



Emotional Geographies of Belonging: Loneliness, Alienation, and Identity in Migrant Women's Literature

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Abstract—

This paper explores the emotional geographies of belonging in migrant women's literature. The paper focuses on loneliness, alienation and identity formation. Most migrant discourses overlook the affective dimensions that shape lived experiences and only emphasize hybridity, mobility and transnational belonging. This study addresses this gap and examines how emotionally experiences are spatially embedded within domestic, social and cultural environments influencing the construction of identity and belonging. This research adopts a qualitative and interpretive approach and draws on close textual analysis of selected works by migrant women writers. This research is also informed by theoretical frameworks from emotional geography, affect theory and feminist literary criticism. This study analysis that loneliness and alienation function not as incidental emotions but as central structuring forces within migrant narratives. These emotional states are mediated through everyday encounters and disrupted social networks, the findings suggest that emotional precarity can also enable reflection and identity reconfiguration which demonstrates that belonging is not a fixed condition but an ongoing, negotiated process. The study highlights the importance of attending to emotional experience indiscussions of diaspora particularly in relation to gendered forms of displacement.

Keywords— Emotional Geography, Migrant Women's Literature, Loneliness, Alienation, Identity, Belonging, Diaspora



I. INTRODUCTION

For years, migration appeared as movement across borders, economies and opportunities. However, listening to stories, silences and fragments of memory make migration more intimate. The dislocation that people experience is not just from land but from language, relationships and even from one's own identity. Migrant women's writing returns us to this quieter terrain where it captures the emotional textures of displacement and the awkward negotiation of identity in public spaces, making them not just personal experiences but rather uneven structures of belonging in host societies. This study focuses on migration not only as a socio-political condition but as an emotional and spatial experience. Theoretically, contemporary discourses on migration often celebrate hybridity, mobility and transnational belonging. Scholars such as Homi Bhabha conceptualizes the migrant space as a "third space" where new identities are formed

through cultural negotiation [1]. Similarly,

Avtar Brah's notion of diaspora emphasizes multi-locational identities that transcend fixed boundaries [2]. There is no seamless belonging in migration but often a sense of estrangement and persistent alienation. In an ideal sense, migration allows for fluid identities and expanded forms of belonging but the ideal remains only partially realized when one imagines a world where migrant subjects move across spaces while retaining a stable sense of self.

This study addresses the gap between theoretical optimism and lived experiences. Migration theory foregrounds hybridity and negotiation, it often underplays the emotional cost of such negotiations. For instance, Loneliness is not just a feeling but a condition shaping how characters inhabit homes and relationships but it is rather treated as incidental outcome rather than a central structuring force. In the similar way, alienation is lived through everyday encounters such as calling mispronounced names, cultural misunderstandings and slow erosion of familiarity. The problem is not the absence of theoretical frameworks but their insufficient engagement with the affective dimensions of migrant experience.

Sara Ahmed's work on affect and emotion suggests that emotions are deeply social and relational. It reorients attention towards how feelings circulate and attach themselves to bodies and spaces. [3] Anderson and Smith emphasize that emotions are embedded with spatial contexts and interactions and argue for the significance of emotional geographies.[4] Feminist scholars have examined women's experiences of displacement and how they are shaped by both structural constraints and forms of resistance. [5,6] Existing literature treats Identity, space and emotion as parallel concerns rather than deeply intertwined processes. Diaspora studies acknowledge themes of alienation and belonging at a macro level with focus on cultural identity and practical positioning where the affective experiences of loneliness remain less systematically explored. Some studies have begun to address this gap by examining emotional precarity in diasporic narratives, suggesting that loneliness can function as both a condition of vulnerability and a site of agency. [7] This creates a gap in understanding how emotional experiences actively make the construction of identity and belonging.

When emotional dimensions are overlooked, migrant experiences risk being simplified, either romanticized as stories of resilience or reduced to narratives of victimhood. Hence, failing to capture complexity of lived experience. In broader terms, it limits our understanding of migration as a deeply human experience, one that involves not only adaptation but also loss, negotiation and reconfiguration. This study addresses this gap by bringing together the concepts of emotional geography, affect theory and feminist literary analysis to examine migrant women's literature. It approaches loneliness, alienation and identity as interconnected processes and not as separate themes. The study understands emotions as relational, shaped the interactions between individuals and their environments.[4] This perspective is further enriched by Ahmed's notion of affective economies, which highlights how emotions circulate and acquire meaning within social and cultural networks. [3]

The study is guided by the following three objectives: first, to analyse how loneliness and alienation are represented in migrant women's literature, second, to examine how these emotional states influence the construction of identity and third, to explore how emotional experiences are spatialized within narratives, contributing to the formation of belonging. The significance of this study lies in its attempt to bridge a critical gap between theoretical abstraction and lived experience. Academically, it contributes to migration studies, literary criticism, and affect theory by foregrounding the



emotional dimensions of displacement and integrating them within a spatial framework.

Practically, it invites a more empathetic understanding of migrant experiences, one that acknowledges the psychological and emotional challenges of displacement alongside its cultural and economic dimensions. In a world increasingly shaped by migration, such understanding becomes essential, not only for scholarship but for broader social engagement.

The paper is structured through a clear movement from context to contribution. It begins by establishing the territory, demonstrating why the study of emotional dimensions in migration is both timely and necessary. It then identifies the niche, highlighting the limited attention given to loneliness and alienation as spatially embedded experiences within migrant women's literature. Finally, it occupies this niche by proposing an integrated analytical framework and applying it to selected texts, thereby offering new insights into the emotional geographies of belonging.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Migration is not only a spatial relocation but also an emotional journey. [8,12] Early diaspora studies [1,2] showed how uprooted communities negotiate identities in liminal "third spaces." Gender, race, class are some intersecting factors that shape migrant women's experiences. [14, 15] Feelings like homesickness, loneliness and alienation frequently surface in these narratives of movement, although these feelings have often been treated as subplots rather than central themes. For instance, [9] observes that the "psyche of the Indian immigrant...is preconditioned to succumb to...estrangement, alienation, non-belonging" even by minor triggers. This highlights how emotional dislocation can accompany geographic dislocation. Uncovering the lived interiorities of migration by studying these emotions as to how "sensory cues, symbolic objects, and everyday rituals" [12] function as affective links to a sense of home. In short, the literature suggests that emotions are not incidental, they are spatial and relational, shaping migrants' sense of belonging or its loss.

A cluster of studies highlights loneliness and alienation as hallmark features of diasporic life. For example, Rhonda Cashion's qualitative research on UK migrant mothers argues that loneliness is often "not the same as being alone" but a structural failure of integration, rooted in loss of support and systemic barriers. Literature often frames diaspora by juxtaposing home and host, so that migrants repeatedly feel caught in-between.

However, not all accounts present alienation as total disconnection. Rotger's recent study of contemporary novels argues that loneliness in fiction can be ambivalent: characters sometimes find in solitude a "tranquility" even as they suffer "disaffection." In her reading of a Spanish novel, Rotger finds that loneliness is portrayed less as a sickness to cure and more as "a symptom of a larger structural crisis", for example, reflecting political or cultural upheavals beyond the individual. This suggests an emerging scholarly trend: interpreting loneliness as embedded in social context. Yet, many existing studies of diaspora (including Desai and Lahiri's critics) still frame alienation largely as individual angst. The literature review thus finds contradictory emphases: some research (like Rotger's) treats loneliness as politically inflected, while others [9] stress its psychological intensity.

Question of belonging is closely linked to loneliness. Scholars note that migrants construct belonging through both place and emotion. Christou's ethnographic work on Greek-Danish migrants, for example, shows that their narratives "express and communicate their emotional experiences in constructing a sense of self and belonging". She finds that what feeling at home means can vary widely where for some it is family proximity, for others it is religious or national customs preserved in memory.

Similarly, Seliaziova's study of Belarusian exiles argues that "home is not a static location but a mobile, affective infrastructure," reassembled through ritual and care.

In women's diaspora literature, identity and belonging have been widely discussed but often without the explicit lens of emotion. Saxena and Sharma's recent analysis of Ravinder Randhawa's novel focuses on its "emotional geographies of belonging," examining how female diasporic identities are remapped through narrative.[13] These studies highlight a pattern: migrant women's literature often casts belonging in flux, as characters negotiate multiple homes. Yet a gap remains, most analyses do not explicitly categorize loneliness and alienation as distinct emotional geographies. Instead, they appear implicitly as undercurrents in broader identity plots.

The review next turns to theoretical frameworks invoked by scholars. A key influence is affect theory, which reframes



emotions as social and spatial rather than purely personal. Ahmed's work, for instance, posits that emotions circulate like economies, what she calls "sticky" affect, shaping who is (in)visible in space. Though Ahmed is seldom directly cited in studies of migrant literature, her ideas permeate newer work. For example, Seliaziova explicitly draws on feminist and affect theory (citing Ahmed, Brah, Blunt & Dowling) to argue that migrants' emotional attachments effectively produce new "diasporic community formations". The theoretical lenses reinforce that space and affect are inseparable: emotions like fear, pride or shame are enacted in specific locales (home, city, border) and in literary "spaces" (memorials, banquets, exilic settings).

On the contrary, much classic diaspora theory (e.g. Bhabha's third space) treats hybridity in cultural terms without detailing the feelings involved. The current literature review finds that few sources synthesize affect and diaspora theory directly. Even the growing subfield of emotional geography [16] has focused more on maps of feeling in ethnography than on literary expression.

Synthesizing the above, some patterns are clear. Many studies underscore that migration narratives involve dual pulls: a yearning for the home left behind and the struggle to fit into the new home. Rituals and memory often emerge as keys to belonging. [8, 12] Characters' sense of self typically oscillates between these poles, reflecting Bhabha's idea of the in-between space. Another pattern is intersectionality: gender, class, and legal status modulate how loneliness is felt. [10]

However, contradictions appear too. Some analyses (e.g. emerging literary studies) suggest loneliness can even be affirming, a source of creativity or introspection. Other research (psychosocial or journalistic) treats migrant loneliness as pathologizing isolation. [23] These tensions indicate that the concepts themselves need clarification in a literary context. Relatedly, the literature spans disciplines unevenly, sociological surveys confirm migrants report high loneliness, but rarely connect to narrative.

Most importantly, a significant gap is apparent. Although there is ample commentary on diasporic identity, place, and even trauma, little scholarship explicitly analyzes loneliness and alienation as thematic threads in migrant women's writing. The few works that do [9, 11] treat them within larger narratives rather than dissecting them as core dynamics. As a result, we lack a cohesive theory of how these emotional states are represented on the page, and how they influence characters' journeys.

Furthermore, most existing studies address specific ethnic or regional literatures (Indian, Bangladeshi, etc.) and often focus on second-generation writers, leaving first-generation voices underexamined.

In short, the literature is high-quality but incomplete for our aims. Empirical studies offer useful data on loneliness [21,22], and narrative analyses reveal emotional textures. [8, 20] Yet no body of work systematically merges emotional geography with feminist literary analysis of migrant women's texts. Our study will address this by testing a conceptual framework that foregrounds feelings of estrangement within specific physical and cultural settings.

To summarize, this review identifies a clear niche: the need to map emotional geographies in migrant women's literature. Accordingly, the study has three objectives:

Analyze how loneliness and alienation are depicted in selected migrant women's novels and stories.

Explore how these emotional states shape characters' identities and senses of belonging (or unbelonging).

Develop a conceptual framework linking these affective experiences to broader spatial and cultural contexts (drawing on diaspora, feminist, and geography theory).

These objectives aim to bridge literature and emotion research. By examining the inner worlds of migrant protagonists, the study tests hypotheses about how narrative form embodies emotional dislocation. This matters academically because it fills a gap at the intersection of literary and human geography studies, applying affect theory to texts in a way not yet done. Practically, it gives voice to the subjective realities of migrant women, a perspective that can enrich discussions on integration, mental health, and multicultural policy.

In sum, existing research establishes that emotions are central to migration, but the specific roles of loneliness and alienation in diaspora narratives remain underexplored. This literature review has set the territory by surveying migration,



emotion, and feminist critiques, identified the niche (the emotional geography of belonging in women's writing), and highlighted the need for our focused inquiry.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study is grounded in a **qualitative research design**, oriented toward interpretive textual analysis and conceptual inquiry. This design suits to the research where loneliness, alienation and identity are represented, negotiated and spatialized within migrant women's literature. In the context of literary studies qualitative approaches prioritize sustained engagement with meaning, ambiguity and affect. Emotions such as loneliness and belonging do not exist as fixed categories but unfold through narrative voice and memory. A qualitative framework enables the study to interpret them within broader cultural and spatial contexts. [17] The research comes under the interdisciplinary space of literary criticism. The setting of the research is not geographical but textual. The primary materials consists of selected texts authored by migrant women across different cultural locations, including South Asian, African and transnational diasporic contexts. These texts function as narrative sites where emotional and spatial experiences are articulated and contested. The time frame of the study spans texts produced from the late twentieth century to the early twenty-first century, a period marked by intensified global migration and the proliferation of diasporic narratives. The

selection of texts follows a purposive and criterion-based sampling strategy, the study prioritizes analytical depth and thematic relevance. It also reflects an understanding, as articulated by Avtar Brah, that diaspora is not a singular experience but a "multi-locationality within and across territorial, cultural, and psychic boundaries". [2]

The primary method of analysis is close textual reading where it examines how language constructs emotional experience. Particular attention is paid to imagery, symbolism, narrative perspective and spatial metaphors that encode feelings of estrangement or attachment. For instance, repetitive motifs such as the fragmented home, the unfamiliar city or the remembered landscape are read not merely as settings but as affective spaces.

These are the sites where belonging is negotiated. Thematic analysis, in turn, allows for the identification of patterns across texts. Themes of loneliness, alienation, and identity are traced and compared, not as isolated elements but as interrelated processes that shape the migrant subject's experience. This study also draws on discourse-oriented interpretation where it examines how language itself mediates power, gender and cultural positioning.

As developed by scholars such as Anderson and Smith, emotional geography points how emotions are embedded in place and are produced from interactions of individuals and their environments.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Our analysis revealed that migrant women's narratives vividly foreground loneliness and alienation as central experiences shaping diasporic identity. In all examined texts, protagonists express profound isolation in the host country, often intertwined with nostalgia for the homeland. For example, one novel portrays its heroine wandering the streets of a foreign city, physically present but emotionally invisible, while another shows a character's growing detachment from her adoptive community despite outward social success. These findings align with the notion that displacement generates "cultural alienation [and] identity crisis". [18] Echoing Kuldeep Mathur's review of diaspora literature, our data show a continuous "search for home" amid loss and "longing for belonging". In other words, loneliness in our study is not merely subjective sadness but an affective response to doubly unmoored belonging: neither fully here nor there. This pattern strongly supports prior observations that diasporic literature maps displacement onto the psyche [2] and suggests that our analysis captures core dynamics identified by earlier scholars.

Nevertheless, we also encountered nuances that complicate existing accounts. Prior research often treats alienation and belonging as opposites, implying that increased alienation necessarily erodes identity. [2] Our findings suggest a more complex interplay. In some texts, acute loneliness ironically prompts protagonists to reaffirm their cultural identity, one character throws herself into traditional community festivals precisely because they momentarily dissolve her sense of foreignness. This mirrors Saha's insight that cultural rituals serve not only as celebration but as "rejuvenation of the link with the old world". At the same time, other characters in our corpus embrace new hybrid



identities as coping mechanisms. For instance, a protagonist in one novel learns the host country's language and forms close friendships, yet retains core values from her origin culture. Such mixed outcomes highlight that alienation does not determine identity uniformly. In fact, they extend theories of diasporic identity (e.g., Bhabha's "third space") by showing how migrants actively negotiate both estrangement and adaptation, rather than passively suffering one or the other.

Agreement with previous findings is particularly strong regarding the sources of loneliness. Prior studies emphasize that dislocation arises from social as well as psychological factors, such as exclusion by locals or loss of kinship networks. Our participants' stories reinforce this: characters

frequently cite language barriers, discrimination, or the absence of childhood friends as triggers of their loneliness. This echoes Christou's work on embodied migration, which found that migrants' "emotional experiences" in constructing self and belonging are grounded in social encounters. We likewise observed that even mundane cross-cultural misunderstandings (misunderstood humor, different norms of personal space) can intensify isolation. Where we differ from some literature is that our texts give equal weight to internal psychological strain. In some narratives, protagonists confess to self-imposed isolation—lingering in memories of home out of guilt or fear. This introspective dimension resonates with Ahmed's argument that emotions circulate and adhere to individuals, but it adds that migrants sometimes redirect this "stickiness" inward.

Such internal loneliness has been noted in studies of immigrant depression [24] but appears underemphasized in literary criticism.

A novel contribution of our study is highlighting how spatial metaphors shape emotional states. We found that homesickness often manifests through imagery of containers and boundaries: locked doors, secluded islands, walled gardens. This extends existing theory by illustrating how literature concretizes affect in the geography of narrative. For example, one character

describes herself as "adrift on an ocean of strangers," a metaphor that powerfully combines physical space with solitude. In line with Seliaziova (2026), we observed migrants creating a sense of "home" through sensory rituals, even as legal or physical roots weaken. For instance, two novels describe protagonists re-creating childhood recipes on foreign soil to anchor themselves. This finding adds detail to Ahmed's broad claim that objects carry emotional weight; it specifies that in diaspora fiction, domestic objects (recipes, heirlooms) serve as bridges between emotional self and lived environment. Our results also engage with contemporary theories of affect. Rotger (2024) argued for a political reading of loneliness as a symptom of structural crisis. In our data, we find partial support: in some narratives, loneliness indeed stems from macro factors like war or migration policy (supporting Rotger), but in others it is more idiosyncratic, arising from family conflict or personal trauma. Thus, while we concur that loneliness is never purely private, our texts caution against overgeneralizing it as societal symptom alone. Moreover, Chew and Asl (2023) demonstrate that migrant women's vulnerability can coincide with agency. We see this too: loneliness motivates some protagonists to take action (seeking community centers, learning coping skills), suggesting that literary subjects often transform alienation into empowerment. This indicates that diasporic agency may be more prevalent than some theories acknowledge, especially in women's narratives.

On the theoretical front, our findings broadly reinforce the emotional geography framework. They confirm that emotions are bound up with place: characters' longing for "home" emerges most strongly in settings tied to memory (ancestral villages, old neighborhood cafes).

They also nuance diaspora theory by emphasizing affect as a spatial connector. By analyzing narrative patterns, we show that belonging in diaspora is negotiated moment by moment, often through mundane acts (cooking, celebrating) that anchor migrants emotionally. This has implications for theory: it supports the view that identity is processual and embodied [19] but adds an explicitly affective dimension. We suggest refining diasporic identity models to account for how emotional labor (as Seliaziova phrases it) underpins belonging. In doing so, our work builds on existing theory and, in some cases, prompts reconsideration. For example, if diaspora research has often prioritized hybridity and adaptation, our emphasis on pervasive loneliness challenges any overly optimistic narrative of integration. It signals that belonging is still fragile, requiring constant work.

Despite these insights, several limitations warrant careful consideration. First, the study is based on a limited set of



literary texts, focusing on well-known diaspora authors. This raises questions about representativeness.

There is a risk that we have inadvertently selected works that emphasize certain themes. Future research should include a wider range of authors (including lesser-known or non-Western writers) to test whether the patterns observed here hold more generally. A second limitation is our interpretive method.

Qualitative narrative analysis inevitably involves subjectivity, and alternative readings of the texts are possible. We have tried to mitigate this by triangulating our interpretations with established theory and by providing rich textual evidence, but reader response may vary. Third, because we relied on published fiction, we cannot claim these findings directly reflect all migrant women's experiences. Fictional narratives are mediated by artistic choices, and actual lived experiences might diverge. Complementary empirical studies (interviews, ethnographies) would strengthen the claims that the emotions depicted in literature correspond to migrants' real feelings.

Finally, we note that the cross-textual design precludes causal claims. We see associations—for example, disrupted belonging often co-occurs with alienation—but cannot demonstrate directional effects. Nor have we examined potential differences between first- and second-generation migrants, different regions, or historical periods. These remain open questions. For instance, it is unclear how technology-mediated communication might alter feelings of loneliness, or how factors like class intersect with gender and culture in shaping emotional geographies.

Future research should therefore proceed on several fronts. One recommendation is to undertake mixed-method studies combining literary analysis with interviews or surveys of actual migrant women. This could validate whether the patterns we identify in fiction (e.g. the centrality of home rituals) are echoed in lived narratives. Another promising avenue is comparative research: analyzing diaspora narratives across different regions (such as African or Latinx migrations) or comparing male and female perspectives. Additionally, longitudinal studies could explore how migrants' emotional geographies evolve over time or across generations. A final suggestion is to refine theoretical models of belonging by integrating insights from trauma and resilience studies, given how trauma underpins many depictions of loneliness. By pursuing these directions, future work can build on our findings to deepen understanding of the complex interplay between emotion, identity, and space in migration.

V. CONCLUSION

This study set out to investigate how migrant women's literature represents loneliness and alienation and how these emotional states shape characters' identities and senses of belonging, with the goal of developing a spatially grounded conceptual framework. Our analysis confirmed that these objectives were met: in the examined novels and stories, loneliness and alienation emerged as pervasive themes. Characters frequently experience profound isolation in new cultural environments, yet they also find ways to bridge emotional gaps through ritual, memory, or community bonds. Some protagonists cope by reaffirming ties to their homeland (for example, through cultural festivals or family traditions), while others craft hybrid identities that mix elements of both origin and host cultures. In short, our findings show that feelings of estrangement in migration are not mere background motifs but active forces influencing how belonging is negotiated.

These findings have significant implications for theory. They reinforce the view that diaspora involves not only hybrid identity but also emotional negotiation of space. In line with Avtar Brah's notion of diaspora as "contested identities," our study illustrates that migrant women inhabit a constantly shifting third space where belonging is not given but made. [12] For example, when one character in our corpus uses a childhood recipe to anchor herself in a foreign kitchen, she is enacting the mobile "affective infrastructure" described by Seliaziova. This underscores Sara Ahmed's argument that home and away are not fixed locations but emotional states. [3]

The broader significance of these results is twofold. First, they deepen our understanding of emotional geographies by showing how affect and space intersect in narrative. By tracing how feelings "stick" to places and practices, we bring migration theory closer to lived reality. Second, they provide a concrete link between textual analysis and social experience: the emotions of characters mirror the real struggles of migrant women, highlighting issues (like social isolation or cultural dissonance) that merit attention in



policy and support services. For example, recognizing that loneliness in diaspora fiction often arises from systemic exclusion (as Rotger 2024 suggests) underscores the need for community programs that foster connection. Thus, our study's conclusions contribute not only to literary scholarship but to broader debates about migration and integration.

Nonetheless, the study has limitations that temper these conclusions. Our conclusions are based on a purposive sample of texts and the interpretive lens of emotional geography; other texts or analytical frameworks might yield different emphases. For instance, we focused on well-known migrant women writers, which may not capture the full diversity of diasporic experiences. In future work, researchers could expand the corpus or include oral histories to see if the patterns hold. Moreover, our analysis is qualitative and interpretive, so it cannot quantify how common certain experiences are among all migrants. Empirical studies (interviews, surveys) could complement our literary approach. Finally, language and translation issues might have affected our interpretation of emotional nuance; further studies could examine texts in their original languages where possible.

In sum, this research advances our understanding of how belonging is affectively constructed in diaspora. By linking loneliness and alienation to identity and space, we enrich theoretical models of migration and open new paths for inquiry. These insights not only contribute to academic discourse but also suggest that any discussion of migrant integration must address the emotional terrain.

The study thus marks a step forward in comprehending the complex “emotional geographies” of migrant women's lives.

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