

Introduction

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In the early spring of 2014 just when Mother Nature was waking up from an unusually long Upstate New York winter dormancy, an invitation to guest-edit a special issue of *Asiatic: IJUM Journal of English Language and Literature* on Asian American literature came from its Editor-in-Chief Dr. Mohammad A. Quayum. I was greatly honoured by the kind invitation as I know Dr. Quayum is an internationally renowned prolific writer, leading literary critic, passionate educator and an unsurpassed translator of major literary works by Bengali writers. For the next couple of weeks, I was musing over a suitable topic for the special issue, one that would not only reflect the vibrancy of Asian American literature but also the positionality of my life as an Asian American.

There is an interesting twist to how the theme of the special issue came about. I was fiddling with the GPS when I was discussing possible topics for the special issue with Dr. Shirley Lim on our way to Jersey City, New Jersey in the spring of 2014. When I presented the idea “home” to her, almost without hesitation, she quickly added “unstable homes.” So I am most thankful to Dr. Shirley Geok-lin Lim for sowing the seedling of this project, for being my GPS on the journey to discover, claim, reclaim, construct and reconstruct “homes,” real and imagined, in Asian American literature.

Castles and Miller suggest that our global reality is in “the age of migration.” People all over the world are on the move everywhere. Increased migration and unprecedented human and spatial mobility across international borders since the mid-20th century, the advent of globalisation, voluntary and involuntary migration and displacement, technological innovations such as the internet, Facebook, Skype, satellite TV, YouTube, and the accelerated speed of modern means of transportation have given the concept of “home” a renewed significance. A large percentage of the world’s population is now wedged in-between different socio-political, political and cultural domains, between homes, and between different allegiances. The narrator of Salman Rushdie’s novel *Shame* says: “We pretend that we are trees and speak of roots. Look under your feet. You will not find gnarled growths sprouting through the soles. Roots... are a conservative myth, designed to keep us in our places” (25). Stable concepts of home and belonging have become the exception rather than the norm.

While the experience of displacement and exile, and living in-between different political, cultural, linguistic, racial, socio-economic terrains can be

challenging, it can also be enriching at the same time. Schiller et al. refer to immigrants who connect/maintain the link between their native land and their host nations as “transmigrants.” They argue:

Transmigrants develop and maintain multiple relations – family, economic, social, organizational, religious, and political that span borders. Transmigrants take action, make decisions, and feel concerns, and develop identities within social networks that connect them to two or more societies simultaneously. (1-2)

“Narratives on ‘Unstable Homes’ in Asian American Literature” showcase the changing dynamics of transnational identities, the shifting nature of homes, and how transmigrants are “creative and mobile agents” who are engaged in the process of constructing homes that are “multidirectional, based on multiple centers of origin and destination” (Ma 11, 19),

Once Dr. Quayum and I finalised our decision on the theme of the special issue, we sent out a Call for Papers inviting contributions that engage in the explorations of the “Unstable home” in Asian American literature, with topics ranging from homing and unstable home, home (real and imagined), homelessness, virtual home, transnational voluntary and involuntary migration, exile and trauma, uprootedness and re-rooting, nostalgia and wishful memory, longing and belonging (voluntary and forced), diasporic spaces, inclusivity and exclusivity, visibility and invisibility, mobility and multiplicity, to forbidden home and unmade home in Asian American literature.

“Narratives of ‘Unstable Homes’” in Asian American literature consists of eight articles by scholars from across the globe, offering a panoramic view of a diverse range of homes depicted in Asian American literature. The sequencing of the articles in this collection is not based on any order of preference, but in a strict alphabetic order of the authors’ last names.

Sanghamitra Dalal’s article explores how the concept of diaspora has changed from a painful exile and homesickness to simultaneously negotiating multiple homes and identities in Meena Alexander’s *Fault Lines: A Memoir*. Dalal argues that Alexander’s writing is fuelled by her “ceaseless quest for stability – at home and in exile,” and believes her self-writing “induces a therapeutic wholeness amidst disjunction and displacement,” constructing and de-constructing diasporic homes.

Binbin Fu’s article investigates how Chinese American identity is constantly redefined and reconfigured by “new global and transnational reality” through an analysis of Annie Wang’s *The Republic of Desire*. He argues that Wang demystifies/rewrites the clichéd Orientalist discourse and demonstrates how China’s emergence as a new world player, as well as transnational economic and cultural exchanges, have shattered traditional notions of home and nation-state.

Su-ching Huang's article focuses on "the anxiety over patrilineal transmission," "male hysteria," "racial melancholy," longing and nostalgia for an idealised China in the works of Taiwanese immigrant writer Chang Shi-Kuo. She argues that Chang dwells in multiple physical, cultural, and emotional "homes"; his works also occupy and crisscross multiple "national borders and academic fields."

Wenxin Li historicises the importance of securing a safe and stable home in Asian American literature. He demonstrates how the idea of home is utilised as a trope to represent the "unstable dichotomy between affirming Americanness and perpetual foreignness" in John Okada's *No-No Boy*. His analysis of two Japanese American families/homes highlights the challenges confronted by Japanese Americans in the difficult process of assimilating into American society. He concludes that the "ultimate hope for Ichiro seems to lie in a home that's yet to build, a life with Emi in an America that simply accepts him for who he is without racialization."

Chingyen Mayer discusses how Shirley Lim problematises the fixity of home, nationhood, and personal and cultural identities. She posits that Lim not only simultaneously captures the trauma of displaced identities, the nostalgic yearning for her native land, the loneliness of an exile, but also celebrates the dynamic multiplicity of transnational identities and homelands in her *Among the White Moon Faces: An Asian American Memoir*.

Lekha Roy and Rajyashree Khushu-Lahiri explore how the culinary plays the role of cultural signifiers, and how homes are shattered and recreated in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*. They focus on the impact of the culinary on the construction of the female characters' sense of home, and how new homes are constructed out of "postethnic transnational diasporic space."

Umme Salma interrogates how home is perpetually denied to immigrants in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* due to issues of race, linguistic barriers, socio-economic class and the psychological trauma of physical and emotional displacement. She demonstrates how "diasporic people's desire to be re-rooted" can be displaced in colonial and postcolonial situations.

Chitra Thirivikraman Nair believes many South Asian diasporic writers want to recreate "Indias of the mind;" their works often attempt to capture their ambivalence about their host nation and their homeland. She engages in a postcolonial reading of Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* and *The Lowland*, and suggests that Lahiri's characters reflect the "mood and sensibility" of Indian immigrants and their "cross-cultural conflicts."

The special issue of *Asiatic* on "Narratives of 'unstable home' in Asian American Literature" has been in the process of germination for about a year now. The "homes" constructed in the Asian American literary texts included in this special issue are literally and metaphorically multifarious, reflecting the evolving cultural, socio-economic and political dynamics of global

contemporary life, and the shifting meaning of “homes” in Asian American literature.

The fruition of this special issue would not have been possible without the selfless generosity, saintly patience and kindness, and expert insight of my co-editor Dr. Mohammad A. Quayum to whom I owe my deepest gratitude. I am eternally grateful for his invitation to guest-edit this special issue. My thanks also go to the copy-editor of *Asiatic*, Dr. Susan Philip, who makes miracles happen on paper, and to all the contributors whose quick response to our Call for Papers convinced us of our project’s merits.

Finally, I want to thank my daughter Emily, my husband Frank, and my selfless parents for their unconditional love and support for my endeavour. I am forever grateful for the sacrifices they make so that I can pursue my dreams.

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