. This is something we find in Monica Ali's writing, right? We see that in *Brick Lane*, the second generation doesn't want to go back to Bangladesh because they have no understanding, no cognition, or any memory of Bangladesh necessarily. They were born in London and identify only as Londoners.

Now, Safran states that it can be considered that, I quote again, the homeland of a South Asian resident of London may be Jamaica rather than Africa. The homeland of a Sikh resident in New York, born and raised in Rajasthan, may be the province of Rajasthan rather than Punjab. Similarly, the homeland of an Armenian-American resident of California may be Russia or Romania rather than the land of Israel, unquote. So, Safran here is trying to make a very important point. He is showing us the distinction between home and homeland, which results in multiple changes in the modes and patterns of displacement and in the means of travel, as well as from some other factors such as generation.

which mediate the formation of diasporas across the globe, especially in the latter half of the 20th century. So, to put it in a nutshell, home and homeland may be similar, but they are not quite—you know, they sound similar, but they are not quite the same. So, to put it in a nutshell, home and homeland may sound like similar entities. They are, however—you know—there may be some overlap between the two. However, they are distinct.

They are two different realities. Home—the concept of home—is evoked by our immediate circumstances, our immediate location, and belonging, whereas homeland is something that corresponds with memories from the past, memories of a land that we have left behind, a land of our ancestors. Sometimes, information or understanding of that land is passed down to us through, you know, popular stories that circulate within the families down the generations.

So, that is how we envision—how we piece together the understanding, the memory of a homeland. It sometimes corresponds with or overlaps with a very idyllic understanding of our ancestral place, from where we originally came. So, the modern age has created people with multiple roots, and multiple, you know, coordinates of belonging. A large population lives a nomadic life, where home plays a significant role in shaping one's nationality, culture, ethnicity, and identity. So, home does not connote only a physical space but is a powerful determinant of who we are and where we belong.


So, migration, whether by choice or by necessity, often leads people to cross borders and espouse a sense of transnationalism. And by transnational behavior or transnational identity, we are referring to the process of individuals and groups maintaining connections across national borders. So, we also have to understand that national borders in modern and postmodern times are sometimes rendered as more fluid, not as watertight as the sovereign state would want them to be. And with the coming of MNCs, the multinational companies, people working abroad, people traveling for business and education, the national borders have increased,

definitely becoming more fluid. The transnational connection becomes very important. Transnational contact actually shapes our identity. So, we see that as a result of transnationalism, individuals grapple with feelings of insecurity and ambivalence in their new temporary homes.

So, on the one hand, there is this question of opportunity, but on the other hand, people do have to face new situations, and sometimes there is insecurity and ambivalence. Displaced immigrants, despite their physical distance from their homeland, strive to maintain a connection with their culture and homeland, seeking comfort and familiarity in the face of uncertainty and, you know, in the face of new challenges that they have to embrace in a new land. So, the idea of home, both in its physical form as a place or a homeland and in the emotional sense, provides the various determinants of one's identity. The home is not just a physical space but a deeply emotional and symbolic place, which becomes synonymous with intimacy, security, familiarity, and identity. So, it offers a sense of belonging, a comforting refuge in the face of the vast anonymity of unfamiliar categories and relations that one faces on a day-to-day basis, and it also offers a secure haven in an uncertain world.

**Home in Diaspora**

- The modern age has created people with multiple roots and belongingness, living a nomadic life where home plays a significant role in shaping one's nationality, culture, ethnicity, and identity. It is not just a physical space, but a powerful determinant of who we are and where we belong.
- Migration, whether by choice or necessity, often leads people to cross borders and embrace a sense of transnationalism, which refers to the process of individuals and groups maintaining connections across national borders. They grapple with feelings of insecurity and ambivalence in their new, temporary homes. Displaced immigrants, despite their physical distance, strive to maintain a connection with their culture and homeland, seeking comfort and familiarity in the face of uncertainty.
- The idea of the home, both in its physical form as a place or homeland and, in its emotional essence, provides the various determinants of identity.



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So, home is where we come back at the end of the day, as we say. According to Roger Silverstone, I quote, 'Home, of course, needs to be understood in both literal and metaphorical senses.' The defense of home is a defense of both the private spaces and intimate social relations, as well as domestic security—the household. So, the home is the household, as well as the defense of the larger symbolic spaces of neighborhood and nation, the collective and the community.

So, when we define our home, we define it in terms of privacy, intimate familial and social relations, as well as positioning that home within larger units. Our immediate microcosm is our neighborhood space, as a smaller fold, and then our next identification—the next step at the community level—is that of the nation. So, home is positioned both in terms of its dynamics within as well as without—or outside—with respect to the neighborhood, the locality, and further, with respect to the nation. So, home identifies an individual's self and identity.

It connects both the old and new cultures of a land, and it is synonymous with a place of lived experience while navigating society, culture, and milieu, as well as being posited as a place—a site of desire. Now, scholar Avtar Brah, in *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities*, describes homing desire in a different perspective of trans-geographical representation. To quote the critic, 'Home is a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination.' In this sense, it is a place of no return, even if it is possible to visit the geographical territory that is seen as the place of origin. On the other hand, home is also the lived experience of a locality.

Its sounds, smells, its heat and dust, balmy summer evenings or the excitement of a snowball, shivering winter evenings, somber grey skies in the middle of the day, all of this as mediated by the historically specific everyday of social relations, all these things The

small memories, the mundane everyday memories, constitute the home. So, Brah states that the concept of home or homeland is intrinsic to the understanding of diaspora. The concept of diaspora, according to Brah, embodies a subtext of home. Now, Femke Stock in *Home and Memory* also states, I quote, 'At the core of the concept of diaspora lies the image of a remembered home which stands at a distance both temporally and spatially,' right?

So, when we try to reconstitute that home from a different time-space, it is the idyllic home, you know, for the diaspora, it is the idyllic home that stands at a distance, both in terms of time and space. The spatial and temporal distance between homeland and hostland makes the longing for return to the place of origin desirable, unless the history of dislocation turns out to be something traumatic. So, unless someone has left their homeland behind under severe constraints, under severe political threats or natural catastrophe or debacle, there is always this underlying desire to go back to the place of origin. Even when in prosperity in the hostland, even if someone has achieved a lot in terms of social, economic, and cultural resources in the hostland and can vouch for themselves to be an established and successful person, and even if return to their homeland may not be considered very safe, one may still dream of a return to the place of origin, thereby showcasing the resilience of the diaspora community.

Even under very unsafe conditions back at home and even if one is living a very good life in the hostland, there would still be, in many cases, in most cases, the dream and the desire to go back to one's place of origin. A famous Hebrew poem by Yehuda Halevi, who is a medieval Spanish-Jewish philosopher, draws attention in discussion to the concept of home. So, Halevi's poem reads as follows. 'My heart is in the east, and I in the uttermost west.' 'How can I find savour in food?'

How shall it be sweet to me? How shall I render my vows and my bonds? While yet Zion lies beneath the fetter of idiom and I in Arab chains, a light thing would it seem to me to leave all the good things in Spain, seeing how precious in my eyes to behold the dust of the desolate sanctuary. So this is how the poem goes. This given poem describes a nostalgic longing for the lost homeland. Home in the diasporic context therefore implies a loss, which occurred in the past. It is constantly, you know, a sense of melancholia that haunts the individual in diaspora, right? And a mourning for that lost land, that sense of loss, right?

The gravity of the sense of loss is contingent upon how much the diasporic subject assimilates the loss, how much one actually realizes or kind of feels the loss or consciously


relates to this loss of land. So, home therefore resides in the imaginary domain of the displaced diasporic subjects. In this context, scholar and critic Vijay Mishra's exploration of the imaginary is very important in our understanding of home and nostalgia. Mishra's use of the imaginary in his analysis of the Indian diaspora and its literature opens up a space for discussion and at the same time underscores the significant role that unconscious spaces may play in shaping literary portrayals of diasporic experiences. So, Vijay Mishra draws a parallel between the diasporic imaginary and Jacques Lacan's concepts of the imaginary, which is linked to the unavoidable residual primary narcissism, initially brought into play during the mirror stage, what Lacan calls the mirror stage, a stage

### Home in Diaspora

My heart is in the East, and I in the uttermost West –  
 How can I find savor in food? How shall it be sweet to me?  
 How shall I render my vows and my bonds, while yet  
 Zion lies beneath the fetter of Edom, and I in Arab chains?  
 A light thing would it seem to me to leave all the good things of Spain –  
 Seeing how precious in my eyes to behold the dust of the desolate sanctuary.

(qtd. in Safran, 'Deconstructing and Comparing Diaspora')

- The given poem describes a nostalgic longing for the lost homeland. Home, in the diasporic context, therefore, implies a loss that occurred in the past and a mourning for that loss. The gravity of the sense of loss is contingent upon how much the diasporic subject assimilates the loss.



through which the infant starts developing her sense of ego through identifying with her image in the mirror. So, Mishra is drawing this parallel between the diasporic imaginary and the mirror phase. Lacan states that even though the infant comes to evolve the subjectivity of his or her with time, especially this subjectivity becomes very evident at the symbolic phase or the symbolic stage. However, the primary narcissism connected to the mirror phase lives on; it still continues somewhere in our subconscious or in our unconscious, right. So, the Lacanian concept of the imaginary has tremendous implications in a diasporic context.


In the diasporic context, the absence of the motherland can indeed be seen to reactivate a play of idealization. So, in the absence of the motherland, what we cling on to is the idealized understanding or memorialization of motherland. So, memorizing the practice of remembering, retelling, narrating, recounting about the motherland becomes something or makes something which is besides the motherland. So the motherland that exists in our discourse, in our memorization, in our practice of telling and remembering may not be the same as, rather it is never the same as the actual motherland.




So we have this plea of idealization and specular identification with this ever lost symbol of origin. So, motherland one could safely say becomes a simulacrum without an original reference in the diaspora. It is like something besides itself and that is how the diasporic subject wishes it to exist or clings on to it. Drawing on James Clifford's understanding of the term diaspora, which is used to characterize the lives of any group that is living in displacement, Vijay Mishra understands the diasporic imaginary as pertinent to, I quote, any ethnic enclave in a nation state that defines itself

consciously, unconsciously or through self-evident or implied political coercion as a group that lives in displacement, unquote. In Mishra's book, *The Literature of the Indian Diaspora, Theorizing the Diasporic Imaginary*, which is particularly written in context to the Indian Diaspora, imaginary is represented as as desiring from the original or ancestral homeland or better still, from an absence even for those generations who had no first-hand experience of migration as they were born in the new land. So this space of absence, this context of absence or the situation of absence actually evokes nostalgia, which is instrumental in recreating the homeland.

**The 'Imaginary' Home**

- So, the Lacanian concept of the imaginary has tremendous implications in a diasporic context. In such a context, the absence of the motherland can indeed be seen to re-activate a play of idealization and specular identification with this ever-lost symbol of origin (Delphine Munos) — motherland as a simulacrum
- Drawing on James Clifford's understanding of the term 'diaspora,' which is used to characterize the lives of any group living in displacement, Mishra understands the diasporic imaginary as pertinent to "any ethnic enclave in a nation-state that defines itself, consciously, unconsciously or through self-evident or implied political coercion, as a group that lives in displacement" (qtd. in Munos).
- In Mishra's book, *The Literature of the Indian Diaspora: Theorizing the Diasporic Imaginary*, which is particularly written in context to the Indian diaspora, imaginary is represented as desiring 'from' the original or ancestral homeland or, better, 'from' an absence, even for those generations who had no firsthand experience of migration, as they were born in the new land (Munos).






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And this recreation, this homeland that is more of a psychic recreation, a collective reminiscing act, is almost like a utopia. And one almost knows, even as they are remembering it, celebrating it psychically or through language, that it is so utopian and so different from reality that one can hardly—or almost never—revisit or go back to it. One can never visit it, as it were. So, one knows that it is difficult—impossible, even—to go back and visit this utopian space of home. Mishra takes a cue from Slavoj Žižek, who defines the imaginary with regard to the question that one should really pose—a question

vis-à-vis the hysteric. So, not really what is his or her object of desire, but where does he or she desire from? So, it is not that Žižek is interested in what we desire, but where we are

even getting this desire, this understanding of desire, from. So, there can be observed multiple references to the place of origin, the homeland, which is an abstract projection of the imaginary. Mishra develops his understanding of the diasporic imaginary through the Freudian conceptualization of an impossible mourning for the Indian motherland.

Although Vijay Mishra talks about the Indian diaspora specifically, this could be extended and applied to all diasporic communities. The difference between mourning and melancholia, which Freud posited as early as 1917, remains a timeless and relevant topic. We have to understand that mourning and melancholia are not quite one and the same. So, melancholia denotes a condition in the course of which a subject proves incapable of acknowledging or pinpointing the reality—even recognizing the anatomy of the loss—whereas, in contrast, for the mourner, there is nothing about the loss that is unconscious.

So the mourner has thoroughly understood or internalized the process of mourning, or the mourner knows what he mourns for. Whereas the melancholic is kind of brooding about something that he or she cannot face up to. It is a kind of anatomy of loss that cannot be really captured in the form of ideation or through language. Freud's view is that melancholia is an unconscious process. Therefore, even when the loss is due to a real death or a separation from a loved one.

So, in the case of a melancholic subject, the person knows whom he has lost, but not what he has lost in the lost object. Right. So there is a cognizance of what has really happened, the negative thing that has happened. But the implication of that happening is yet to dawn on the person. This informs melancholia.

In the context of homeland, the diasporic subjects mourn for a lost homeland. However, soon the mourning becomes melancholia, from which the diasporic subjects are unable to return home. So mourning is more of a momentary process. It's more direct, and it's supposed to be something not going on forever. Whereas melancholia is not something very pronounced, but it stays somewhere in the subterranean layer, somewhere in the unconscious, and it lingers like a brooding.

Like a silent cry, one cannot really withdraw oneself from a melancholic temperament very soon or very easily. Scholar Delphine Munos makes an observation on Vijay Mishra's understanding of Freudian concepts of mourning and melancholia as follows. So, I quote Munos at length: 'Under the regime of melancholia, any replacement of the lost object (for instance, by redirecting libidinal energy outwards towards the new land) is unthinkable.' Because to do so would be to taint the purity of the object lost, right? But any return to a



'before the break' relationship with the lost object is also out of the question. Indeed, not only does the melancholically created 'India within' defy representation, but the signifier 'India,' in both its

phantasmatic and its referential acceptations, now carries too the accusing marks of the source of trauma, right?' So, in this above quote, Mishra is basically saying that for the diasporic subject, 'India' has necessarily become, following the departure, synonymous with loss, departure, deprivation, and separation. So, there can be both of these things. One is the utopia that is being formed in our mind, in our collective reminiscence about the homeland, which is something larger than life, which is definitely blown out of proportion.

On the other hand, sometimes the remembrance is loaded with accusatory elements such as loss, departure, deprivation, and separation. So, that generates the melancholia, and melancholia, like we said, cannot pinpoint what has been lost or what is the source of negativity. However, it keeps haunting us like a phantasmal presence. So, through the discussion on home and diaspora, it can thus be understood that it is a complex concept that has varied implications, that has multiple discursive interpretations, and its meanings vary from person to person. For an eminent writer like Jhumpa Lahiri, who has stayed in the UK, the US, and now lives in Italy, home is not a fixed entity.

She has declared herself as a global citizen. Diasporans who keep moving from one hostland to another are called serial diasporas. Regarding serial diasporas, Safran says that members who move from one hostland to another may keep the homeland in their consciousness. However, such a homeland, if it exists at all, may be more of a utopia to which one is not expected to return. So, the person has been displaced so many times from that home or that concept or that simulacrum called home, that it is somewhere back in one's mind, present in one's language, maybe in some habits, daily cooking, dressing, and all.


However, it is not expected that one would return there, especially in the case of serial diasporas where a person has moved away from home many times over, is displaced from home repeatedly. Uma Parameswaran, an Indian-born, Canada-based diasporic writer, in her famous essay entitled 'Home is Where Your Feet Are and May Your Heart Be There Too,' argues that for a diasporian who is not part of the serial diaspora and not displaced multiple times from the homeland, the hostland could also be home for such a person where the original referent can no longer be found or pinpointed, which exists only at an idyllic level. It could be in the form of extreme imaginations, as we discussed, through a utopian




understanding or, conversely, a dystopian understanding or a melancholic feeling that lingers as a memory of home. For such a person, for such a population, the hostland could very well be home in practice.

Parameswaran's essay was published in 1997, and Avtar Brah's book 'Cartographies of Diaspora' came out in 1999. These works presented a similar ambiguity regarding the concept of home vis-à-vis the diaspora. Brah, in fact, questions: in diaspora, where is this home? Salman Rushdie, who has said in many interviews that he considers India his home, has further problematized the concept of home in his famous essay 'Imaginary Homelands,' something we will discuss at length in our subsequent lecture. Let us discuss 'Imaginary Homelands' at length in our next lecture to understand how difficult it is to have a material or concrete definition of home or a constant relation with this concept once you have stepped out of its boundaries, right?

### Conclusion

- Uma Parameswaran, an India-born, Canada-based diasporic writer, in her famous essay, **"Home is Where Your Feet Are, and May Your Heart Be There Too!"** - argues that for a diasporian who is not a part of 'serial' diaspora and not displaced multiple times from the 'homeland, the hostland could also be the 'home' (qtd. in Angshuman Kar).
- Parameswaran's essay was published in 1997, and Avtar Brah's book, *Cartographies of Diaspora* (1999), presented similar ambiguity regarding the concept of 'home'. Brah questions that in diaspora: "Where is home?"
- Salman Rushdie, who has in many interviews said that he considers 'India' as his home further problematises the concept of home in his famous essay **'Imaginary Homelands'**, which we will discuss elaborately in our following lecture.





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So, we see that Rushdie considers India his home, but then he has problematized this concept so much in his Imaginary Homelands, which we are going to take up in our subsequent lecture. Thank you.