

# Moving Homes, Moving Histories: Displacement and Refuge in Remi Weekes' *His House*

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## Abstract

The past few decades have witnessed a dramatic increase in the mass movements of people across borders owing to political turmoil(s) and uprising(s). Such displacements, especially towards continents like Europe and North America, have given rise to narrative and cultural productions introducing a crucial intersection of existing socio-cultural and historical debates around the larger rubric of refugee community and culture. One such instance of South Sudan, experiencing a recent civil unrest and administrative change, leading to forced migration, has been explored through the visual and visceral cinematic experience encapsulated by Remi Weekes' independent Netflix film 'His House.' The film tells an evocatively poignant story of two Sudanese refugees, seeking home and refuge, who are given asylum in Britain under various oppressive conditions. The film is, quite literally, perched on the binaries of culture, tradition and memory that go on to become the foundation of certain necessarily imaginative ideas of home and livelihood the couple builds across borders, away from their homeland.

My paper would discuss the desire for 'home' in an asylum seekers' life highlighting journeys and (re)production of narratives as an essential part of their trans-cultural lives. My arguments attempt to discuss the re-construction of (cross)cultural topologies and re-configuration of space/borders. Finally, my research seeks to incorporate larger debates on myth and memory-making by negotiating space and imagination within the corporeal reality of 'home.'

**Keywords:** migrants, displacement, refuge, histories, myth and memory making

Migratory movements have been quite a popular phenomenon throughout history; People have moved between countries and continents seeking better opportunities and livelihoods. Owing to such forms of cross-cultural dislocations, there has been a constant attempt to establish oneself across borders creating global spaces of existence which were effectively theorised in William Safran's (1991) 'characteristics of diaspora,' and James Clifford's (1997) exploration of the distinctive racial and cultural differences in the context of travel and migration<sup>1</sup> to name a few. However, alongside the idea of a fluid and coherent landscape that promotes cross-cultural linkages, issues of representation, gender, race, class and culture propelled considerable debates in diasporic theory, literature and culture. While Homi Bhabha's (2004) 'Third Space,' formed as a result of cultural hybridity and constant interaction between cultures focusses on the idea of forming a unifying body of diasporic identities, Avtar Brah's (1996) examination of historicised 'power structures' (gender, race, class), 'journeys' (socio-economic, political and cultural trajectories) and 'confluence of narratives' (memory and re-memory) infiltrate the composite structure of the term 'diaspora.' Therefore, broadly speaking, 'diaspora' locates itself within a network of grand narratives of nation, culture and ethnicity that are consistently reconfigured by metanarratives of race, gender, culture and identity creation.

Refugee communities, beyond the relentless struggle, violence, war and pregnant chaos that went into their formation, have recently begun to incorporate a space where they attempt to revolutionise diasporic multicultural exchange and global dialogue. The last few decades have witnessed a dramatic increase in the mass movements of people from various parts of the world like Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq and North Africa towards Europe. Migration and forced displacement have not only been consistent but have also been interspersed with certain political turmoil and uprising(s) that opened doors for international engagement and rescue missions across borders, consequently allowing a rapid change in the political situation of the world at large.

A crucial idea that emerges in the context of migratory movements is the isolated existence of home. In fact, Avtar Brah (1996) in *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities*, locates 'diaspora' as a concept that "places the discourse of 'home' and 'dispersion' in creative tension, inscribing a homing desire while simultaneously critiquing discourses of fixed origins" (Brah, 1996). As men and women sought a place to live

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<sup>1</sup> In his study on the formation of alternative cultures in the postcolonial condition Clifford argues that "travelers move about under strong cultural, political and economic compulsions [...] movements in specific colonial, neocolonial and postcolonial circuits, different diasporas, borderlands, exiles, detours and returns. [...] an experience including deportation, uprooting, marronage, transplantation, and revival has resulted in a range of interconnected black cultures: African American, Afro-Caribbean, British and South American." (1997)

in an entirely different nation, their hopes and expectations hinged on their ability to identify with the culture they were intermingling with— as individuals and as a community.

Additionally, it is the sense of loss associated with home which becomes an important trope explored both critically and creatively in films and visual media. For instance, in the introduction to *Refugees and Migrants in Contemporary Film, Art and Media*, Robert Burgoyne and Deniz Bayrakdar (2022) discuss the aspects of displacement and finding a home stating,

The phenomenon of mass displacement, however, also brings into view a striking new mode of human existence: as one writer says, the journey is now shaping a different class of human being, “people whose idea of ‘home’ now incorporates an open road” or, at the other extreme, people whose mobility is blocked, who have become [...] “permanently temporary” (Salopek, 2019). Viewed through a guardedly positive lens, the refugee and the migrant, as Giorgio Agamben (1998) further suggests, may represent “the paradigm of a new historical consciousness,” pointing towards a future beyond the binary order of the nation state, defined as it is by the concepts of citizenship and exclusion. (Burgoyne and Bayrakdar, 2022, p. 11)

Evidently, Burgoyne and Bayrakdar explore the impermanence of borders that movements and migrations promote which, while eschewing the frontiers of the nation-state, have given rise to dislocated and hyphenated identities. In fact, the contestations of home arise as deeply fissured diasporic identities oscillate between the cultural roots of the homeland and the acceptance of the host-land and film and media become the retainers and propagators of such voices. For instance, Dudley Andrew (2022), in the essay, “Moving People and Motion Pictures: Migration in Film and Other Media,” rightly argues, “migration is the most controversial international issue of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and therefore an opportunity as well as an inevitability for cinema everywhere” (Burgoyne and Bayrakdar, 2022). Dudley takes an example of the efflorescence of films and visual media after the mass migrations due to the partition of India and Pakistan and explores the indelible imprint of the burgeoning culture of India which was popularised through it. He asserts:

In hits such as *Shree 420* (Raj Kapoor, 1955), his character, an itinerant, impoverished dreamer, bumbles his way to Bombay, playing to the anxieties of displacement that come up in film after film. Even India’s parallel cinema, working in explicit opposition to Bombay entertainment, followed suit. Beginning in 1955 with *Pather Panchali*, Satyajit Ray’s *The Apu Trilogy* (1955–1959) chronicled the painful uprooting of the rural poor. (Dudley, 2022)

Further, commenting on the narratives of displacement, Wendy W. Walters (2005), in *At Home in Diaspora: Black International Writing*, argues that “displacement creates a distance that allows writers to encode critiques of their homelands, to construct new homelands, and to envision new communities” (p. 9), and diasporic identities are not only embedded in the narrative process but also, “made, unmade, contested, and reinforced.” (Walters, 2005) Apparently, narratives around the development of postcolonial societies, explored in visual media, art and literature, encompass the larger issues of displacement and the turbulent foundation of postcolonial nations and cultures in the aftermath of colonisation.

My paper discusses the desire for home in an asylum seeker’s life highlighting the visual and visceral cinematic experience encapsulated by the Netflix film *His House*. Remi Weekes’ (2020) film, *His House* is an evocatively poignant story of a family of two Sudanese refugees seeking asylum in Britain. On their journey to establish themselves as good citizens in the host-land, they are tormented within themselves by Nyagak, a fellow passenger child’s death, and inside their rundown living quarters by unexplained instances and visions of apparitions thriving inside the very walls of their accommodation. The film is quite literally perched on the binaries of culture, tradition and memory that go on to become the foundation of the imaginative ideas of home and its spatial recognitions that the couple tries to build across borders, away from their homeland.

The social and political unrest, sheer violence and the collective movement towards a more decisively democratic governance led to unrelenting migrations from South Sudan to Europe. Remi Weekes’ film is able to capture minute details of civil unrest in the society and bring out the intricacies of displacement and the dissipating roots of home. Weekes’ narrative develops through Bol, who envisions a home across borders, and Rial, who reconfigures and stabilises the idea of home-making. The film begins with quickened footsteps, a direct sign of movement that lays the foundations of displacement and migration in postcolonial societies and their tumultuous socio-political formations. Bol and Rial transgress borders on various modes of transport and their determination to forge a new beginning is consistent all through the disparity of their situation.

Writers and theorists have examined the very act of leaving the homeland, a sense of being uprooted from one’s place of birth, as a rather violent act in a metaphysical sense. For instance in *Step Across This Line*, Salman Rushdie (2010) argues that “migrant, severed from his roots, often transplanted into a new language, always obliged to learn the ways of the new community, is forced to face the great questions of change and adaptation.” This position of the migrant is embodied by Bol who looks forward to

the other side of his struggle as an asylum seeker and navigates a sense of 'rootedness' that consistently escapes him. Further, Bol, in Rushdie's words, is the 'running man,' who is as much beyond borders as he is within them: "The running man leaps into confinement" (Rushdie, 2010). David Farrier (2011), in his book *Postcolonial Asylum: Seeking Sanctuary Before The Law*, discusses the archetype of Rushdie's running man in association with the problematic figure of the asylum seeker who is constantly identified and valued in terms of his displacement within the postcolonial narrative and is "posited as introducing crisis into the territorial concepts of belonging" (Farrier, 2011).

Bol's desire to find a place in the land that he is struggling to refer to as home creates a heart-warming narrative of loss. For instance, in the scene where Rial asks for directions, she is established as a migrant across both national and linguistic borders as her dialect and accent is misunderstood and mocked by the citizens of the country. Importantly, while Rial constantly seeks homeliness and the familiarity of the people of colour who she asks for help reinstates the feeling of abandonment and loss, Bol sits at the corner of a pub and sings the Peter Crouch song in the need to feel included and accepted. In fact both Bol and Rial develop contrasting sentiments about the Peter Crouch song and, consequently, about the routes of their migration and the marks of their past. Bol attempts to move towards a new beginning and Rial explores a new birth in terms of harking back to the past and revisiting her family ties quite literally by making a necklace out of Nyagak's doll (Weekes, 2020, 10:30–11:00).

Spine-tingling or soul-stirring, Weekes highlights pain through the eerie and grotesque visualisations of crumbling walls, broken windows and rotten food. In addition to their living conditions, the necessity to appear 'good' in the eyes of the British hosts, the duty to remain an example of an assimilated foreigner, is a constant reminder of their position as an outsider. Foraging for an anchor through an alternative culture, both Bol and Rial 'settle,' excruciatingly, at the brink of acceptance. However, as Bol struggles to build a new identity and acquiesce his cultural loction, to the extent that he uses an advertisement of a clothing store as his idea of fitting in, Rial thrives in the contrasting journey of her homeland. Her relentless attempt to return to her land in imagined and fantasised narratives recognises her cultural affiliations and intensifies the fissures of her migrant identity.

Migrant histories and the process of their narration have been explored in personalised experiences of dispersal. Avtar Brah (1996) emphasizes the image of a 'journey away from home,'

Diasporas, in the sense of distinctive historical experiences, are often composite formations made up of many journeys to different parts of the globe, each with its own history, its own particularities. Each such diaspora is an interweaving of multiple travelling; a text of many distinctive perhaps even disparate narratives. [...] This means that their multiple journeys may configure into one journey via the confluence of narratives as it is lived and relived, produced, reproduced and transformed through individual as well as collective memory and re-memory. (Brah, 1996, p. 180)

This journey and the production of narratives become an essential part of the transcultural lives of migrants. Importantly, gender, race and culture are crucial intersections in the narrative process, production and preservation of culture. For instance, Trinh T. Minh-ha (1989), in *Women, Native Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism*, identifies three kinds of intersections—woman writer, writer of colour and woman of colour—which are often at odds with the actual process of writing. Minh-ha argues that “The original notion of ‘I’ as a real subject is counter-imposed by the relations of race and gender so as to alienate the ‘writer’ from her position of power within the act of writing itself” (Minh-ha, 1989). This figure of the woman writer is extensively explored in Rial’s character as she continues to inhabit a desire to establish herself across borders but is unable to excavate her own process of narration. Interestingly, over the years of belligerent tribal relations, Rial’s body becomes the scribe on which warring generations carved their identities. At a doctor’s appointment she narrates the historical influence of her ‘scars’—the ones she engraved on herself enveloping both the disputing tribes as a motif of her unbelonging and the ones that she got as a memory of Nyagak and her impending homelessness. Rial carries the stories of her homeland at heart, reaches out to the women left behind in her dreams and occasionally attends to a guilt that she harbours.

Inflictions of pain and the retention of harrowing memories through scars are crucial to Weekes’ storytelling and the dilapidated house stand as a testament to it. The wallpaper coming apart leaving the walls bare and Bol’s curiosity encroaching the marginalised and distressed voices that it holds within itself, led the house to disintegrate, so much so that, in a powerful scene, Bol was seen moving past it to confront his fears. While Bol is repulsed by the horrors of his past and fearful of the circumstances, Rial faces the truth of her identity by accepting the migrant identities in her abode. Therefore, the borders Rial crosses are beyond the realms of her reality and she is rooted to the idea of home through the cultural and traditional connections that keep calling out to her. Importantly, Rial holds on to the Dinka cultural symbol of an Apeth and associates her life with the close-knit circle of her home left behind.

An Apeth or Night Witch is a figure from the Dinka culture. Rial begins with a story that her mother used to tell, that of a good man who wanted his own house so desperately that he began to steal from other people. Eventually, he stole from an old man who turned out to be an Apeth. She asserts that “When he built his home the Apeth lived there too and would whisper spells and would never stop until the man repaid his debt” (Weekes, 2020, 34:18–34:31), believing that Nyagak’s death has given rise to an Apeth from the sea who asks for their debt to be repaid. Weekes creates the terror from within, the apeth, here played by a formidable creature that terrorises Bol and Rial, whispering to them through mouldy holes in the walls, conjuring visions of what they so desperately want to forget—bodies in the water, ropes dripping with seaweed. But there is a world beyond that they fear, too. Weekes recreates the United Kingdom’s hostility towards immigrants and locates it in the small neighbourhood where Bol and Rial discover and evade the stares, glares and hurtful comments like “go back to Africa” (Weekes, 2020, 27:29–27:33). Further, a woman in the window next door strokes her cat, her cheeks caved in so she looks like one of the tropes of the horrors beyond their house. While Rial hones and houses these narratives, Bol tries to burn Nyagak’s doll and other mundane things that they had brought along with them—believing that erasing their past is the only way to move forward. Tormented by spirits in his house he breaks the walls exclaiming “this is my house!” (Weekes, 2020, 50:08). The Apeth tells Bol, “No matter where you go, I will follow. You are mine now.” (Weekes, 2020, 1:02:02–1:02:15) and says that he must exchange his life for Nyagak.

Rial finds herself living within traumatic memories. When asked for her husband’s flesh, Rial adheres to the ways of the Dinka culture, which is an act of acceptance of herself through her culture. Rial, therefore, believes in the home she has left behind and her desire to keep the small aspects of her culture alive in the process of storytelling. In fact, Weekes naming the film *His House* presents an almost patriarchal transaction of the idea of home, the territorial limits of which were stabilised both by Bol’s masculine assertion and the Apeth’s demands. However, the manifestation and materialisation of home was strengthened by Rial’s belief and her interaction with all the migrants lost in the process of border-crossing. Additionally, the female figure that exists as an embodiment of Rial’s interaction is Nyagak’s doll, which becomes the paraphernalia that presents Rial with the inter-connections of an increasing yet disappearing communal harmony and cultural history.

Further, homes have often been associated with women and their bodies have been represented as the carriers of tradition and culture across generations. For instance, Rial, believing in the existence of the Apeth that inhabits the walls and haunt the rooms,

casts her into a forbearing image of her Dinka culture. The spirits in the walls manifest into Nyagak, wearing a grotesque face mask, more tangible, often wielding a knife and able to switch lights on and off. But the house is also filled with spirits of others who had drowned while trying to escape across the ocean, the ghosts of Nyagak's dead mother and the ghosts of the women who were massacred in the village in Sudan, and by the end, any number of other ghostly images from the couple's past.

Containing the story within the crude walls of the house elevates this dreadful experience. Ultimately, it is not the night witch on its own that torments Rial and Bol, but the unfairness of their fate, as well as the trauma they have to cope with. Importantly, what Rial and Bol's narrative attempts to defy is process of differentiating the 'other' that is often central to the countries in the West where migrants seek asylum in difficult conditions. In fact, when Rial speaks about the ghosts of her culture in front of the two British government officials that visit them, the inversion of the figure of the other is prominent. Rial lets them feel stronger and contrasts the image of the weakened outsider seeking aid. The walls of the house are held together by Rial's deep and inexplicable scars that grow terrified of Bol's denial and disregard for his cultural roots. The migrant bodies and voices that reach out to Rial are safe in her rootedness and challenge the defiance of Bol's search for a life in the United Kingdom. More than a space that provides Bol's and Rial's life with structure, stability and hope, home is a reminder of the traumatic events that made them what they are, that their identities are not essentially skin-deep but had been entrenched in their bodies as markers of their culture.

Although the emergence of the 'Third World'<sup>2</sup> happened under a constant process of defining and implementing power relations within the post-colonial context of literature, film and its further criticism, it also arose from a sense of connectivity and shared experience of colonial rule and paved its way as a constant counter-narrative to the previously established colonial rule. It has not only emerged as an all-encompassing field of research but also branched into various aspects of social, political and academic understanding of the centre<sup>3</sup> and the periphery<sup>4</sup>. Emanating as a term strictly used to denote a historical period in the 1970's, it has evolved into a constantly debated and contested

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<sup>2</sup> An umbrella term used to denote the lesser developed nations as compared to the 'West.' Generic term used to establish a binary.

<sup>3</sup> In this paper, the British Empire.

<sup>4</sup> Bill Ashcroft, Garreth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin's (2013) examination of the aspect of the 'Centre/ Margin' is explored as "one of the most contentious ideas in postcolonial discourse, and yet it is at the heart of any attempt at defining what occurred in the representation and relationship of peoples as a result of the colonial period. Colonialism could only exist at all by postulating that there existed a binary opposition into which the world was divided. The gradual establishment of an empire depended upon a stable hierarchical relationship in which the colonized existed as the other of the colonizing culture." (Ashcroft et al., 2013)



term that encapsulates broad ideas of 'first world,' 'third world,' 'imperialism,' 'decolonization' and the current aspect of 'neo-colonialism' within it (Lazarus, 2011). Additionally, postcolonial criticism raised issues of belonging, identity, and creative expression with renewed force, asking new questions about the location of production and consumption as well as the position from which interpretations and classifications arise—within the residual ideologies of colonialism and their impact on present society, and between art and its socio-political context (Lazarus, 2004). Sushieela Nasta (2000) quotes Karim Barber (1995) from an article on "African Language, Literature and Postcolonial Criticism":

The postcolonial criticism of 1980's and 90's has promoted a binarized, generalized model of the world. [...] This model has preceded an impoverished and distorted picture of 'the colonial experience' and the place of language in that experience. It has maintained a centre-periphery polarity which both exaggerates and simplifies the effects of the colonial imposition of European languages. It turns the colonizing countries into unchanging monoliths and the colonized subject into a homogenized token. (Nasta, 2000)

Finally, emerging from a space outside of mainstream dominant epistemologies, Bol and Rial's narratives develop as an exhaustive display of modern immigration. Displaced and dislocated from their origin story, their homeland, the couple is plunged into an unknown cross-cultural display of spatial recognition and resistance. Occupying and owning a space are two imperatively distinct forms of ownership that the couple experiences in their respective ways. While Bol tries to 'occupy' and develop a connection with men, different from him, bonding over football at a local recreational spot and continues to remain at the fringes of their dialogue, Rial attempts to reiterate and almost own the narrative of the past within herself. Challenging both, the rundown house that they seek asylum in seeks them in the most horrifying sense, dislocating them even further. Benaouda Lebdaï (2015) argues that the process of displacement accompanies with it a traumatic and horrific experience:

Migrant writers of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century are all haunted by their past, the crossings of frontiers, revealing here again a trauma, as defined by the critic Cathy Caruth, who explains how such signs become significant in the sense that "there is a response, sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming event or events, which takes the form of repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts, or behaviours stemming from the event along with numbing that may have begun during or after the experience, and possibly also increased arousal (and avoidance) to stimuli recalling the events." (p. 152)

In Remi Weekes' (2020) *His House* this trauma takes up the physical shape of the house that Bol and Rial reside in. Their behaviours, responses and fears arise from the unknown capability of their past to dismantle the 'future' that they wish for themselves. The film takes its viewers on a journey through the postcolonial migrant mind and its disrupted sense of space and identity. However, as a counter-narrative to colonial precursors of the nation-state that ameliorated by marking up spaces with borders, dismantling national and cultural identity in colonised lands, and promoting a stirring sense of nationalism based on the stronger assertions of national borders, Weekes' (2020) *His House* reclaims the migrant identity on the host's national space. The storytelling rehashes the threads connecting both mythic and cultural traditions and modern immigrant affiliations, so much so that the home as a space for refuge oscillates between the two creating an eerie trans-locational experience of loss. Postcolonial migrant artists and visionaries continue to study such critical forms of spatial (dis)locations and revive a sense of community across cultures, races, genders and nations.

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