

Shifting Homes in Bangladeshi Diasporic Writer Iffat Nawaz's *Shurjo's Clan*

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Abstract

Bangladeshi American writer Iffat Nawaz's novel *Shurjo's Clan* problematizes the concept of 'home' for native as well as diasporic Bangladeshis. It raises questions of generational rootedness and un-belonging, forced or willing migrations, and assimilation or abnegation to help understand the various nuances of home for a 21st century Bangladeshi family that hails from undivided India, has witnessed Partition, lost sons in the 1971 war for independence, and also holds American Green Cards. It tries to find out what the definition of home is in today's globalised world. Is total assimilation possible, or even desirable? How many migrations are required to find home? How many generations does it take to be able to claim a piece of land as home? This paper traces three generations of Bangladeshi women as they make and break homes dictated by various existential, socio-political, religious or economic requirements. It argues that while for the first generation of these women home is a betrayer, a source of nostalgia, a demander of sacrifices, or even an indirect killer, for the second and third generation of women, it is an affective place, not a nostalgic limbo, or historic burden. These women are able to reconfigure it in the light of self-discovery, adaptation, diasporic distance and hybrid existence. This paper delves into theories of postcolonial diaspora, migration, hybridity, transnationalism, and acculturation to decode how these women question insularity of homes, overcome its challenges of transformations, and create a unique cultural synthesis at the heart of it.

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Introduction

The centrality of home as material, spatial, ideological, epistemological, and discursive space in South Asian diasporic literature is ubiquitous. In "Homes and Postcoloniality," Aparajita Sagar explains: "If we think of postcoloniality and diaspora as formations characterised by displacements and dispersions, by the continual unpicking of seams and borders, homes and homelessness inevitably become of special interest" (237). But she is quick to ask: "What are the passports to various homes, the initiation of rites, the evidence that one belongs or will learn to belong?" (Sagar 237). Indeed, the flow of refugees, internal/external migrants, and globalisation has galvanised dichotomous issues such as, location/dislocation, belonging/unbelonging, appropriation/abnegation, hybridity/purity, insularity/flexibility, etc. that problematise South Asian subject formation and construction of home as a private as well as national entity.

In *The Politics of Home: Postcolonial Relocations and Twentieth Century Fiction* (1999), Rosemary Marangoly George propounds a similar idea of home as paradoxically haven and prison. Highlighting the often binary and oppositional constituents of home, she argues that "homes are ... places of violence and nurturing ... to escape to and ... escape from.... 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). Such critics goad my inquiry into the complicated treatment of home in Bangladeshi American fiction: Is home seen as baggage, or a sanctuary in this kind of diasporic fiction? Is it possible or even desirable to have divided allegiance to multiple homes in such fictional work? In her article, "Homes and Nation in South Atlantic Literature," Ruth Maxey quotes Sanjukta Das Gupta who comments on the perils of negotiating home in Bangladeshi diasporan writing. In the words of Gupta, "the desire for locating home in the world, and home as domestic space in Bengali American women's writing seems to be intricately enmeshed as cultures, identities, heredity and environment are negotiated" (Homes and Nation 31). Some of the complexities of the treatment of home as pointed out by Gupta, can be traced in the Bangladeshi American writer Iffat Nawaz's debut novel *Surjo's Clan* (2022) that challenges traditional ideas of home by contextualising its multifarious aspects in the lives of three generations of Bangladeshi women. In this paper I highlight gendered generational gap as another vital component that complicates the terrain of home in Nawaz's novel. It is my contention that while the first generation of Bangladeshi women in

Shurjo's Clan experience home as an alienating, nostalgic, and sacrificial entity, the second and third generation of women visualise it as a reassuring, assimilating and multitudinously flexible concept.

Home and alienation in first generation women

Though Nawaz's novel is not primarily a Partition² novel, the historical event looms large in its background as Shantori and Paru, Nawaz's first-generation women are forced to migrate from West Bengal to East Bengal in search of a home. Indeed, scholars and media seem to have focused more on the Hindu migrant story from East to West Bengal, leaving Muslim movements less visible in historic and literary narratives. But earlier writers such as, Jahanara Shahnawaz,³ and Shaista Ikramullah,⁴ chose to focus on Muslim migration in order to address the paucity of the Muslim Partition experience. In their article "I Am Not a Refugee?: Rethinking Partition Migration," Mahbubar Rahman and Willem Van Schendel similarly argue that in Partition literature "the dominant image of the refugee is that of the Bengali Hindu fleeing from East Pakistan to Calcutta in West Bengal" (559). They wish to include stories of Muslims fleeing from Assam, Tripura, West Bengal, Bihar, and Uttar Pradesh to East Pakistan in search of home.

Home however, remains an alienating entity for the first-generation Bengali Muslim women in Nawaz's fiction who migrate from West to East Bengal because of the trauma caused by witnessing ancestral abodes being looted, and homes burnt down to ashes in front of their eyes. Despite the fact that their forefathers belonged to West Bengal for centuries, the Partition mob leaves them dislocated and homeless. Their dejection is aptly captured in the following scene where Shantori and her husband Mehul experience their few last moments on the soil of Murshidabad, their ancestral home:

² During the Partition in 1947, British India was divided into Hindu-majority India and Muslim-majority Pakistan, forcing about 16 million people to cross the arbitrarily drawn borders (mainly between the provinces of Punjab and Bengal), depending on their religious affiliation.

³ In her book, *Father Daughter: A Political Autobiography* (1971) Jahanara Shahnawaz describes the huge influx of Muslim refugees from India into Pakistan as one of the greatest crises in the history of the subcontinent. Although her focus is on the refugees of Lahore and Kashmir primarily, she claims that "over forty-two lac [Muslim] refugees were settled within a short time" (221).

⁴ In *From Purdah to Parliament* (1963), Shaista Ikramullah focuses on Muslim refugees of Bengal and Punjab. She records "five million refugees" that poured into West Pakistan within the first three months of Partition (155).

In the riots, as everything broke and fire devoured and made all into brittle rust, Mehul and Shantori ran for their lives. They looked back and saw that their house was on fire. Shantori tried to return a few times; she wanted to run back to Bhagirathi and jump into it, but Mehul held her tight. (Nawaz 39)

Shantori was inconsolable during her entire stay in Dhaka's refugee camp since she did not know what happened to the rest of her family on the other side of the border. Although the Ganga (Ganges), which becomes Padma as it flows from the Indian territory into Bangladesh, provides a momentary sense of belonging to her, soon she realises that it was just an illusion. Her frustration at the false promise of the river (read adopted home) to save them from their plight is evident from the following lines:

Shantori touched the river, her hands searching for the horizons she could disappear into, piercing through the space where the sky started and water ended. She tried to listen to the river but as she went further from her homeland, its voice grew fainter and fainter. Until finally, the river no longer spoke, its undercurrents no longer answered. That was when Shantori knew the inevitable separation had happened. She knew she had entered a new place, forced into a new home while carrying an unborn child. (Nawaz 39)

Physical and environmental distance from the land where her roots lie makes it impossible for Shantori to feel in tune with the same river flowing across the borders. Her inability to assimilate with her new homeland is also demonstrated through her failure to listen to the river's voice. It does not speak with the same lucidity as the Bhagirathi river did back in her home in Murshidabad. Shantori's obsession with Bhagirathi is reminiscent of what Rifat Mahbub and Anika Saba observe, "As people migrated from one side of Bengal to another, they were uprooted from their ancestral homes and close kin but the memories of those people and places remained with them long after Partition" (Mahbub and Saba 113). The authors further add that though the concepts of home and nation are interchangeable, "the migrants miss their immediate physical space such as streets and neighborhoods more than an ideological space which is the nation" (113). Like Mahbub and Saba, Zlatko Skrbis emphasises the role of geographic locations and settings as a potent source of emotional ties for migrants, that one may see as deterrents on the way to assimilation in their new environment. In the words of Skrbis,

Migration is invariably a process that dissociates individuals from their family and friendship networks, as well as from other socially significant referents that have strong emotional connotations. These may include

familiar surroundings, such as landscapes... buildings... sacral objects or sacred spaces (Transnational 236).

Shantori's estrangement in her new home further multiplies owing to the realisation that her new born child has also been banished with her, and will never be able to claim her ancestral home. Later in the story she divulges to Shurjo, her granddaughter, memories of crossing invisible borders, "leaving complete realities behind for incomplete ones" without realising the far-reaching impact of that on her granddaughter (Nawaz 46).

Shantori's alienation in her new home can also be attributed to the fact that she is perceived as a 'Ghoti'⁵ or an outsider in Dhaka. As Sabrina Fatma Ahmad opines: "Shurjo's maternal grandparents had fled from Calcutta during the Partition, a fact that earned the girl the racial slur of 'ghoti' from her school bullies" (10). The not so subtle rejection of the refugees from West Bengal by the residents of East Bengal is evident from the trip to the Buriganga river that Shantori and Mehul undertake shortly after finding a home in Dhaka. In the words of the narrator, "Shantori stared at the grim waves.... There weren't many trees around, and strange men in their lungis stared inquisitively at Shantori's swollen stomach. They spoke in a Bengali dialect that was unknown to Shantori and Mehul and then laughed at jokes that were best unheard" (Nawaz 41). Faced with such rejection by none other than fellow Bengalis, Shantori becomes reclusive, and does not visit the river again.

Paru, Shurjo's paternal grandmother similarly experiences the prolonged curse of alienation in East Bengal because she too is considered a 'ghoti' or an outsider. When she regrets that her sons who died for the freedom of Bangladesh, could not enjoy the country for long, Shurjo wants to remind her that, "Bangladesh would not have been fully theirs either" because here they would be seen as 'ghotis', or half-breeds" (Nawaz 22). But she spares her the pain caused by prejudiced people like Mohona who believe "that at least three generations are needed for a person to belong to a country" (Nawaz 16). Paru shares with Shurjo her side of the story of forced alienation and un-belonging, when she had to say goodbye to her ancestral home, friends, pets, and plants in India, and travel to a new land with her husband and six-year old son to embrace it as home. Her difficulty in assimilating in East Bengal is succinctly expressed in the following lines:

It was not easy for us when we moved here. We left much behind. It was the story of many I know, so we didn't make our struggles into an ordeal,

⁵ The term 'Ghoti' is used to refer to West Bengalis, and the term 'Bangal' is used for the people of East Bengal. People on both sides of Bengal often use these terms to differentiate and poke each other.

but it hurt. I was pregnant with your father. Between my frequent dizziness and morning sickness, we had to adapt quickly to all kinds of changes. We had to work on our accents to sound more like East Bengalis, not West; we had to make friends fast (Nawaz 23).

Because of a new identity forced on her that felt like a burden, and her struggles to find new ways of belonging, Bangladesh did not feel like 'home' to Paru. Speaking of the alienation of Bengalis like Paru and Shantori who migrated to East Pakistan, Mahbubar Rahman and Willem van Schendel hold that "[t]hey usually settled in places where they had no previous contacts and where they were easily distinguished by their speech and conduct" (559). Their article further points at the slow and arduous ways in which the identities of some immigrants shifted and transformed as they found various niches in East Pakistan society.

In fact, Shantori's and Paru's alienation are part of Nawaz's own family history. Her grandparents hailed from Murshidabad, and this encourages her to write about the alienation of those who were stigmatised as "ghotis." In an interview with Sara Anjum Bari of *The Daily Star*, Nawaz reminisces,

Those of us who moved from West Bengal to East Pakistan, felt like we did not tell a lot of our stories because we didn't want to be 'othered'. We love Bangla and Bangladesh so much, we wanted to focus on that and not focus so much on the issues of borders.

Despite many attempts, her grandparents could not fully assimilate. Their pangs of alienation are aptly captured by the author through the experience of her first-generation women.

Home and nostalgia

Shantori's inability to belong to the house that her husband procures in Gandaria leads to a chronic nostalgia for her ancient dwelling in Murshidabad with its magnificent Bhagirathi as well as the history of the mighty Mughals. To her Dhaka seems grimly different from Murshidabad. Its old homes are pale in comparison to the ancient ones of her ancestral land in Murshidabad. Neither modern nor old "in-betweenness" of its buildings "unsettles her" (Nawaz 40). Its air and bricks sit heavy on her, forcing her to live in her river-cocoon. On the contrary, even as a child, Shantori was nostalgic about Bhagirathi. The river transformed her into a goddess or a Mughal princess with the shadows of passing clouds over it, and she sat on its banks for hours, mesmerised by the language of its undercurrents. Through attachment with the river, home becomes the quintessence of an all-encompassing communal consciousness for her, as expressed through these lines:

Shantori heard it all – the songs of the fishermen, the tears from the widows' lonely baths, the tinkling anklets of young dreamers, the ageless devotion of lovers, the melted clay of the previous year's goddesses, the legacy of Murshidabad, which swam and sang in Bhagirathi's depths....

The river told Shantori at least a thousand tales. (Nawaz 37)

Shantori's nostalgia for the river that flew by her ancestral homestead keeps deepening even after her marriage. Soon her husband realises that he will never manage to secure any space in her heart since it was already full with a majestic love he could not compare with. Shantori's nostalgic memory of the river that embodies her old home disenfranchises her, and she begins to slide into depression. Paru's comment – "I could tell from the way she would suddenly lose her train of thought, how she turned paler and paler by the day. A blankness had taken over her eyes" – evokes premonitions of her untimely demise through suicide (Nawaz 33). Paru is nostalgic too, and her attachment is with the "asymmetrical home" in Gandaria because her dead sons return there every evening. When her only surviving son, Babu decides to migrate to America with his family, she refuses to leave. Clinging on to her adopted home she asks her son: "Move again? How many times do we need to migrate to find our home?" (Nawaz 65).

Home and sacrifice

Paru's sacrifices for calling Bangladesh home takes the shape of the blood of her sons killed during the 1971 war. Shurjo says about her grandmother that

all the hardships of leaving her ancestral land, blending into East Pakistan and raising her boys in this new home in old town Dacca were minor miseries compared to the moment when she found out about the deaths of her eldest and youngest son. (Nawaz 23)

This shows that the price Paru paid for her claiming an independent Bangladesh was too high.

In her book review of Nawaz's novel, Gemini Wahhaj deftly captures the sad trajectory of Shantori's ultimate sacrifice for home at the altar of migration and arbitrarily drawn impervious borders in these words:

Shantori was in love with the river of her childhood, Bhagirathi. Forced to migrate to Dhaka with her husband following the riots in Calcutta during Partition, Shantori rejects her new homeland, searching vainly for the river of her childhood that she has left behind. This search ultimately leads her to jump to the bottom of a well of water. (Review of *Shurjo's Clan*)

From the above arguments it can be concluded that in the lives of the first generation of Bangladeshi women in Nawaz's fiction, home is an alienating and painfully nostalgic entity that demands innumerable agonising sacrifices.

Home as reassurance: Second and third generation Bangladeshi women

While in South Asian diasporic fiction, home often surfaces as a site of contestation in relation to migration, nationalism, and memory, it also appears as an anchor of identity, resilience, and reassuring comfort. As seen from the cases of Shantori and Paru in Nawaz's fiction, if home is a source of tension between belonging and alienation, then from the instances of Bela and Shurjo, one may argue that home is also a reconstructive refuge, a fountain of emotional stability, and a welcoming sanctuary. Shantori's daughter, Bela is a second-generation Bangladeshi woman, who was conceived in West Bengal, but claims Bangladesh as home by dint of birth and marriage. Bela also considers America as home once she relocates there. Bela's daughter Shurjo, is a third-generation woman of the family who like her mother, claims both Bangladesh and America as home. Whether in Old Town Dhaka in Bangladesh, or in Virginia in the US, for the mother daughter duo, home represents a more reassuring, assimilating, and flexible concept.

Although Bela wants to erase the sad memories of her childhood home in Old Town Dhaka because of her mother's suicide, this home ends up providing her with reassurance and consolation in the shape of her father Mir, who resides there and singlehandedly raises her to grow into a practical and rational being. Bela's asymmetrical marital home in Gandaria is also reassuring and solacing for her because of marriage to Babu, her childhood sweetheart. Similarly, Bela's daughter Shurjo is also a source of comfort for her in this house, as are other dead family members who provide a reassurance formula of emotional wholeness and belonging to her by repeating family stories and national history.

Bela however, has to quit her reassuring home in Gandaria and search for other nourishing homes when it begins to threaten her daughter's emotional stability. Though her husband Babu and she both realise the importance of reminiscing about Partition and the 1971 war through repetitively narrated filial and national stories in shaping home as a site of emotional belonging for Shurjo, they also worry about the grief relayed through these stories that could ruin their daughter's mental health. They do not want that she should perpetually carry the burden of unspoken family secrets, communal grief, and national expectations. They also do not expect their daughter to have to match her predecessors' courage and sacrifices. Hence, despite the dilemma over leaving their beloved

home and country for which their brothers gave blood, Bela and Babu relocate to America with their daughter. The following scene that describes their departure leaves no doubt in the reader's mind about the reassuringly melancholic home that they left behind:

On the day Babu, Bela and Shurjo departed, even the cruel waters of the Buriganga broke into tears, the asymmetrical house cried Shurjo left her birthland with the imprint of tight embraces. She carefully packed invisible bits and pieces of her uncle's yet-to-be-told tales and speeches, her grandmothers' escaped secrets, stories that had harmed and healed her. (78)

The memorabilia that Shurjo carries to her new home in America have to be locked away eventually for acculturation, but they bespeak of the far-reaching affirming roots that have already germinated around their reassuring home in Dhaka.

Bela is fortunate to find another reassuring home in America as she follows her husband and daughter into the land of opportunities. Her sense of relief in her new homeland is well expressed in the following lines:

It was possibly the happiest she had ever felt in her adult life – that moment when Babu was driving down a windy path towards the edges of the sea, his hand in hers, their daughter's face turned up the sun. Bela breathed her entire surroundings in and thought to herself, *this is it*. (141)

Though initially she resists mingling with Americans and speaking English at home, soon it becomes apparent that “Bela did not miss home. She did not say it out loud, but it was apparent to Babu that she was relieved to finally untangle the close knots with the Unknown side,” that is, the ghosts of the past that visited the Ganderia home (Nawaz 101). As Bela's American home provides hope for the future, and escape from burden of the past, she embraces it with open arms.

After Babu's sudden demise, Bela's sense of security in her American home is shaken for a while, but she is fortunate to find a reassuring friend in her mild-mannered American colleague, Stephen. Shurjo also helps in seeing her American home as a place for nurturing and bonding. Their American home and lifestyle provide sustenance and order to both which is captured in these lines: “Bela and she swapped stories about their careers, promotions, colleagues, events. The nine-to-five of America had given them a structure that felt safe enough to be a common link that connected them” (Nawaz 189).

Like her mother, Shurjo easily finds a reassuring home in America. Although she misses Bangladesh, America is a better alternative because here she is not judged for her family's bloodline, and does not “feel the weight of history like in Bangladesh” (Nawaz 118). She recalls how her authenticity as a

Bangladeshi was challenged by her classmate Mohona who embodied the bitter political legacy of Partition and labelled her as a ‘ghoti.’ Even as a child Shurjo had refused to be alienated and reclaimed her right to her native home by throwing out this rhetorical question to her friend: “Weren’t we all Indians before 1947?” (Nawaz 17). In her article in *The Indian Press*, Madhura Dutta reminds us of Shurjo’s resilience when she points out how the girl “stands out in school for being...a grandchild to those considered ‘outsiders’ in Bangladesh as they migrated from Calcutta during the Partition,” but she fights back segregation.

America proves to be a reassuring haven for Shurjo also because here she can resist her nation’s expectations from children of her generation who were born in the first decade of the country’s independence, to pay for the freedom of the country by indulging in memories of sacrifices made for it. Shurjo’s agency in trying to process the heavy burden of inherited history and loss can be better understood through Nawaz’s description of her own experience as narrated in an interview with Sukanya Basu in *The Telegraph*:

Those of us who are born during the first decade of liberated Bangladesh inherited the leftover, secondhand trauma of the war; the oral and written history of the new nation was something our childhood was deeply steeped in as well As for untold truths, perhaps this is it, this way of being raised, this heavy inheritance of memories of our forefathers and how we have processed them and are still healing from it.

Nawaz believes that our world is still grappling with issues of migration and displacement, and hence themes of inherited grief, trauma and identity crisis are important as we trace the contours of home. But she wants these to be analyzed in a fresh light that allows growth no matter where one is planted. She entreats readers like her to question what they were told as children. Most importantly, she wants them to forget the grief they have been carrying as their family’s or nation’s honor. In the same interview she maintains: “I believe we can honor our history better by healing from its pain, with compassion leaping into something lighter and brighter.” She further explains the reason behind choosing her protagonist’s name: Shurjo, short for Shurjomukhi or sunflower. This name works as a constant reminder to her to simplify the intensity and darkness of tales of migration, and “not dig down towards the abyss but look up to the sun,” making room for multiple shifting homes (*The Telegraph*).

Shurjo’s letters to her grandmother Paru show how America helped her “turn over a new page” right after arriving in Virginia, and how “she seems giddy and in love with America” (Nawaz 125). The following comments by the narrator further depict America as the ultimate haven for Shurjo:

‘I’m glad Baba brought us here’, Shurjo told herself, as she went in for a bath. The body wash Bela had bought for her smelled of cotton candy. Her skin was sugar, America was sugar. A light sweetness danced around their home here, uncrowded with furniture and shadows, emotions safely tucked away in suitcases. It was good to lose some things from the past, Shurjo thought as she walked over to the mirror in the bathroom. (Nawaz 95)

America assists Shurjo unburden some of her psychological load in their two-bedroom apartment where squirrels run between pine trees, and the ice cream truck’s bells promise a different childhood. After her father’s sudden demise when Shurjo plunges into melancholy during college years, America heals her in the shape of her therapist. She finally puts herself together, merging seamlessly again in the tapestry of the American homeland. Sanjukta Dasgupta underscores this reassuringly emancipatory role of home in the lives of second-generation children in Bengali diasporic fiction. In her words,

Namesake and *Brick Lane* both texts unambiguously highlight a recurrent validation in diasporan writing that the new ‘home’ is a location of cultural freedom quite unlike the inevitable conservatism and claustrophobic that are inherent in the places of one’s origin. (Dasgupta 80)

Dasgupta is aware of the essentialism embedded in this perception of home in diasporan writing, but she also acknowledges its positive advantages (80).

Home as assimilation

Unlike Babu, Bela and Shurjo do not “cling to the ground they had come from, or to the security of familiarity” (Nawaz 115). Rather, they quickly assimilate into American culture not just with their good accent, but also with myriads of American ways. Bela’s assimilation into the American lifestyle happens through simple everyday things such as

a bird feeder in the balcony and a cup of coffee, a switch from the tea she used to drink. Her interest in the morning newspaper, or reading novels by J.D. Salinger and James Joyce from her daughter’s English class syllabus, books she had missed out on when she went to school in Bangladesh. (Nawaz 122)

But though “her ears were alert to the ways the wind chimes sang in each season, how the patterns of their tablecloth needed to change according to festivals and seasons, and how she learnt to bake apple and pecan pies to put on its center,” a miniature rickshaw and a Bangladeshi painting also occupy certain areas of her American home as symbols of her rootedness in her native culture (Nawaz 122).

Bela is determined to find out who she is besides being a Bangladeshi and what gives her a sense of personhood on American soil. Bela's job as a school teacher proves highly agential in strengthening her roots in America. The new confidence and sense of belonging it provides is apparent in these playful lines to her husband:

We moved continents. I'm no longer a housewife, we're not shuffling between the Known and Unknown worlds, I take four different buses a day, I wear skirts, pants, shirts, jackets. Gloves. I'm not your shari-wearing Bela from next door, mister. (Nawaz 97)

Again, when Babu expresses his desire to return to Dhaka after getting the Green Card, because of her growing ties with her adopted home, she instantly makes it clear that she is not leaving. After Babu's death, she instantaneously decides to stay back in America to raise Shurjo singlehandedly in what she believes to be a better home for her child than Bangladesh. Her brother-in-law Bikhu commends her agential powers of assimilation in her diasporan home in these words: "You built a life, an independent identity. You raised our beloved Shurjomukhi, and so very well. But most of all, you found peace in that world, your own ecosystem that is not dependent on anybody else" (Nawaz 240). Shurjo also acknowledges her mother's resilience and willpower to adapt to her new-found home culture. She is thankful when her mother decides to stay back in the US for giving her a better future. Although she initially resists the idea of leaving behind the last home her father had lived in, eventually she sees her mother's wisdom in buying a small townhouse and claiming a tiny part of America as her exclusive home. Indeed, there are times when Bela feels bound by her job, mortgage of her house, and loan payments for her car. The narrator captures her American challenges thus: "The cookie-cutter comfort of America and its structures that had given her strength in the past, felt like shackles" (Nawaz 207). But despite being raised by a father who trains her to live a contained and structured life, "Bela [does] not want to stick to the limits of her life. She want[s] to shed the restrictions of her old skin, rush out of herself and be undefined" (Nawaz 206). Bela's agency to assimilate within pluricultural homes is reminiscent of Jasmine, in Bharati Mukherjee's titular novel *Jasmine* (1989). Like Jasmine, Bela is ready at the end of the novel to take charge of her life and declare with a sense of triumph: "Watch me reposition the stars" (Mukherjee 214). Her power to acculturate while negotiating her dual cultural heritage, also invokes Firoza Jussawala's definition of a South Asian immigrant woman as a dynamic and multifaceted entity. In the words of Jussawala: "We are like 'chiffon saris' – a sort of cross-breed attempting to adjust to the pressures of a new world, while actually being from another older one" (Jussawalla 583).

Like her mother Bela, Shurjo is also quick to follow Jussawallah's mantra for opening up new frontiers for herself by assimilating and keeping "our distinctness, our senses of nationality" (Ullah 36). Within months of moving into her new home in America, she starts showing signs of assimilation as she begins to shed the burden of history that she had been carrying around in Dhaka. She no longer holds herself back in any way, and makes more friends than ever before. Both her parents admire the agility of their thirteen-year-old daughter, and wish to belong instead of just being in the diaspora. Shurjo makes apple cider and bakes chocolate chip cookies by the second Christmas season. She also learns how to vacuum, sack groceries, and make friends easily. Most importantly, she believes in America's melting pot. When her father jokes about the strange sense of humor the Americans have, Shurjo is quick to reprimand: "Baba, we won't assimilate if you speak like that. We'll be American one day too, and there is no definition for any one kind of American here" (Nawaz 105). She considers the District of Columbia with its outdoor sitting in restaurants, the façade of its buildings and the roundabout monumental parks to be her desired home, and spends seven years since university exploring its neighborhood. Commenting on Bela's and Shurjo's agency to adjust and mold their new reality, Madhura Dutta in her review of the novel holds that while Babu remains torn between longing for the unknown world and the guilt and self-doubt over the decision to leave his own country, "Shurjo and her mother eventually settle well. Shurjo makes the most of a fresh start, becoming a thoughtful, sensitive, independent adult" (Datta). Dutta's comment on Babu brings to mind Steven Vertovec's article, "Transnationalism and Identity" where he notes how sometimes transnational identities can foster tensions, fractured memories, identity confusion, or a sense of never fully belonging to either culture.

Home and flexibility

Vertovec's article, "Transnationalism and Identity" however, demands more focus on the second and third generation migrants who usually experience a transnational sense of identity and belonging that enables them to feel emotionally, culturally, socially, and economically connected to two or more 'homes' simultaneously -- one in the host country, another in the ancestral homeland. The article suggests that because the later generations inherit traditional practices, political history, family ties, cultural exposure, and communication from the previous generation, and also because of the impact of modern communication technologies on them, these individuals feel simultaneously connected to multiple places. They do not see home as just where they live, but also as places where their family, culture, and community originate

from or extend into. In *Shurjo* one finds such a descendent of first-generation migrant parents who grows up between homes in Bangladesh and America, developing a sense of transnational hybrid cosmopolitanism, and the ability to navigate both cultures with ease. Her rich and layered identity is shaped not by a single national space, but through multiple “habitats of meaning” or, places of emotional ties and cultural attachment (Vertovec 578).

Like Vertovec, A.K.M. Ahsan Ullah also highlights the significant role of transnationalism in providing fluidity and dynamism to the hybrid identity of second generation South Asian diasporans like *Shurjo*. As Ullah holds:

Transnationalism has emerged as a significant theoretical perspective in the study of second-generation diasporas, emphasizing multiple, interconnected social spaces and affiliations. Scholars urge that identities are not limited to a single national or cultural framework, but are shaped by transnational experiences, including familial ties, travel and media consumption. The transnational perspective recognises the fluidity of identity, and challenges traditional notions of fixed cultural belonging. (6)

The impact of transnationalism and globalisation on *Shurjo* becomes more evident when she grabs the opportunity of working for an international NGO in Dhaka. Bela is not surprised at *Shurjo*’s decision; rather, she is envious of the ease with which her daughter embodies not only America but also Bangladesh as home. Being a Bangladeshi by birth, and fluent in Bangla, *Shurjo* is the perfect candidate to work with local communities in forests and wetlands of the country. Again, being educated in America, and with field experiences in several third world countries, she is quick to fathom the ecological threats to Bangladesh. As she grabs the opportunity to work simultaneously with Bangladeshi and American governments, her agential capacity to quickly fit back into the essence of Bangladesh, a home that she left behind in her early teens, becomes evident. The narrator comments on this smooth transition and flexibility of homes in the following way:

It took little time for *Shurjo* to be enmeshed in her new life. She felt like she had never stopped following the rhythm of Dhaka....The cotton of her sharis wrapped her in an embrace like nothing else could, and the tea sellers sang folk songs *Shurjo* had learnt as a little girl. (Nawaz 199)

Shurjo lets Dhaka’s monsoon work on her as a healer and potion that rejuvenates her thoroughly by erasing bad memories, regrets, and grieves. Through her job she is excited to find a Bangladesh that her parents could never show her. As she crosses villages where people speak a dialect she cannot fully understand, and eat dishes she has not heard of, her desire to learn more about the land and the people grows. The realisation of her own ignorance gives *Shurjo* fresh hope, and

she sees new paths opening before her, paths which did not remind her of her old scarred past, but a welcoming and nourishing old home. The following lines from the narrator indicate the innumerable possibilities awaiting her as she smoothly assimilates once again, and fosters a flexible concept of home:

A sense of elation rose up from below her navel. Something told her that she did not need keys to enter, the asymmetrical house would let them in when the time came.... A tremendous life waited to be lived, new roads and shoes to try on, a mother and a lover to learn from, new homes to build, new children to welcome into the world. (Nawaz 242)

The fluid, flexible, and dynamic identity formation that Shurjo musters in the context of cultural diversity and transnationalism, is what allows her to claim multiple homes across borders.

As can be gathered from Shuma Raha's review of Nawaz's novel, Shurjo's agency to re-root can also be contributed to her eventual realisation "that the ghosts from the past need never be laid to rest; you just need to make your peace with them;" something not just her dad, but her grandmothers also could not fathom. Hence for them "grief and the horror of the past prove to be all-consuming — they can run, but can never hide from it" but for Shurjo, "the journey, though freighted with lingering darkness and trauma, ended in "redemption and light" (Raha, *The Hindu*).

Conclusion

Shurjo's Clan can be read as a novel of intergenerational shifting attachments to home. But the concept of home, whether as a personal physical abode, or a national psychological space, can be analyzed through multiple and often contradictory concepts like alienation, nostalgia, and sacrifice on the one hand, and reassurance, assimilation, and multiplicity/flexibility on the other. For the first generation of Bangladeshi women like Sahntori and Paru, who migrate from West to East Bengal during the Partition of India, ancestral home converts into a hell-hole due to communal violence. These women watch helplessly as those homes are looted and burnt down to the ground. They are forced to leave their homeland and seek refuge across the border. But once they try to relocate in their adopted homes, they feel alienated partly because of the resistance and stereotyping they face from the host society, and partly for personal inability to assimilate. Shantori perpetually dwells in nostalgia for her lost home, and fails to make a home in Dhaka despite many cultural overlaps with her original home in Murshidabad. Paru also suffers from alienation and what she calls "the saddest-song syndrome," as she keeps visiting the past painful memory of having to sacrifice her sons for the independence of her adopted home (Nawaz 2).

Migration of her only living son and his family to America further alienates her within the four walls of her Ganderia home.

For a while Bela, Paru's daughter-in-law and a second-generation Bangladeshi woman, is also caught in the limbo of her asymmetrical Old Town marital home, but eventually she manages to escape it, and successfully carve out a home in America by dint of her own willingness to assimilate. Inspired by her daughter Shurjo's relocation in Dhaka, she also dares to return to her Old Town home after almost seventeen years. Like her daughter, she instantly finds reassurance and old tempo of life where she had left it in and around her old home. Her swinging back to the habit of haggling with fish mongers, and tying strands of fragrant Jasmines around her hair are indicative of her power to assimilate, and accept multiple homes.

Though as a child in Dhaka when her allegiance to her country is doubted owing to her ghetto status, Shurjo equates herself with "the brittle wings of a stateless clan of migratory birds," once in America, like her mother, she is quick to adapt to her new home (Nawaz 18). Again, upon returning to Dhaka she is also quick to reclaim her birthplace despite the invisible Jell-O cube that it has become owing to environmental pollution. Thus, unlike Shantori and Paru, the older generation of Bangladeshi women, Bela and Shurjo, the second and third generation diasporan women do not yearn for a whole, undividedly insular home anywhere. They carry multiple homes in their hearts, and assimilate with ease in all. Their ability to secure tranquil homes for themselves in Bangladesh as well as America can be seen as a colossal achievement, especially when considered in the light of thousands of people in the novel who are either confined in perpetual "obhiman" or hurt-pride in their martyred homes across Dhaka, or the innumerable homeless Vietnam vets, lingering in the streets of LA in America.

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