



BEYOND BORDERS: CULTURAL MEMORY AND THE SEARCH FOR BELONGING IN DIASPORIC NARRATIVES

Punjab, Rushdie's Bombay, and Adichie's America

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Abstract

*This paper examines how cultural memory shapes belonging in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*. It connects the seminar's Punjab context with Rushdie's representation of Amritsar and Bombay, and with Adichie's account of Nigerian migration to the United States. Using Homi K. Bhabha's hybridity and Third Space, Stuart Hall's account of cultural identity, Avtar Brah's diaspora theory, and Jan Assmann's distinction between communicative and cultural memory, it argues that remembered attachments help people interpret displacement without guaranteeing acceptance. Rushdie's unstable narration questions the possibility of recovering a complete homeland; Adichie's attention to race and everyday bodily experience exposes the conditions under which migrants are recognised. The Jameson–Ahmad debate provides a further caution against treating postcolonial texts as expressions of a single Third World experience. Punjab supplies both a direct literary connection through the Amritsar episode and a historical context for considering the preservation of displaced lives. The comparison proposes that belonging depends on the relationship between remembered place, narrative authority, and social recognition.*

Keywords: cultural memory; diaspora; hybridity; Third Space; Punjab; Salman Rushdie; Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie.

Introduction

What survives of home when a person can no longer inhabit it in the same way? A familiar street may remain vivid in memory even when it has become inaccessible. A person may also return to a familiar country and discover that familiarity no longer produces ease. These experiences require a distinction between remembering a place and belonging to it. This paper argues that cultural memory provides resources for interpreting displacement, while belonging remains dependent on relationships and forms of recognition that memory alone cannot secure.

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The discussion brings together three unequal geographical scales: Punjab, a region divided by Partition; Bombay, a city reconstructed in Rushdie's fiction and reflective prose; and the United States, encountered through the particular locations of Adichie's *Americanah*. They are not equivalent geographical or historical units. Their comparison is useful precisely because it tests how the meaning of home changes across different kinds of border. The title "Beyond Borders" therefore describes the movement of stories and attachments, rather than a claim that borders have ceased to matter.

The method is comparative textual analysis, focused on scenes, narrative form, and the relationship between private experience and public history. *Midnight's Children* is not a conventional account of settlement in a Western host country. Its relevance to diaspora emerges through movement within the subcontinent and, when read beside "Imaginary Homelands," through the problem of reconstructing India from a position of distance. *Americanah* more directly depicts migration, racialisation, and return. Keeping this difference visible prevents the category of diaspora from becoming a synonym for every experience of estrangement.

Theoretical framework

Bhabha's account of hybridity challenges the assumption that cultures possess pure, self-contained identities before they meet. His Third Space concerns the production and negotiation of cultural meaning; it is not a third country or a comfortable midpoint between two national identities. For this paper, its value lies in directing attention to moments when established categories fail to describe a subject adequately. A culturally mixed identity does not, by itself, establish that a person has equal power or secure membership within a community (Bhabha, "The Commitment to Theory").

Cultural representation is a concept developed by Stuart Hall that presumes that ideas, images and other cultural texts represent some abstract quality or behavior. Representation connects meaning and language to the culture. Hall offers a related account of cultural identity as historically produced and continually repositioned. His formulation of identity as "becoming" as well as "being" allows continuity and change to be considered together (225). Applied here, this means that the remembered self cannot simply be recovered intact. The person doing the remembering has acquired new experiences, and these experiences alter the significance of the past. Hall's argument arises from Caribbean and Black diasporic histories; its use in this comparison is an analytical extension, not a claim that those histories are interchangeable with South Asian migration.

Brah distinguishes a desire to feel at home from an obligatory desire to return to a homeland. Her account also insists on the historical specificity of migration (15–16). This distinction helps separate the emotional search for security from the geographical act of return. It is especially useful when comparing a displaced community's remembered place with a migrant's attempt to establish everyday life elsewhere. Diaspora, in this reading, involves relationships among places, people, and power, rather than physical movement alone.

Assmann distinguishes everyday, socially transmitted recollection from cultural memory sustained through more durable forms of representation and collective transmission (125–33). The distinction guards against calling every private recollection "cultural memory." A remembered family story may circulate through conversation; its preservation in a novel, archive, or museum raises a further question about how it acquires public meaning. This paper therefore asks both what is remembered and what carries that memory beyond the individual who first experienced it.

“Third World” belongs to a different theoretical debate from Bhabha’s Third Space. Jameson argues that texts from the societies he places within that category should be read as national allegories, linking private destinies to collective circumstances (69). Ahmad challenges the homogenising effects of that argument and the uneven logic of its world categories (3–8). Their disagreement supplies a methodological caution: Saleem’s connection with national history does not justify reading every Nigerian or South Asian character as the representative of a nation. The term is used here as a contested critical category, not a ranking of cultures.

Punjab and the transmission of historical memory

Punjab enters this paper through a specific episode in Rushdie’s novel before it enters as a wider historical comparison. In “Mercurochrome,” Aadam Aziz is in Amritsar during the violence of April 1919 and attends the gathering at Jallianwala Bagh. Rushdie places a family history within an event of public violence. The passage is fictional representation, not survivor testimony, and its narrative details should not be treated as independent historical evidence (Rushdie, *Midnight’s Children*, “Mercurochrome”).

The red medicine named in the chapter becomes particularly important. Before the massacre, Naseem mistakes the stains of Mercurochrome on Aziz’s clothing for blood; after it, the confusion is reversed. The resemblance between treatment and injury unsettles the apparent readability of the body. A stain is visible, yet its meaning depends on a story. My reading is that this small domestic misunderstanding makes a larger point about historical memory: evidence does not explain itself, and intimate witnesses must interpret what public violence has left behind.

Saleem narrates an event preceding his own birth. His authority consequently depends on the transmission and imaginative reconstruction of a family past. The question is not simply whether he remembers accurately, because the episode is not his firsthand memory. It is how an inherited account becomes part of his understanding of himself. Punjab is therefore present within the novel’s structure of intergenerational narration, rather than merely functioning as an external historical reference.

The violence of 1919 must be distinguished from Partition in 1947. For the latter context, the Partition Museum in Amritsar offers a concrete example of memory entering public institutions through objects, documents, art, and oral histories (Partition Museum). This is not the same activity as fictional narration. An archive has obligations to testimony and provenance that a novel does not share in identical form. Nevertheless, placing the two practices beside one another clarifies a common question: whose experiences become available to later generations, and through what forms?

This connection gives the paper a defined place within a seminar on Punjab’s cultural history. Its contribution concerns the mediation of historical experience, not a comprehensive account of Punjabi religion or spirituality. Neither the Amritsar episode nor a museum collection can stand for the full diversity of Punjabi life. Equally, displacement should not become the region’s sole identity. The comparison uses a particular history of rupture to investigate how people maintain attachments without reducing a culture to its losses.

Rushdie’s Bombay and the limits of recovery

In “Imaginary Homelands,” Rushdie reflects on the distance between a remembered Bombay and the city available to him in the present. His image of the “broken mirror” treats incomplete recollection as a condition of imaginative reconstruction rather than merely a defect to be repaired (Rushdie,

“Imaginary Homelands”). The essay helps explain why a remembered city cannot be judged only by its resemblance to a complete, recoverable original. Distance also produces a perspective, although that perspective remains partial.

The opening of *Midnight's Children* links Saleem's birth in Bombay with the moment of Indian independence. His personal origin is already framed by public time (Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*, “The Perforated Sheet”). This framing makes Bombay a site where a private life acquires a national significance that it cannot fully control. A birth normally seems to establish a beginning; here, it immediately involves the narrator in histories and expectations larger than himself.

The comparison with Punjab is therefore not simply a contrast between a lost region and a remembered city. Both raise questions about the authority of beginnings. Does a new national border provide an adequate account of a community's attachments? Does a date of independence explain the people whose lives it gathers into a national story? My argument is that Rushdie's narrative makes these questions inseparable from the act of telling. The nation becomes available through a situated voice, with its ambitions, limitations, and interruptions.

Bhabha's framework helps describe the instability of cultural categories here, but it should not turn Bombay into a romantic emblem of effortless mixture. The interpretive task is to ask how different affiliations coexist and who claims the authority to define their meaning. Remembering a plural city may challenge demands for a singular identity; it does not establish that all the city's inhabitants experienced plurality in the same way. The phrase “Rushdie's Bombay” should retain that possessive: it identifies a literary construction, not the definitive memory of a city.

Adichie's America and conditional belonging

The opening of *Americanah* establishes a different relationship between place and recognition. Ifemelu lives in Princeton but travels to Trenton to have her hair braided. The journey locates an everyday need outside the affluent environment in which she otherwise moves. Adichie's America is consequently not a single, undifferentiated destination. Its local spaces offer different possibilities of comfort, visibility, and familiarity (Adichie, ch. 1).

The analytical importance of the salon is its ordinary function. Belonging can be tested by whether a place accommodates the body's routine needs, not only by formal declarations of inclusion. A small journey between neighbouring places exposes the limits of treating residence as sufficient evidence of being at home. This reading does not make a hairstyle an automatic expression of an authentic African identity. It asks why certain forms of bodily presentation are easily accommodated in one environment and require a journey elsewhere in another.

Adichie also distinguishes national background from the racial identities a society assigns. Ifemelu's Nigerian formation does not prevent her from being read through American categories of Blackness. Her relationships and observations expose differences within what might otherwise appear to be a single racial community. Her eventual return to Nigeria further complicates a one-directional account of migration (Adichie; Penguin Random House).

The point for hybridity is that self-understanding and social classification do not necessarily coincide. A migrant may understand herself through several affiliations while an institution or stranger recognises only one. Cultural flexibility can therefore coexist with restricted recognition. This is

where a celebratory account of the Third Space becomes insufficient: the freedom to produce new meanings must be distinguished from the power to make those meanings socially effective.

Memory enters this process through comparison. The familiarity of an earlier life makes the assumptions of a new setting perceptible, but remembering that earlier life does not suspend the conditions of the present. In my reading, the past works as a critical reference rather than a reliable refuge. Return likewise offers no logical guarantee of restoring an earlier self. Brah's distinction between home-making and compulsory return helps keep that possibility open without deciding in advance where a migrant ought to belong.

Comparative findings

The comparison yields a distinction between remembering, narrating, and being recognised. Remembering maintains a relationship with absent people and places. Narrating makes that relationship available to an audience. Recognition depends on whether others accept the speaker's account and allow it to matter. These activities can support one another, but none automatically completes the others. A powerful narrative may preserve an attachment without restoring a home or changing the conditions of entry into a community.

Punjab sharpens the ethical stakes of this distinction. The preservation of testimony cannot undo displacement, but it can challenge the disappearance of displaced lives from public accounts. Rushdie's *Bombay* sharpens the formal problem: a city recovered through narrative remains shaped by selection and perspective. Adichie's American settings sharpen the social problem: a person's account of herself may encounter categories that she did not choose. Together, these perspectives show why cultural memory matters while also identifying the limits of what it can accomplish.

The main limitation of the comparison is also part of its method. Colonial massacre, Partition displacement, and migration for education or opportunity involve different degrees and forms of coercion. This paper does not classify them as one universal diasporic experience. Following the caution supplied by Ahmad's critique, it compares particular questions about memory and recognition while retaining differences of genre, historical circumstance, and social position.

Conclusion

The search for belonging in these texts is neither completed by geographical arrival nor resolved through the recovery of an untouched past. Rushdie makes the reconstruction of home inseparable from the uncertainties of narration. Adichie directs attention to the everyday conditions under which a migrant's identity is accepted or restricted. Punjab contributes a direct literary connection through Amritsar and a public context for examining how displaced histories are transmitted. Cultural memory sustains the ability to speak about home; belonging also requires circumstances in which that speech, and the person who offers it, can be recognised.

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