

Subverted and Internal: Portrayals of Home in Women's Refugee Writings

Carla Martínez del Barrio

Introduction: Rushdie's *Imaginary Homelands*

In this essay, I focus on how the concept of *home* that Salman Rushdie proposes in *Imaginary Homelands* is portrayed in two literary texts written by African refugee women: Meron Hadero's "A Down Home Meal for These Difficult Times" and Novuyo Rosa Tshuma's "New Lands, New Selves".¹ My goal is to explore the gendered transformations *home* undergoes in forced displacement with relation to how the home is imagined as internalized and subverted to benefit the protagonists themselves.

In *Imaginary Homelands*, Rushdie reflects on the idea of home as something both tangible and intangible, real and imagined. One of the central themes the author grapples with is the notion of

belonging in displacement. As an expatriate writer, he often writes from the perspective of someone who has been uprooted from his homeland - India - and finds himself navigating multiple cultural identities. Rushdie's notion of home is not tied solely to a physical place but is also deeply connected to memory, imagination, and narrative. In this collection, Rushdie suggests that home can be a fluid and evolving concept, shaped by life experience, collective histories, and personal stories. He challenges the idea of a fixed, static home and instead embraces the idea of a shifting, dynamic sense of belonging. For Rushdie, the home is as much a construct of the mind as it is a geographical location. If we view the home as a mental construct, then, it can reside within us and thus, be subjected to subversion.

¹ Hadero, Meron. "A Down Home Meal for These Difficult Times." *A Down Home Meal For These Difficult Times*. Canongate, 2022, pp. 172-181. Further references in the text abbreviated as "DT." Tshuma, Novuyo Rosa. "New Lands, New Selves." *The Displaced: Refugee Writers on Refugee Lives*, edited by Viet Thanh Nguyen, Abrams, 2018, 173-183. Further references in text abbreviated as "NS."

Furthermore, Rushdie critiques oversimplified and nationalist conceptions of home(land), contending that they can lead to exclusion and oppression. He celebrates cultural diversity and suggests that true belonging can transcend narrow boundaries to embrace "multiplicity, pluralism, hybridity" (32). Hence, I believe his framework is well-suited for examining the experiences of African female refugees. For Rushdie, "the migrant is, perhaps, the central or defining figure of the twentieth century" (277). I argue that the migrant, most specifically the forced migrant or refugee, is the central or defining figure of the twenty-first century.²

The *subverted home* in "A Down Home Meal for These Difficult Times"

The first story I analyze in this essay is written by Meron Hadero. She is an Ethiopian writer who sought refuge in Germany and the United States. Hadero includes Jazarah and Yeshi's story as the conclusion to a collection which bears the same title and is written

entirely by herself. Every chapter of the homonymous collection features different individuals facing various conflicts, albeit always within the context of Ethiopian forced migration to Germany and the United States. In this particular text, Jazarah and Yeshi are two Ethiopian women who, like Rushdie, leave their home behind - Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia - to settle in New York City. The factors driving their displacement are not explicit, but it can be inferred they are refugees of war, climate change and economic conditions. The civil war (1974-1991) and the drought-induced famine of the 1980s, the period in which the narrator places "DT", resulted in the forced displacement of millions of people in Ethiopia.

These two women meet at a series of recreational activities organized by the neighborhood church to foster the integration of new migrants like themselves. After becoming friends, they start a business together selling Ethiopian

² In the category forced migrant, I include war refugees and internally displaced people, as well as economic and climate refugees, amongst other types, regardless of whether the labels overlap and are protected and defined by international legal frameworks or not.

home-cooked meals, which later evolves into a food truck. Their entrepreneurship not only provides a feeling of empowerment but also grants them economic independence from their husbands and the sense of belonging Rushdie grappled with. They achieve this, first, through their partnership, and second, via the transcultural exchanges with other church attendees, volunteers and customers. As a result, they oppose the problematic model of cultural assimilation as well as the multicultural model so popular in North-American society.

Yeshi and Jazarah create a new sense of home in a process of bidirectional *transculturation*. The duality of the process implies that they are not seeking to assimilate into American culture, nor are they aiming to preserve their Ethiopian identity completely intact. Their original culture permeates the American and the new, being influenced by the old, the Ethiopian. Their hybrid identity emerges as distinct and unique (Bhabha). Perhaps challenging to define but that is precisely what makes it distinctly their own. In their first encounter at a cooking workshop, Yeshi and Jazarah neither knew how nor wanted to cook:

Yeshi asked, "Does your husband cook?"

Jazarah replied, "Never. Does yours?"

"He wouldn't be caught dead near the kitchen", Yeshi said.

Yeshi asked, "Do you want to learn to cook?"

Jazarah said, "No way. How about you?"

Yeshi asked, "Is it mandatory?"

However, it did seem to be a requirement for them, somehow entangled in the American vision of femininity and womanhood. ("DT" 174)

Their uninterest in cooking might turn ironic and somewhat comical the fact that they later start a food business together. Yet, as hinted at in the quote above, it seems there is a good reason behind their entrepreneurship. Both women feel enormous cultural pressure from the host community to be good mothers and homemakers. They feel it is their duty to make their family feel at home, to *make a home*. Depending on how 'good' they are at this task, they feel it can make the difference between their families' acceptance and rejection by the community.

Hence, "cooking every meal just for their little families not only felt like a waste of energy but also like a national prerequisite" ("DT" 174). Indeed, Yeshi and Jazarah start the food business to support themselves and their families economically. In addition to that, they set it up as a natural and necessary consequence of the *transculturation* process they experience. They want to fit in and meet expectations, but they

They make a home but on their own terms.

also do not want to waste their efforts or lose themselves to gender ideals that do not align with their personal aspirations or personalities. As they say at the beginning of the excerpt, they neither want to cook nor want to learn to cook. But they do. They learn, and they make a *home* – but on their own terms: they subvert the role assigned to them, turning it into an economic source, a life purpose, and a home for themselves, their families, and their community.

Through their dishes, they establish relationships, create their own community, and keep their Ethiopian culture alive in their new sense of home. In addition to being united by their reluctance to cook, “Yeshe and Jazarah talked about their experience as refugees, their assimilation, and all the unsettling things they learned to fear when they resettled in the United States” (“DT” 173). In the course of the story, through their work in the restaurant, we witness how they manage to avoid cultural assimilation by engaging in a process of transcultural influence with their customers.

Their clientele, who come from diverse backgrounds and cultural settings, gather around their table, seeing their similarities in their differences, and identifying with the powerful North-American

symbolism of a family around a table (Griffin). Following Rushdie, such pluralism makes their customers believe that “a meal at Down Home was like being at the eternal American family table, different people from different places coming together to unwind after a hard day, sharing the same food: one dish, one destiny” (DT 181). However, it is not that Yeshe and Jazarah’s way of socializing around food resembles the American myth, but rather that the American myth itself resembles theirs, and that is where they find their place without losing themselves. Through the subversion of imposed cultural and gender identities, they build a new sense of home after migration:

Roots intertwined their lives, sprouting from seeds they never wanted to plant, never consciously watered, but that took root nonetheless because life adapts, or tries. These roots cradling their lives were uprooted from time to time, trampled, shaken, but gradually they made their way, stabilizing them, as Yeshe and Jazarah treaded more firmly on ground that had to become their home. (“DT” 183)

These lines also invite us to question the concept of *resilience*. This capacity manifests in the face of obstacles for both protagonists. Having said that, it is important to question whether resilience is a natural and inherent characteristic of

the refugee person, or whether, as the text suggests, it is more of a contextual and conditioned skill, despite the natural metaphor employed by the narrator to describe their transculturation and subversion processes. According to Brad Evans and Julian Reid's critique in *Resilient Life*, resilience could be interpreted as a quality that emerges in response to the shortcomings of a structural system and manifests as an imposed inevitability. Evans and Reid's perspective corroborates the previously stated: that New York is their home, they make it their home, not by freedom of choice but out of necessity, as an inescapable, subversive reality.

The *internal home* in "New Lands, New Selves"

The second story I analyze in this essay is written by Zimbabwean author Novuyo Rosa Tshuma. Tshuma herself sought refuge initially in South Africa and later established residence in the United States. This text is part of *The Displaced: Refugee Writers on Refugee Lives*, a compilation of autobiographical refugee stories. Tshuma shares her experience as a Zimbabwean woman who migrated to

various countries due to a major crisis in Zimbabwe that began in 2000. From the socio-political and economic crisis in Zimbabwe to xenophobia in South Africa and the United States, the narrator explores the struggle against discrimination, political violence, and the search for a home that feels her own. The narrative highlights the complexity of identity and resilience in the face of adversity, aspects that once again emerge as key themes.

Throughout the narration of her migration experience, Tshuma introduces the notion of the first home as Rushdie's unattainable myth. The protagonist of "NS," despite the metaphorical impossibility of returning to her past home, redefines the concept as something internal, mobile, and fluid. On the one hand, upon crossing the American border, the protagonist's presence is questioned. This encounter, marked by prejudices and stereotypes about African people, exemplifies the critical concept of *orientalism* (Said). It also highlights how she is recognized as *the Other*, a stranger, an alien during the encounter (Ahmed). On the other hand, upon returning to Zimbabwe for a visit years later, she is also perceived as a stranger (Riley). This perpetual scrutiny could lead her to

isolation, generating a sense of total and constant estrangement. Despite this challenge, the narrator manages to internalize the sense of home, which helps her understand and appreciate the total complexity of her hybrid identity.

Furthermore, the narrative voice delves into the implications of the processes through which the Other is perceived during the encounter, especially the Other's body, which is categorized as strange. These processes align with Donna Haraway's, and particularly with Judith Butler's research, which suggest that some bodies seem to matter more than others. In other words, these feminist theorists tell us that *strange bodies* and the identities associated with them are shaped by entrenched discursive and material practices. Both recommend challenging these identities to make way for new forms of existence, connection, and relationship for everyone in the world.

In "NS", the notion of home is approached as an imaginary myth, as something that no longer exists as it once did. This means that the home is a place one can physically return to but not metaphorically, as described by Rushdie. When returning to Zimbabwe, the narrator comments:

The metropolitan landscape of my childhood city is what I hold onto most, as it remains static and unchanged, filling me with nostalgia when I visit my home, unlike the family and friends I left behind, who have grown and changed in ways that surprise and sadden me; we are no longer the people we used to be for each other, and we can never return to the ease and familiarity we shared. Life has moved on, for everyone. ("NS" 174)

In this excerpt, we see that the physical landscape, the environment, the city, remain unchanged. On the contrary, the protagonist acknowledges that her family and friends have undergone significant changes. The metaphor of home, i.e., the abstract, the felt and imagined, that which cannot be quantified, does show a notable difference. The narrator, in line with Rushdie's ideas, admits that she herself has also changed and recognizes that the familiarity of home, as it existed before, can no longer be regained. Initially, the impossibility of returning to the imagined home generates a feeling of nostalgia in the protagonist, as evidenced here. However, despite this loss, she manages to adopt a different and more reflective perspective on the situation.

Like Yeshi and Jazarah, instead of only lamenting what they

Home can be a fluid and evolving concept, shaped by life experience, collective histories, and personal stories.

lost after migration, Tshuma seems to have developed an attitude that allows her to confront change with a more nuanced and understanding outlook towards herself and others, finding a kind of meaning or acceptance in transformation: "Although I still yearn for my 'home,' I no longer see it as a place to go. It now resides within me, a 'feeling at home' within me that I try to cultivate every day, that I can carry with me wherever I need to go" ("NS" 186-188). Now, the concept of home has transformed into something internal, something that moves with her and that she can access wherever she is. Although it departs from its original conception, the sense of home and belonging resides within her, in her being, and is constructed through her own perception. The sense of home she manages to internalize belongs to her and her only, even after crossing multiple - literal and metaphorical - borders.

Nevertheless, she continues to face situations where her presence, identity, and experience as a refugee are presupposed and contested. When migrating for the

second time, from South Africa to the United States, she observes:

I became 'African,' from the Africa of the Western imaginary, which confuses 'Africans' with a narrative of perpetual crisis and suffering. So many Americans reacted to me with surprise: How come I spoke English? How come I knew American movies and music? How had I gotten here? *I rode an elephant until I reached the U.S. border.* ("NS" 174)

Despite the linguistic-colonial past - and present - in South Africa, North-American airport officials find it puzzling that our protagonist speaks English. These brief lines encapsulate the simplification of Africa, a continent often conceptualized as a country, acknowledged for centuries of occupation but paradoxically, rarely imagined as possessing experiences remotely similar to those of the West, to 'ours'. Through this reductionism, a dichotomy of *us versus them* is established, via which it is perceived that nothing significant or important happens or is projected from this continent in comparison.

When I was reading Tshuma's story, I thought of Kenyan writer and journalist Binyavanga Wainaina's essay, "How to Write About Africa". Both texts, with great sarcasm, criticize the stereotypes and prejudices that often prevail in the Western collective imagination about Africa. Like Tshuma, Wainaina points out how one often falls into the trap of perpetuating harmful stereotypes, from only describing nature and people to completely avoiding topics like love, cultural diversity, and African characters with depth and complexity.

In the conclusion of the story, she touches upon the *naturalization of suffering*, in which non-white bodies are considered less important or not valued in the same way (Butler). Tshuma explores how certain bodies are marginalized or neglected, and how this marginalization becomes rooted and normalized in society, which can have profound implications in terms of social justice and human rights:

The suffering of non-white bodies is so naturalized, so overwhelming and so ordinary that it ceases to be exceptional. Therefore, the price to escape from that constant possibility of being reduced, under the gaze of the sovereign power of the host country, to a mere biological fact of life, is an unyielding pursuit of exceptionalism. ("NS" 182)

This excerpt highlights how suffering not only involves projecting images and stories that perpetuate the victimization of the Other but also involves recognizing her as such (Ahmed). In this case,

she is the African woman, an 'African' in quotation marks, an African body that is observed but not seen, upon which racist and colonial stereotypes and prejudices formed over time by the collective imagination are projected. Tshuma concludes her commentary by questioning the notion of *exceptionalism*. She emphasizes how refugees like herself, especially women and girls, such as Yeshi and Jazarah, initially experience the expectation to be twice as good, correct, and grateful. This idea connects with what Dina Nayeri exposes in *The Ungrateful Refugee*, where she denounces refugees' efforts to obtain a minimum recognition of their humanity and dignity; qualities that should be inherently recognized in all people, regardless of their legal status.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I contend that both narratives depict two portrayals of home: the *subverted home* and the *internal home*. The internal home suggests that the concept of home may lack a physical referent. On the contrary, it is personal, fluid, and changes out of necessity. This notion redefines home as internal, mobile, and detached from tradition and the past. The protagonists internalize their

sense of belonging, carrying it beyond geographical borders. Consequently, in both the host society and upon returning to their place of origin, they recognize their cultural hybridity while questioning and challenging prejudices and stereotypes. This questioning leads to the concept of the subverted home, where the protagonists disrupt and challenge established (and gendered) systems, engaging in practices that allow them to feel at home on their own terms.

These two conceptualizations are represented in both texts, although the subverted home is more prominent in "DT", while the internalized home is clearer in "NS". In "DT", Yeshi and Jazarah build a subverted home, transforming and reconfiguring their space by opposing gender roles via a transculturation process. They defy expectations and the fear of not belonging, as Rushdie warns, by starting a culinary business. Their economic and social empowerment arises as a consequence of actively participating in their host community and holding a strong capacity for resilience. In "NS", Tshuma creates an internal home for herself: after migration, she carries a sense of home within her. Unlike Rushdie's notion of an unreachable home, hers is always

accessible because it resides within her. Moreover, she opposes the us versus them mentality and questions the naturalization of the suffering of non-white African bodies as well as the need for being an exceptional refugee, all while using humor and sarcasm to strengthen her resilience and distance herself from trauma.

Overall, both narratives oppose Western stereotypes about Africa and African refugee women, emphasizing the need for responsible and complex narratives that avoid simplification and perpetuation of prejudices. First, these authors challenge conventional constructions of identity in displacement. Second, and most importantly, they highlight the need for transformations not only of exclusive and cliché literary representations of migrants but also in social, political, and legal structures to ensure that human rights are also present in - and outside - the home, however it may be imagined, of all refugees and forced migrants alike.

Works Cited

Primary literature

Hadero, Meron. "A Down Home Meal for These Difficult Times." *A Down Home Meal For These Difficult Times*. Canongate, 2022, pp. 172-181.

Tshuma, Novuyo Rosa. "New Lands, New Selves." *The Displaced: Refugee Writers on Refugee Lives*, edited by Viet Thanh Nguyen. Abrams, 2018, 173-183.

Secondary literature

Ahmed, Sarah. *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality*. Routledge, 2000.

Bhabha, Homi. "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse." *Discipleship: A Special Issue on Psychoanalysis*, vol. 28, pp. 125-133.

Butler, Judith. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*. Routledge, 1993.

Evans, Brad and Julian Reid. *Resilient Life: The Art of Living Dangerously*. Polity, 2014.

Griffin, Mackensie. "'No Place For Discontent': A History Of The Family Dinner in America." *NPR*, 16 February 2016, <https://www.npr.org/sections/thesalt/2016/02/16/459693979/no-place-for-discontent-a-history-of-the-family-dinner-in-america>. Accessed 14 May 2024.

Haraway, Donna. *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. Routledge, 1991.

Nayeri, Dina. *The Ungrateful Refugee: What Immigrants Never Tell You*. Catapult, 2019.

Riley, Philip. "The return of 'The Stranger': Distance, Proximity and the Representation of Identity in Domain-Specific Discourse." *ASp*, vol. 53, 2008, pp. 7-24.

Rushdie, Salman. *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991*. Penguin, 1991.

Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. Pantheon, 1978.

Wainaina, Binyavanga (2019): "How to Write About Africa." *Granta*, 2 May 2019, <https://granta.com/how-to-write-about-africa/>. Accessed 20 May 2024.