

International Journal of English Language & Translation Studies

ISSN: 2308-5460



A Sense of "Unhomeliness" in Anton Chekhov's *Kashtanka's* Vacillation between Two Worlds

[PP: 135-142]

Faeze Rezazade

Department of English Literature
Faculty of Humanities, Vali-e-Asr University
Rafsanjan, Kerman, **Iran**

Esmail Zohdi

Department of English Literature
Faculty of Humanities, Vali-e-Asr University
Rafsanjan, Kerman, **Iran**

Mohammad Hussein Oroskhan

Department of English Literature
Faculty of Humanities, Vali-e-Asr University
Rafsanjan, Kerman, **Iran**

ABSTRACT

Oscillation between two geographical places, the native or ancestral land and a foreign land, causes the feeling of having been displaced for that person. The concept of "home" plays a crucial function in everyone's lives and also gives a sense of one's place in the world. Therefore, "Unhomeliness" emerges when one lives in a place which is not his/her real home. This concept is investigated by Homi K. Bhabha and other theorists of post colonialism as "unhomeliness". In Anton Chekhov's *Kashtanka*, a short story written in 1887, *Kashtanka* as the protagonist is an "unhomed" dog, who has been lost and forced to live in an stranger's house. This story can be read as the manifestation of the concept of "unhomeliness" and lack of intimacy and warmth in the new place despite of its good life conditions. The protagonist's imaginations and dreams of her homeland provoke a sense of insecurity and not belonging to the new land. In this research, it is tried to explain the process of identity-making in Chekhov's *Kashtanka* through Bhabha's theories of mimicry, hybridity, and "third space".

Keywords: Unhomeliness, diaspora, homeland, identity, Anton Chekhov's *Kashtanka*

ARTICLE INFO

The paper received on: **22/08/2015**, Reviewed on: **20/09/2015**, Accepted after revisions on: **19/10/2015**

Suggested citation:

Rezazade, F., Zohdi, E. & Oroskhan, M. H. (2015). A Sense of "Unhomeliness" in Anton Chekhov's *Kashtanka's* Vacillation between Two Worlds. *International Journal of English Language & Translation Studies*. 3(3), 135-142. Retrieved from <http://www.eltsjournal.org>



1. Introduction

1.1 The concept of unhomeliness in Post-colonial theory

Postcolonial criticism became a major force in literary studies when colonial regimes began to collapse after World War II. It is a type of cultural criticism which deals with the analysis of literary texts produced in countries and cultures that have come under the control of European colonial powers at some point in their history. Since the end of the Second World War, the former colonizing nations have experienced the arrival of many migrants from once-colonized countries. Migrants were groups of people who due to the several reasons were forced to leave their countries and settle in the others’.

In British, colonial peoples were specifically recruited by the Government to cope with labor shortages, such as the drive after the Second World War to employ Caribbean’s in public services like health and transport. Others arrived to study, or to escape political and economic difficulties in their native lands. Some followed family members who migrated before them (McLeod, 2000, p. 206).

Diasporas are those dispersed populations who have left their homelands deliberately or by force and have settled in foreign countries. Robin Cohen in his book *Global Diasporas: An Introduction* (1997) describes Diasporas as communities of people living together in one country who “acknowledge that ‘the old country’- a notion often buried deep in language, religion, custom or folklore-always has some claim on their loyalty and emotions” (p. 4). Indeed, these peoples are viewed as the groups of migrants who do not belong to the new lands and a sense of alienation has encompassed them in the foreign soil.

Consequently, a feeling of “unhomeliness” is evoked among the diasporic communities which differ from the feeling of not having a place to live in.

Therefore, the concept of “home” plays a crucial function in every one’s lives and also gives a sense of our place in the world. Home as an indigenous space is schemed as a place of warmth and security where our identity and belongingness comes from. According to Avtar Brah:

On the one hand, ‘home’ is a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination. In this sense it is a place of no return, even if it is possible to visit the geographical territory that is seen as the place of ‘origin’. On the other hand, home is also a lived experience of a locality. Its sounds and smells, its heat and dust, balmy summer evenings, or the excitement of the first snowfall, shivering winter evenings, somber grey skies in the middle of the day... all this, as mediated by the historically specific everyday of social relations (1996, p. 192).

As a result, “unhomeliness” emerges when one lives in a place which is not his/her real home. “Unhomeliness”, investigated by Homi K. Bhabha and other postcolonial theorists, is the sense of displacement and oscillation between two geographical places when people are not in their real homes. It can be explicated that “‘home’ as an idea stands for shelter, stability, security and comfort. To be ‘at home’ is to occupy a location where we are welcome, where we can be with people very much like ourselves” (McLeod, 2000, p. 210). Thus, having been ghettoized and excluded from feeling of belonging to the new countries or the host lands, Diasporas or migrants feel “unhomed” and wish to return to their native homelands. Home for these populations can be defined as “a space of privacy and intimacy, intrinsically associated with family and loved ones, with warmth, affection, security, freedom and assured belonging” (Roy, 2014, p. 99). The sense of not belonging to the new lands is examined to provoke the feeling of insecurity and anxiety there. Diasporas or

people living in foreign countries, though living at the present time in foreign lands, think about their native lands in the past. "This disjunction between past and present, between here and there, makes 'home' seem far-removed in time and space, available for return only through an act of the imagination" (McLeod, 2000, p. 211). Imagination, therefore, is seemed to be an important element for unhomed individuals. Since the Diasporas are not able to precisely reclaim the past things, they construct a mental home for themselves based on some scraps and fragments of the past remained in their memories. These scraps and patches, therefore, whether present in front of them or imagined in their memories, remind the migrants of their real and original identities. Homi K. Bhabha, himself a migrant from Bombay to Britain who now lives in America, in his book *The Location of Culture* (1994) speaks about the 'border lives' and the hybrid identities of those who live at the in-between. "For Bhabha, the border is the place where the conventional patterns of thought are disturbed by the possibility of crossing. It is argued that imaginative border crossings are as much a consequence of migration as the physical crossing of borders" (McLeod, 2000, p.217). Thus, by imagination and bringing the past to the present, or as Bhabha says by 'restaging the past', migrants live in a 'third space' which does not belong nor to the past neither to the present. By living in this space, which reminds them of their origin, migrants or Diasporas try to reduce their sense of melancholy. On the other hand, hybrid identity which is examined to be the consequence of catching between two different cultures, gives a feeling of frustration, anger, and isolation to the migrant peoples and therefore pulls them back to their countries, or at least makes them wish to return to their real homelands and identities.

1.2 Anton Chekhov's *Kashtanka*

Anton Chekhov's short story *Kashtanka*, written in 1887, can be read as the manifestation of the concept of "unhomeliness" and lack of intimacy and warmth in the new place despite its good life conditions. Chekhov has written many short stories among which *Kashtanka* is an allegorical story in which he has portrayed the life of the desperate modern man in the form of a dog.

Anton Pavlovitch Chekhov (1860- 1904) was born into a family whose father was a slave. Nevertheless, the son of this slave occupied a literary position whose prose and drama opened a way of new thinking about the art of short story and drama. He was a sensitive and talented Russian intellectual at the end of the nineteenth century and is considered to be among the greatest short story writers of all time. He was educated as a doctor and he practiced medicine for a good part of his life. Therefore, one can notice detached and observant eyes of a medical examiner in his writings. Chekhov used humor, in hundreds of his short stories and in several of his plays, as a way of coping with the unpleasantness that he saw around him. Meanwhile, from 1886 he started to write more serious stories. Therefore, he wrote *Kashtanka* in 1887, when Russia was in its reformation time.

Chekhov lived during a silver age of Russian literature which coincided with the reign of Alexander II and his son Alexander III, and his stories and plays reveal the social and political issues of that era, from Reformation time to the Revolution. The reformation time is the latter part of the 19th century, when Russia was involved in its modernization time and cultural and economic improvement. Throughout these years, until the Revolution of 1905- 1917, the society of Russia was divided between the aspirations for the landowning past and



credence to the social revolutions' growth. These times of growth and stagnation formed the heart of Chekhov's stories. Likewise, the main character of Chekhov's *Kashtanka* is often torn between nostalgia for the past and the struggle for modernity. Chekhov's *Kashtanka* has been written to show the disappointment of migrant intellectuals, who left their country to the western world and their decision to come back and explore their own arts.

Kashtanka is the story of a mongrel dog that belongs to a drunken carpenter but has been lost and forced to live in an estranger's house. The stranger is an animal trainer who works for a circus. He feeds *Kashtanka* well, renames her "Auntie", and treats her kindly until she becomes a well-groomed dog. The estranger, who had rescued *Kashtanka* for the purpose that she "will be of use for something" (Chekhov, 1887, p. 3), decides to train her for animal act in the circus. On the first day of *Kashtanka*'s debut in the circus, her master (the carpenter) sees her and calls her. As soon as *Kashtanka* notices her master she leaves everything and happily goes to the carpenter and his son. She follows behind them and tries to fade away all her memories when living in the estranger's house.

Kashtanka as an unhomed dog encounters with the feeling of insecurity in the estranger's house even though he knows the estranger is more kind to her than her master and the life conditions are good there in the new house. Here, being "unhomed" does not mean being homeless. To be unhomed, as Lois Tyson states in *Critical Theory Today*, "is to feel not at home even in one's own home because you are not at home in yourself; that is, your cultural identity crisis has made you a psychological refugee" (2006, p. 421). Although the estranger's house is not *Kashtanka*'s home, she is not a homeless dog. But the feeling of being

unhomed and not belonging to the new place gives her a sense of isolation and depression and makes her imagine her real home all the days. Even in her dreams the trace of melancholy and longing for her real home and root could be seen obviously. Through this loyal animal, Chekhov has beautifully expressed the situations of migrants in foreign lands who are faithful to their homelands but have been forced to leave their countries. As a result, in this article, it is tried to explore unhomey moments of *Kashtanka*'s protagonist as a dislocated individual and her hybrid identity in those moments.

2. The Concept of "home" in Chekhov's *Kashtanka*

One of the concepts of postcolonialism which has been introduced by Bhabha is "hybridity". As Bhabha says, "[The] importance of hybridity is not to be able to trace two original moments from which the third emerges, rather hybridity to me is the 'third space' which enables other positions to emerge" (Bhabha, 1991, p. 211). It can be argued that hybridity is the result of catching between two different spaces and constructing a "third space" full of contradictory and ambivalence. The relation between diaspora and the native place of origin is represented by equivocation and psychological uneasiness because the diasporic subject is situated between two different homes. Moreover, this ambivalence toward the concept of home is continued until "a fundamental ambivalence is embedded in the term diaspora: a dual ontology in which the diasporic subject is seen to look in two directions—towards a historical cultural identity on one hand, and the society of relocation on the other" (Ashcroft et al, 1995, p. 425). Thus, unhomed people living in another lands are encountered hybrid identities because they unconsciously imitate

those lands' cultures and accordingly are caught between two different cultures.

Pursuant to the hybrid identity, a strange feeling of uneasiness evokes which pull the Diasporas back to their homes or at least make them imagine their homes. Bhabha has described this state of one's feeling as the "unhomely" moment. He has extensively pondered upon this notion and explicated the terror affiliated with the loss of the one's recognizable self. He believes that "The unhomely moment creeps up on you stealthily as your own shadow and suddenly you find yourself taking the measure of your dwelling in a state of 'incredulous terror'" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 15). This traumatic cultural experience which one resides within oneself is referred to by Bhabha as "unhomeliness" (Bhabha, 1994).

Anton Chekhov in *Kashtanka* depicts the unhomely moments of an unhomed dog, who has been lost in the street, and her inevitable sojourn in an estranger's house. He beautifully portrays the protagonist's sense of melancholy as a diasporic subject and her wistful longings for her real home. In fact, Chekhov in this allegorical story tries to show the imbroglia situations of migrants trapped in diaspora deliberately or by force and their desire to return to their real origins and homes.

Kashtanka begins with the description of the moments of a lost dog's consternation and her wandering in the street in search of her master. From the first lines of the story, the unhomely moments initiate and the dog, whose name is "Kashtanka", experiences a sense of unhomeliness. The story happens in a snowy and cold weather to foreshadow the gloomy atmosphere of diasporic society. As it gets quite dark, Kashtanka huddles up in an entrance and feels hungry. When he is exhausted and helpless, he is forced to go along with an estranger who treats her graciously and takes her to his house.

Although the estranger gives her a great meal and speaks to her softly, Kashtanka begins to compare her master's home and the estranger's house in her mind:

The stranger's surroundings were poor and ugly; besides the easy-chairs, the sofa, the lamps and the rugs, there was nothing, and the room seemed empty. At the carpenter's the whole place was stuffed full of things: he had a table, a bench, a heap of shavings, planes, chisels, saws, a cage with a goldfinch, a basin. . . . The stranger's room smelt of nothing, while there was always a thick fog in the carpenter's room, and a glorious smell of glue, varnish, and shavings (Chekhov, 1887, p. 3).

Moreover, this kind of comparing poses a difficult dilemma for Kashtanka as she rapidly begins to think of the kindness of the estranger and the carpenter's misbehavior toward her.

...the stranger had one great superiority -- he gave her a great deal to eat and, to do him full justice, when Kashtanka sat facing the table and looking wistfully at him, he did not once hit or kick her, and did not once shout: "Go away, damned brute!" (Chekhov, 1887, p. 3).

As the diasporic subject is torn-between two different homes, a sense of traumatic ambivalence embraces her. Therefore, regardless of having been settled in a home, the diasporic person looks for her real home. It can be claimed that "a constant apprehension arises between where you are from and where you are at which leads the diasporic subjects to form their own space" (Elmo Raj, 2014, p. 88). The diasporic subject, consequently, is caught between two different choices, the host land and the homeland. Thus, Kashtanka begins to compare her two homes to choose which one is better. "...she wagged her tail and considered the question, whether it was better at the stranger's or at the carpenter's" (Chekhov, 1887, p.3).

Home can be considered as a warm place for relationship, "a place of relationships,



bonding and a pool of collective memories that assume identity and natively formulating a longing when dispersed” (Elmo Raj, 2014, p. 90). Likewise, in the story, it is described that Kashtanka is sit in a “snug little place under the bench” (Chekhov, 1887, p. 4) at the carpenter’s home. Thus, Diasporas who are far from their homes feel homesick and try to evoke their origins. Indeed, their minds are always preoccupied with the lovable or even somehow painful memories of the past. It is the unhomely memory of home, or the remembrance of loss that is further disrupted by strange narrations of recent events. “It signifies that one can forget all, but not the indigenous roots and real belonging” (Bhat and Mir, 2014, p. 124). Kashtanka in her first night staying in the new house, notwithstanding the sense of exhaustion and weariness, remembers Luka Alexandritch and Fedyushka, her master and his son, and her good and bad times living with them. Even the dreadful experiences of Fedyushka’s mischief toward her were dolorous for Kashtanka and made her homesick.

Fedyushka would tie a piece of meat to a thread and give it to Kashtanka, and then, when she had swallowed it he would, with a loud laugh, pull it back again from her stomach, and the more lurid were her memories the more loudly and miserably Kashtanka whined (Chekhov, 1887, p. 4).

Kashtanka’s “unhomeliness” can be seen through the above lines. As Bhabha says in his *The World and The Home*, “...to be unhomed is not to be homeless, nor can 'unhomely' be easily accommodated in the familiar division of social life into private and the public spheres... in the stirrings of unhomely, another world becomes visible” (Bhabha, 1997, p. 141). This “another world” is what Bhabha calls it the “third space”. As the time goes, a constant apprehension is grown between where she is from and where

she is at which causes the diasporic subject (‘Kashtanka’) to form her own space. Kashtanka like a pendulum vacillates between two worlds, her new house and her real home, and through the act of imagination she makes a new world for herself which reminds her of the real identity of herself, though her new master has given her a new identity and name, Auntie. In fact, she neither lives in the present nor in the past. She feels not belonging to the new place and does not feel safe there. When Ivan Ivanitch, a gander in the stranger’s house, dies, “It seemed to Auntie that the same thing would happen to her, that is, that she too, there was no knowing why, would close her eyes, stretch out her paws, open her mouth, and everyone would look at her with horror” (Chekhov, 1887, p. 13).

As it has been debated before and through the words of James Clifford, one of the important features of diasporic experience is “a strong attachment to and desire for literal return to a well-preserved homeland” (Clifford, 1994, p. 305). Clearly, when you experience a loss of home, it compels you to search for a location where the self could belong, a secure socio-political, cultural and intellectual space one could describe it as home. But there is not always possible to visit the geographical territory of homeland. Here imaginative border-crossings make the diasporic individuals romanticize their homelands and alleviate their pains of homesickness. Kashtanka also begins to imagine and romanticize her past living in the carpenter’s house, which is regarded as her real home, through some scraps and fragments which are remained in her memory. “...A table, a bench, a heap of shavings, planes, chisels, saws, a cage with a goldfinch, a basin...” (Chekhov, 1887, p. 3) and also the smell of “glue, shavings, and varnish” (Chekhov, 1887, p. 9) were those

odds and scraps which reminded Kashtanka of her home. Reminiscence of the native soil, indeed, is considered to be evocative of the lost home because the new land is not easy to cope up with. As William Safran says, the Diasporas “retain a collective memory, vision, or myth about their original homeland – its physical location, history, and achievements” (Safran, 1991, p. 83).

The word which can come with “unhomeliness” is “loneliness”. People in diaspora despite of having home are “unhomed” and despite of being with others are “alone”. This loneliness and feeling of not belonging to the new place and not having the sense of warmth, security, and serenity among the foreign land’s population, will make the diasporic subjects soak themselves into the world of imagination and memories of their past life in order to be rescued from the melancholy which has encompassed them. “Left alone, Auntie lay down on her little mattress and began to feel sad” (Chekhov, 1887, p. 9) and let her imagination embrace her.

...then vague figures, half dogs, half human beings, with countenances attractive, pleasant, but incomprehensible, would appear in her imagination; when they came Auntie wagged her tail, and it seemed to her that she had somewhere, at some time, seen them and loved them. (Chekhov, 1887, p. 9).

People living in diaspora cannot acknowledge the new lands as their perpetual homes, even though the life conditions are good there. It is obvious that home is where one’s heart is. In this case, they feel unhomed and want to return to their origins. As Kashtanka left everything and went to her real master as soon as she heard his voice calling her, and then she accounted all her life experience in the stranger’s house as an “oppressive dream” (Chekhov, 1887, p. 18).

3. Conclusion

Unhomeliness and hybridity are two concepts of postcolonial studies which are

introduced and coined by Bhabha and developed by other postcolonial critics. Diasporas or migrants in the foreign lands are involved in these two concepts for they are unhomed and away from their origins. Therefore, a sense of insecurity and not belonging to the alien culture envelopes them and leaves them alone with a hybrid identity in diaspora. Anton Chekhov, who is among the best short story writers, lived during the Reformation and Revolution periods in Russia. In those days, Russia was in a terrible time and most of its people, especially peasants and intellectuals, were unsatisfied and disappointed about the social and political situations of Russia. Thus, the difficult situation of Russia forced some of the intellectuals to immigrate to foreign lands. Chekhov has elegantly portrayed the unhomely moments of migrants in his *Kashtanka* through the character of a dog with the same name. Kashtanka as a diasporic subject vacillates between her original homeland and her new house like a pendulum and consequently makes a world in her imagination which reminds her of her origin. As a result, the concept of home, which is defined by warmth and security, is never achievable for her. And at the end of the story, she cannot tolerate this situation anymore and grasps the opportunity of going back to her original home when her name is called by the master and his son. Hence, in this study, our focus was to discover the consequent result of vacillating between two worlds, the original homeland and the new home, and the resultant feelings of "unhomeliness" caused in such a bewildering and confusing situation.

About the Authors

Faeze Rezazade is currently a M.A student of English literature in Vali-e-Asr University. She got her B.A in English Literature from Vali-e-Asr University.



Esmail Zohdi got his PhD from Calcutta University in 2000. He is a faculty member of Vali-e-Asr University since 2000. He is an assistant professor of English Literature majoring in political fiction. Moreover, he has been a member of Psyart Foundation from 2008 until now. He has translated two books from English to Persian, one related to Psyart Foundation and one related to writing academic papers. He has also published a good number of articles on a variety of subjects such as poetry, novel and comparative literature. He is presently more involved in a number of projects concerning film studies as well as comparative literature.

Mohammad Hussein Oroskhan is currently a M.A student of English literature in Vali-e-Asr University. He got his B.A in English Literature from Yazd University. His main field is film studies and comparative literature. Until now, he has written several articles on these subjects.

References:

Ashcroft, Bill et al. Ed. (1995). "The Post colonial studies reader". London: Routledge. Print.

Bhabha, Homi K. (1991). "The Third Space": Interview with Homi K. Bhabha. Interview by Jonathan Rutherford. Identity: Community, Culture, Difference. London: Lawrence & Wishart. Print.

Bhabha, Homi. K. (1994). "The Location of Culture". London and New York: Routledge.

Bhabha, Homi K. (1997). "The World and the Home". In A. McClintock, A. Mufti & E. Shohat

(Eds), *Dangerous Liaisons: Gencler: Ilation, & postcolonial perspectives*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Bhat, Altaf Ahmad, and Mir, Shabir Ahmad. (2014). "An Appraisal of 'home' as a Psychological space in *Interpreter of Maladies*". Lapis Lazuli: An International Literary Journal (LLILJ).

Brah, Avtar. (1996). "Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities". Oxford. Routledge. Print.

Chekhov, Anton. (1887). "Kashtanka". http://www.online-literature.com/anton_chekhov/1245/

Clifford, James. (1994). "Further Inflections: Toward Ethnographies of the Future." Cultural Anthropology 9. Print.

Cohen, Robin. (1997). "Global Diasporas: An Introduction". UCL Press.

Elmo raj, P. Prayer. (2014). "The Concept of Home in Diaspora". Lapis Lazuli: An International Literary Journal (LLILJ). P. 88- 90.

McLeod, John. (2000). "Beginning Postcolonialism". Manchester University Press. P. 206- 217.

Roy, Basudhara. (2014). "Blending Worlds: Mapping Home and Belonging in the Short Fiction of Chitta Banerjee Divakaruni". Lapis Lazuli: An International Literary Journal (LLILJ).

Safran, William. (1991). "Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return". *Diaspora* 1.1. Print.

Tyson, Lois. (2006). "Critical Theory Today: A User Friendly Guide". New York: Routledge.