

Homesick or Sick of Home? Unhomeliness and Unhoming in Postmigrant Denmark

Anna Meera Gaonkar:

Feeling Sick of Home? A Cultural Study of Postmigrant Homesickness in Contemporary Denmark

University of Copenhagen, 2022, PhD Dissertation.

By Laura Luise Schultz

Associate Professor, Dept. of Arts and Cultural Studies, University of Copenhagen,
laura@hum.ku.dk

With her dissertation, *Feeling Sick of Home? A Cultural Study of Postmigrant Homesickness in Contemporary Denmark* (2022), Anna Meera Gaonkar offers a timely and convincing study of what she calls “postmigrant homesickness” in postmillennial Denmark. She puts the spotlight on migrantised Danes who were born or grew up in Denmark but are affectively migrantised by socio-political discourse on migration and integration.

Gaonkar extends the notion of homesickness to cover both feeling sick *for* home and sick *of* home, as well as the inverted ‘anti-immigration’ equivalent of “grief-like reactions to the loss of ‘the good old days’ before so-called mass immigration” (p. 21). She convincingly argues that homesickness should not be posited simply as a “universal migrant malady” (p. 23). Rather, a cultural analysis of homesickness needs to engage with oppressive racialised dynamics.

Gaonkar elaborates the ways in which homesickness can be productively related to various notions and forms of migration and mobility, and how the concept of ‘home’ (or the lack thereof; or

indeed, the eviction from it) may serve as an interpretive prism through which we are able to perceive the different emotions and affective dimensions elicited by lived experiences of migration, as well as by reifying and racist discourses on migrants. She explains that cultural and political expressions of homesickness are best understood in relation to postmigrant society if they are read a) as affect; b) in relation to imagined national(ist) communities; and c) as embodied, and as a force that categorises, excludes, and evicts certain bodies and not others. ‘Affect’ here gestures towards the cultural politics of emotions as uncovered in the phenomenological work of Sara Ahmed, because Gaonkar is firmly invested in the politics of who gets to be a “homebody” – someone who, via their racialisation as white, is automatically considered to belong to the realm of the familiar within the Danish nation state.

The use of the term “postmigrant” disrupts the permanent problematisation of the figure of the migrant and the embodied effects of this problematisation, which Gaonkar defines as a

form of racialised migrancy, where visible otherness contributes to a continued experience of not being recognised simply as a citizen. These deliberations lead her to suggest an *inverted* dimension of homesickness: homesickness as feeling sick of home, as well as an *embodied* dimension of homesickness: homesickness as an effect of racialisation.

She sums up her approach thus: “Combining an affective-oriented and postmigrant perspective, I submit that postmigrant society is a highly intense site of affective circulation in which the imaginary of the national home is partly configured through the affective management of migration and migrants” (p. 28). The implications of this condition are unfolded in the analytical part of the thesis, where Gaonkar identifies three dimensions of homesickness in postmigrant Denmark.

The chapter on “Affective inheritances of migration” discusses two films: Anita Beikpour’s short film *Walk with Me* (2017) and the documentary *Far from Home* (2014) by Nitesh Anjaan. Both films centre on intergenerational dynamics between migrated grandparents and grandchildren, who have been born in Denmark. Gaonkar refers to the concepts of ‘postmemory’ and ‘countermemory’ to describe the inherited nature or the affective transferal of memories of migration. In contrast to the public obsession with generational conflict, the two films perform “imaginative memory work” as a form of “‘care work’ on behalf of their family bodies” (p. 86).

The chapter on “Feelings of unhomeliness” deals with non-white postmigrant voices, all of them Danish-born and Danish citizens, who are excluded from their Danish “home” by dominant white society, which at the same time accuses this same generation of failing to enter the Danish mainstream. This double bind leads to a particular relationship to home: a being sick not *for* a desired home, but a being sick *of* it and revolting against it. The postcolonial concept of ‘the unhomely’ leads Gaonkar to distinguish between ‘unhomeliness’ and ‘homelessness’. There is a specific generational unhomeliness, expressed in hostile statements like “go home”, or in the recurring question “where do you come from” in everyday encounters, that

continuously challenges whether racialised members of society can ever be truly Danish. These feelings are performatively explored as being caught between two lovers in Babak Vakili’s podcast *Generationen* (2021), in which he also contests the constant demand to prove one’s loyalty to the country. Malene Choi Jensen’s feature film *The Return* (2018) explores the global adoption industry, the question of kinship, and the failure of any memory of migration for Danes who have been adopted from South Korea as children and are now trying, with varying degrees of success, to explore this heritage in Seoul. Finally, Mikas Lang’s poetry collection *Melanin* (2021) creates Black kinship via intertextual references to Black culture.

The chapter “Affective evictions” discusses how Danish mainstream society in effect evicts – both discursively and in reality – non-Western populations from their Danish “home”. Gaonkar argues that such evictions are rooted in, and in part explained by, a common affect among majority white Danes, a sense and feeling of having lost the true, real, and good old homogenous Denmark. Simply stated, non-Western Danes are racialised, excluded, and evicted in a political and affective effort to reclaim and reconstruct a Denmark, in which white Danes can feel at home. Gaonkar analyses the Security Initiative and the Parallel Society Law as discussed in parliament. She demonstrates how in these discourses the figure of the “insecurity-creating immigrant boy” emerges. Here a nativist mode of homesickness, which is comparable to what Paul Gilroy describes as postcolonial melancholia in the British context, emerges as the longing for a national past and future with less migration from ‘outside Europe.’ Consequently, migrants and their children are, as Gaonkar compellingly terms it, “affectively evicted.” This is traced with reference to representations of the young male migrant and actual legislation on evictions from social housing. Returning to Vakili’s podcast, Gaonkar shows how he uses his art in this hostile climate “to insist on his right to express sickening feelings for home without being threatened with expulsion” (p. 151).

Finally, Gaonkar concludes that the notion of homesickness – and hence also of its derivatives,

for instance, home, unhomeliness, unhoming – offers a fundamental way of understanding how identities and collectives are categorised, grouped, managed, included, and excluded in contemporary Denmark.

Gaonkar's thesis is a lucid identification and examination of affective, emotional, cultural, and ideological mechanisms underlying processes of social, cultural, and political exclusion and segregation. Her conceptual and analytical framework enables her to demonstrate how families with a history of migration relate to "home"; and how ethnic and racial exclusions prevail in postmigrant societies, to the effect that non-white people are prevented from finding a "home" in their country of birth and citizenship.

The dissertation shows how the mechanisms of exclusion are both questioned and consolidated in aesthetic media, cultural discourse, and political policy. The thesis is remarkably coherent, as Gaonkar manages to connect seemingly

disparate experiences and phenomena – relationships within (post)migrant families; the unhoming (exclusion, segregation) of non-Western Danes; and the political establishment's deceptive and delusive rhetoric of Danish homogeneity and Danish values. Gaonkar successfully relates these three aspects precisely through her insistent focus on terms such as "home", "homesickness", and "unhomeliness" and the affects that cling to such terms.

Gaonkar offers an important analysis of the value of postmigrant perspectives, and how such perspectives may pave the way toward a society and culture in which the exclusionary and often racist walls that today surround Danish identity, the Danish home, are dismantled. Innovatively, she does not pathologise migrants' affective bearing but instead asks under what conditions some people are made to feel unhomey in their places of residence and how artistic practices can offer resistant and reparative responses to such feelings.