

THE SEARCH FOR HOME IN DIASPORIC LITERATURE: A STUDY OF *CROSSING FROM GUANGDONG* AND *OLD TONGUE* (Outlook)

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Migration is a particular type of mobility that involves crossing international borders and, consequently, is subject to the logic and control of the nation-state (Dahinden 2016). This often leads to loss of identity and displacement as individuals leave behind their cultural roots, language, and community. New Economics of Labor Migration (NELM) does not emphasize the role of the individual and instead suggests that migration decisions are made by larger units such as families and households (Stark – Bloom 1985; Stark – Lucas 1988). A sense of alienation can ensue, as these individuals are tasked with creating new worlds while they struggle to accommodate their old identity with their new one and vice versa. W. H. Auden's repetition of the phrase "*Yet there's no place for us*" in his poem *Refugee Blues* echoes the reality of displacement – a relentless reminder that without belonging, home remains out of reach, no matter where one goes. As migrants spend longer periods of time in these "new worlds", some of their traditions, cultures, and even language are gradually lost. This is particularly evident in the lines of *Old Tongue* "*I cried one day with the wrong sound in my mouth*" (Kay), and *Crossing from Guangdong* "*I picked at anaemic bamboo shoots, lotus root like the plastic nozzle of a watering can, over-sauced – not like you would make at home*" (Howe). Both texts examine the struggle of finding a home in the context of migration, where language loss, shifting familial ties, and emotional alienation contribute to the characters' fractured sense of belonging.

IDENTITY WITH LANGUAGE AND LAND

Both the aforementioned poems reveal an ambivalent relationship that language has with identity. In *Old Tongue*, Kay experiences an involuntary loss of her native language, which, upon realization, creates a sense of erasure from her original Scottish identity. It is evident here that the poet is reminiscing about her unintentional lack of awareness. She claims she would have "knocked" or "swallowed" back her accent to prevent her "vowels from stretching like bones". Cultural identity reshaped by language acquiescence is inherent despite the poet's feelings of noncompliance. Here, the speaker relies on language as a marker to create the perception of belonging.

Crossing from Guangdong contrasts with this notion by portraying how language can also serve as a barrier to cultural identity and belonging. The speaker in Howe's poem possesses a limited vocabulary, "Like a baby" illustrated by her counting coins in Cantonese. Mahmoud Darwish in his poetry¹ speaks about the ability of language to act as a portable home. He says: "Exile is not a geographic state, I carry it everywhere as I carry my homeland". If language shapes identity, losing

1 Mahmoud Darwish explores language as a defining aspect of identity and belonging. In *A Rhyme for the Odes*, he declares, "*I am my language*," emphasizing that home is not a physical space but exists within words. Similarly, in *We Travel Like All People*, he describes "*a country of words*" reinforcing the idea that memory and speech serve as a portable homeland. *Identity Card* further underscores this, as the speaker's roots are tied to ancestry rather than geography. These ideas parallel themes in *Old Tongue* and *Crossing from Guangdong*, where linguistic connection – or its loss – shapes one's sense of belonging.

it means losing a sense of home, disconnecting individuals from their cultural roots and sense of belonging. Memory, speech, and self-definition maintain that home evolves beyond physical borders.

KINSHIP AND EMOTIONAL ATTACHMENT AS HOME

We have seen that Sarah Howe's speaking in limited Cantonese, in *Crossing from Guangdong* creates a barrier between her and her ancestral home. Yet, family connections spark a vital link to identity. In another instance, this barrier is further perpetuated by her inability to meaningfully converse with "the old woman on the Datong bus", that she, quite contrastingly feels united with, referring to her as a potential "unknown grandmother" thus illuminating the ability of language to alienate but also connect, indicating how kinship can transcend language.

The transnational kinship theory (Baldassar – Merla 2013) suggests that home is maintained through emotional ties, not just physical presence. Home is often defined not by where one is but by whom one is with. Avtar Brah (Brah 1996) highlights how diasporic individuals create "homing" practices, where familiar cultural traditions and social networks reconstruct a sense of belonging in a foreign land.

Glück's poetry reinforces the argument that home is more than a physical place – it is a construct shaped by identity, relationships, and memory. In *Sunrise*, upon returning home, the speaker notes that her idea of what home entails has changed and is now unrecognizable: "*I went back, but I didn't stay. Everyone I cared about was gone, some dead, some disappeared into one of those places that don't exist.*" In *Identity Card*, Darwish emphasizes heritage and ancestry as unbreakable bonds, declaring, "*My roots were planted before the birth of time.*" This reflects how migrants remain connected to their homeland through family and cultural memory, even when physically distant. If home were just a place, migrants wouldn't feel nostalgic for places they left or alienated upon return, proving that home is shaped by identity rather than geography.

SHIFTING FAMILY TIES IN MIGRATION

Migration profoundly alters family relationships, reshaping roles, expectations, and emotional bonds. Physical distance does not sever kinship ties; rather, it forces individuals to adapt, sometimes strengthening connections and at other times creating a sense of loss and separation. Some relationships fade over time, while others take on new dimensions as family members adjust to life apart.

In *Crossing from Guangdong*, the protagonist experiences this transformation firsthand, leaving behind family and stepping into an unfamiliar world. The journey is not just about moving from one place to another – it is about navigating the emotional weight of distance. Without the immediate presence of family, the protagonist must redefine their sense of belonging, negotiating between the culture they left behind and the new environment they now inhabit. Yet, even in separation, family remains a crucial force, shaping their identity and connection to the past. Those left behind continue to play a role, whether through memory, communication, or the unspoken expectations that persist across borders.

This experience aligns with transnational kinship theories, particularly Baldassar-Merla's concept of affective circuits – the idea that family ties are not broken by migration but instead restructured through emotional, material, and communicative exchanges. Migrants remain connected to their families not just through memories but through remittances, digital conversations, and the

longing to return, even if only temporarily. In *Crossing from Guangdong*, the protagonist's sense of cultural dislocation underscores the importance of these ties as they attempt to bridge the gap between their past and present, between physical absence and emotional presence.

Ultimately, migration challenges traditional notions of family, proving that kinship is not solely defined by proximity. It is carried in conversations across time zones, in the unspoken duty to send money home, in the longing to see familiar faces again. Family bonds adapt, stretching across borders, proving that home is not just a place – it is the people we remain tied to, no matter the distance.

EMOTIONAL ALIENATION AND THE SEARCH FOR BELONGING

We can draw parallels between the two poems based on certain similarities. The characters in *Old Tongue* and *Crossing from Guangdong* feel unmoored, neither fully belonging to their birthplace nor their new environment. It is interesting to note that neither displays any mention of wealth or belongings but rather emphasizes relationships, memories, and lost connections. Much of Howe's poem features vivid Chinese imagery like mahjong tables, bamboo shoots, lotus roots, and much more. Material objects often carry emotional and cultural meaning, serving as semiotic representations of home, yet there is an absence of materialism; instead, references are made to everyday objects that symbolize cultural continuity.

This aligns with Darwish's poetry, where the speaker is in a constant state of longing and self-definition. In *Identity Card*, the phrase "Write down! I am an Arab" is a desperate claim to an identity that is threatened. In this poem, the speaker is physically in his homeland but is treated as an outsider, forced to assert his identity through language. Despite being on his own land, political oppression and displacement make him feel like a stranger. Home is more than just a location; alienation can ensue even during inhabitation. This proves that home is an evolving concept shaped by identity.

Home is more than a physical place; it is woven from language, memory, and the people who give it meaning. In *Old Tongue*, the speaker's loss of Scots represents more than the fading of words; it signals a deeper disconnection from their heritage. Similarly, in *Crossing from Guangdong*, standing in one's ancestral homeland does not guarantee belonging, as language barriers and cultural distance create a sense of estrangement. Mahmoud Darwish's *Identity Card* asserts that identity endures even in exile, while Louise Glück's haunting words "Everyone I cared about was gone, some dead, some disappeared into one of those places that don't exist" illustrate the painful reality that returning does not always restore what was lost. These works collectively reveal that for migrants and displaced individuals, home is not a fixed location but something carried within—preserved in the echoes of language, the bonds of family, and the memories that shape identity across time and distance.

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