ATTICS AND BASEMENTS

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The Evocative, Expressive and Embracing Functions of Homes and Other Human Dwellings

Edited by

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To

The future generations of psychoanalysts of South Asian origin

Contents

Acknowledgments

This book is an outgrowth of the annual dinner meeting of psychoanalysts of South Asian origins that has taken place in New York City ever since 1997. With members from India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka (and keeping its door open for future entrants from Bangladesh, Bhutan, and Nepal), the group had remained mostly focused on collegial warmth, mutual support, and a modicum of nostalgia. However, one could sense that it also harbored a subterranean, if furtive, search for meaning and transcendence beyond friendly banter over sumptuous meals. One actualization of that striving is the book in your hands. While nine of the group's members are responsible for editing and writing it, the "holding" function of others can hardly be denied. Mention also needs to be made of Jeremy Vera for skillfully preparing the manuscript in its final polished form, Anita Mason for guiding us through various stages of publication, James Darley for his masterful copyediting, and Kate Pearce, the psychoanalytic publisher par excellence for lending her prestigious imprimatur to our work. To all these individuals, we offer our very sincere thanks.

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Introduction

That the individual psychic self has an ecological dimension also is by now a well-accepted notion (Akhtar, 2001; Spitzform, 2000). This dimension makes its appearance, in its most rudimentary form, with the infant's acquisition of the animate-inanimate distinction along many vertices; these range from the most simple perceptual one to the far more complex one of conceptual and motivational interpretation (Lichtenberg, 1983; D. N. Stern, 1977). With increasing consolidation of this function, the capacity for "object permanence" (Piaget, 1936) evolves; the resulting stability of representations, initially restricted to the objects in the immediate surround, gradually spreads to cover a larger psychophysical terrain. Frosch's (1964) "reality constancy" (the capacity to tolerate environmental changes without the destabilization of the core veracity of perception) and Pacella's (1980) notion of "waking screen" (the background of expectation that scans, accepts, rejects, or modifies all new perceptions) now become important.

The "waking screen" at the deepest level, the "reality constancy" at the mid-level, and the "average expectable environment" (Hartmann, 1939) at the highest level form the triadic basis for the child's relationship with the external, material world. The use of physical objects is at first for psychic integration and structuralization, then for ego-motivated

instrumentality, and only after these two modalities are established, it is for the containment, concealment, projection, and expression of drive-related curiosities and fantasies.

Criss-crossing these intrapsychic developments is the growing child's relationship with his or her or their homes. Dim, unintegrated, and unmentalized at first, this "relationship" later comes to include many psychosomatic realms: perception, imagination, fantasy, projection, primal scene, optimal distance, separateness, boundaries, smells, sounds, cloisters of intrigue and fear, and cabinets of curiosity and excitement. Side by side with such phenomena, the feeling of being "at home" evolves; this is at first anchored in the "thoughtless" entitlement over the parents' minds and bodies and the physicality of the home itself, but soon begins to be internalized and give rise to the future capacity to feel "at home" most anywhere in the world.

Another dialectic now emerges. On the one hand, the childhood home is deeply incorporated in one's psyche and persists, throughout life, as a fond prototype, an object of nostalgia, and—via the "second look" (Novey, 1968)—a source of ego-replenishment. On the other hand, that very home has to be left and with the passage of time new homes are to be found, formed, and left. Such "biography" of homes includes transient residences of youth, college dorms, first apartments and flats, marital and family homes, downsized residences of late middle age, retirement homes, nursing homes, hospices, and urns that contain our cremated remains and graves that house our buried bodies. Far from such linear progression are traumatizing homes, foster homes, and orphanages where searingly painful as well as defiantly triumphant scenarios of growth and development unfold. And, then there are monasteries which embody the human striving for detachment, silence, and contemplation in a turn away from a world of earthly relations to spirituality and transcendence.

Our book covers all such matters. Its approach is fundamentally psychoanalytic but borrows significantly from anthropology, history, architecture, religion, and general psychiatry. The result is a harmonious gestalt of understanding the dialectical relationship between man's internal world and his external reality, especially in terms of the four walls and a roof that provide him shelter and earn the designation of his home.

Finally, an admission: our book's title, *Attics and Basements*, is inspired by a letter of Sigmund Freud in response to a congratulatory message on his eightieth birthday by the renowned Swiss psychiatrist Ludwig Binswanger. In that letter, Freud wrote: "I have always lived on the ground floor and in the basement of the building—you mention that on changing one's viewpoint one can also see an upper floor, housing such distinguished guests as religion, art, and others. You are not the only one; most cultivated specimens of homo natura think likewise. In this respect, you are the conservative, I the revolutionary" (letter dated 8 October 1936, cited in Fichtner, 2003, p. 132). It is our sincere hope that our book on homes illuminates both the "attics" and the "basements" of the human experience in all its sadness and horror as well in all its splendor and majesty.

Salman Akhtar
Philadelphia, PA

Introductory overview

CHAPTER 1

The nature and functions of a home

Nidhi Tewari

In discussing the nature and functions of a home, it is best to begin by drawing a clear distinction between the concept of a "house" and a "home." Despite their superficial resemblance, these terms are not interchangeable. A house is a physical structure, constructed from bricks and mortar, stone and cement, wood and glass, adorned with doors, windows, and all the material conveniences—electric wiring, plumbing, and the like. It is the form, the shell, that shelters us from the elements. A home, in contrast, is a psychological and emotional construct. It is not merely the place where one lives, but the relational matrix within which one is formed. A home is created through bonds of attachment, the nurturance of love, the comfort of stability, and the often unspoken, yet vital, sense of belonging. It is the place where safety is granted, not just physically, but emotionally, where there is respite and restoration. It is the space where boundaries—both generational and personal—are established, where trust is built, and where, over time, the past and future coalesce. The house may take on many forms—Victorian, Tudor, Cape Cod, Mid-century, Craftsman, Contemporary—and each speaks to a particular cultural or architectural tradition. Yet the home is less about style or structure and more about what it fosters. Some homes are

generative, nurturing creativity and fostering emotional growth; others may be traumatizing, marked by neglect or abuse. Some offer refuge and joy, while others are filled with tension or terror. The home, then, is defined not by its outward shape, but by the emotional and relational dynamics within.

A house, therefore, with its walls and roof stands as a physical structure—an assemblage of materials that delineates a particular space. In contrast, a home embodies the relationships, emotions, memories, and fantasies that suffuse this space. The home, thus, becomes a physical manifestation of the deepest of instincts—the life instinct. This life instinct aims to propel the home and its inhabitants toward not just survival, but flourishment. The notion of survival, along with its evolutionary implications, is fundamental to the conceptualization of demarcating a particular space as a home rather than a house. Thus, contextualizing the evolutionary concept of home is a prerequisite to exploring the home's deeper psychic functions. It provides the narrative that shapes the understanding of what a home represents and the essential functions of a home.

History

Understanding the significance of transitioning from a nomadic lifestyle to the establishment of sedentary homes is pivotal in shaping our conception of the essential functions of a home. The modern notion of "home" as an emotional attachment to a fixed structure is a relatively recent development in the social consciousness, emerging only within the last 12,000 years. Before this, humans lived as nomads. They created temporary shelters that accompanied them on their journeys alongside family, friends, animals, and possessions.

In that earlier existence, there was no singular, man-made structure to which the sentiment of "home" could anchor itself. For nomadic peoples, the concept of "house" was expansive and intimately intertwined with nature and their environment. They perceived "house" as encompassing the entirety of the natural world around them. The earth beneath their feet served as the floor, while the vast sky above formed the roof. The nomads did not subscribe to the notion of owning discrete sections of land. This is poignantly illustrated by the historical account

of the Dutch purchasing Manhattan Island from the Lenape people for only sixty gold coins, known as guilders. The Native Americans did not appreciate the notion of land as a commodity, especially not in terms of individual ownership. Modern narratives often convey that Indigenous peoples were unable to perceive the concept of owning or selling land; it was a shared commodity integral to their communal existence.

With this contextual backdrop, what could have been the nomadic person's concept of "home?" Evolutionary psychologists, sociologists, and anthropologists have speculated on the external and internal lives of the nomadic people. What is known for sure is that they remained in groups. These groups, collectively with their animals, mobile shelters, tools, and personal items, provided a cultural identity and sense of belonging to a community. This, in effect, established the trust that the community would create refuge, sustenance, anchoring, routine, and respect for its members. This communal experience is the essence of the modern-day experience of "home."

This feeling of "home" was inherent in the communities of nomadic predecessors. The traveling bands of people helped provide a sense of security, assurance that sustenance can be managed, and a sense of interconnectedness that contributed to the daily routine which was essential for physical survival. And thus, since "life instinct operates in ways that lead to the protection, sustenance, and enhancement of the self and to species propagation" (Akhtar, 2009b, p. 160) as humankind shifted from the nomadic lifestyle to the sedentary one, this instinct to experience security, sustenance, interconnectedness, and routine was interjected to the walls, roofs, floors, furniture, and decor chosen for individual houses. Furthermore, the social necessities of experiencing dignity and prestige were projected onto the home's specific interior and exterior characteristics.

Worldwide literature, songs, and poetry reveal the universality that "home" is about the capacity to feel these essential qualities in relation to a person (or people) and not at all about the wood, cement, mud, or brick that constructs a house. In her four related books of fiction (2014, 2015, 2016, 2017), Jennifer Lynn Barnes creates a character who repeatedly reminds her daughter that "Home isn't a place … Home is the people who love you most" (Barnes, 2016, p. 354). Madonna released an internationally popular song in 1989, titled "Like a prayer," linking home and the sense of interpersonal belonging. In his poignant song titled "Ghar,"

Indian poet and lyricist Irshad Kamil beautifully articulated that "home" transcends physical structures; it dwells within the soul of a loved one with whom we share a deep and meaningful connection. In 2023, Jasmine Sokko, a Singaporean singer-songwriter released a song, "Home is a feeling," in two languages, Mandarin and English. She echoed the above sentiments about the definition of home. These lyrics, drawn from three distinct cultures, illustrate that the experience of "home" transcends physicality; it goes beyond the concrete interactions of residing in a man-made structure. Instead, the essence of "home" is intricately tied to the fundamental need to feel loved, nurtured, and connected—essential elements that underpin our physical, psychological, and social survival. Moving onwards from the universality of the feeling of "home" as exemplified in songs and literature, I now will address some psychoanalytic contributions to this topic.

Psychoanalytic contributions

Despite having lived in sixteen different houses in four different countries, namely Czechoslovakia (now Czech Republic), Germany, Austria, and England (Gay, 1988; Togel, 2015), Freud commented little about the psychological functions served by one's residence. He primarily uses the word "home" in three contexts: (i) to delineate details about the location of a person, dream, or object (Freud, 1912–13, p. 98), (ii) to clarify if someone was leaving "home" or coming back "home" (Freud, 1901b, p. 183), (iii) to refer to feeling at "home" with a particular concept (Freud, 1939a, p. 70). Particularly noteworthy is that Freud did expand on the symbolic possibilities of a "house" in both *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900a) and *Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis* (1916–17), where he proposes that it may symbolize portions of a body, various internal organs, or female genitalia. However, he refrained from theorizing on "homes" and their functions specifically.

In contrast to Freud, Winnicott has made many significant observations about homes. He specifically emphasized the functions of a home and the utility of a "good" home life. Sprinkled throughout his writings, the five most important observations that he made are the following:

- 1946: "The child whose home fails to give a feeling of security looks outside his home for the four walls; he still has hope, and

he looks to grandparents, uncles and aunts, friends of the family, school. He seeks an external stability without which he may go mad" (Winnicott, 1946, pp. 115–116).

- 1949: "The child of a broken home, or the child without parents … spends his time unconsciously looking for his parents. It is notoriously inadequate to take such a child into one's home and to love him. What happens is that after a while a child so adopted gains hope, and then he starts to test out the environment he has found, and to seek proof of his guardians' ability to hate objectively" (Winnicott, 1949, p. 199).
- 1956: "The antisocial tendency *is not a diagnosis* … A child becomes a *deprived child* when deprived of certain essential features of home life. Some degree of what might be called the 'deprived complex' becomes manifest" (Winnicott, 1956a, p. 308, italics original).
- 1965: "This explains why it is that children are regularly 'cured' of incipient character disorder in the course of their own childhood development simply by making use of home life. Parents have a second and third chance to bring their children through, in spite of failures of management (mostly inevitable) in the earliest stages when the child is highly dependent" (Winnicott, 1965a, p. 206).
- 1967: "The child absolutely requires an environment that is indestructible in essential respects; certainly carpets get dirtied and the walls have to be re-papered and an occasional window gets broken, but somehow the home sticks together, and behind all this is the confidence that the child has in the relationship between the parents" (Winnicott, 1967, p. 94).

In essence, Winnicott emphasizes a home's silent facilitation of the individual's "going-on being" (1956b). Echoing this sentiment, Roger Kennedy, in his book *The Psychic Home: Psychoanalysis, Consciousness, and The Human Soul* (2014), noted that home as walled-off space allows for the themes of authentic self-expression as well as repression and neurosis in the mind of the inhabitants of these sedentary homes. Further exposition of the significance of homes has more recently appeared in a Special Issue of the *Psychoanalytic Inquiry* (2023). While space does not permit a detailed commentary on the various

contributions in this volume, some outstanding points made by the contributors include: (i) In her article "A space odyssey: The impact of changing the physical aspects of the analytic setting on the analyst, the patient and their relationship," Sandra Hershberg explores how modifications to the professional home (the psychoanalytic office) can significantly influence the therapeutic process. She examines the ways in which changing elements like the layout of the room, seating arrangements, or even the use of technology (e.g., video conferencing) affect the dynamics between the analyst, the patient, and their relationship. (ii) In "Leaving home: Prokofiev's 'Peter and the Wolf,'" Julie Jaffee Nagel discusses how the characters in Sergei Prokofiev's musical tale, particularly Peter, reflect stages of maturation and the challenges of confronting fears and overcoming obstacles. She interprets the story as a symbolic journey of separation, independence, and personal growth, paralleling the developmental process of leaving home. She clearly delineates how Prokofiev's music and narrative structure mirror the psychological dynamics of individuation and the transition from childhood to adulthood. (iii) In "The complex relationship between structural and psychic space: When two cultures/homes collide," Monisha Nayar-Akhtar discusses how conflicting cultural environments impact one's psychological sense of self. She explores the tension between external (physical) spaces and internal (psychic) spaces, highlighting how cultural collisions can create both conflict and opportunities for growth. She suggests that individuals must adapt their identities when navigating between different cultural "homes." (iv) In "Mapping obscura," Yamini Nayar illustrates how photographs capture both the physical space of home and the intangible nature of memory. She shows how photos serve as a map of personal history, revealing both what is remembered and what is forgotten. Ultimately, she highlights the role of photography in navigating the boundary between physical and psychic "homes." (v) In "Leaving, losing and finding home: Through the shadow of trauma," Anne Adelman discusses the emotional and psychological impact of displacement and trauma on the concept of home. She explores how leaving or losing a home can create a sense of disconnection and loss, while the process of finding or recreating a home involves navigating trauma and rebuilding identity. She outlines

the complex journey of healing and transformation, where home is not just a physical space but a psychological and emotional construct shaped by trauma.

What does a home provide?

The renowned French social philosopher, Gaston Bachelard, in his widely celebrated *The Poetics of Space* (1958), emphasizes the sustaining and integrative function of homes. In his view, homes possess:

> the greatest power of integration for the thoughts, memories and dreams of mankind. The binding principle in this integration is the daydream … the chief benefit of the house, I should say: the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace. (Bachelard, 1958, p. 6)

So a more nuanced understanding is that a sedentary "home" (i) is a space that can hold a specific conglomeration of feelings necessary for biological and psychological survival and advancement, and (ii) allows for the containment of fantasies, daydreams, and other forms of projections that have development-facilitating potential. One useful way to conceptualize the psychosocial functions of a home is to view them as fulfilling these five distinct tasks: (i) refuge, (ii) sustenance, (iii) anchoring, (iv) routine, and (v) respect. Examining these five properties is the foundation of having a comprehensive and rich understanding of the function of a home as it evolves throughout its biography. Imagine a symphony performed by an orchestra of five instruments. Throughout the symphony these five instruments seamlessly shift from providing lead music to playing essential accompaniment. This dynamic interplay creates a multifaceted harmonious composition, where each instrument plays a vital role in the overall symphony. However, if any instrument falters or fails to deliver the expected sound, the entire movement risks unraveling, causing the symphony to lose its coherence. In such moments, the listener feels the dissonance and suffers the consequences of this disruption. Similarly, throughout its biography, a home is destined to try to achieve a delicate balance of these five essential functions to sustain its inhabitants; if one or more qualities falter, the inhabitants experience

the loss and subsequent trauma. What follows is a close examination of the five essential functions of a home.

Refuge

Refuge is the experience of feeling safe. The most fundamental form of refuge is provided by any house, apartment, igloo, or hut: protection from natural elements, predators, and other external threats. The walls of a home also provide another type of refuge: the freedom to relax and daydream. A home's sanctuary can allow for the shedding of facades and pretenses cultivated for external society. Inhabitants can experience the freedom to wear mismatched clothing, forgo hairstyling, and not apply makeup. They can have the liberty to apply less of a filter to their speech and mannerisms: no need to be politically correct or keep elbows off the table while eating. However, some homes are unable to create this environment. Children raised in homes where parental scrutiny dictates their choices may tragically miss out on the liberating potential that a home can offer. Thus, these individuals, striving to reclaim that sense of safety and authenticity, seek refuge in alternative spaces.

Sustenance

Houses can be a source of nutritional sustenance where food is prepared and stored. Homes have the potential to establish ideal conditions to nourish internal lives: to have dreams, to wonder, to play, to work. It is this specific type of psychic sustenance that a dwelling space nurture throughout its biography. Homes, ideally, provide a capacity to grow physically and flourish internally. In part, the capacity to flourish internally stems from a home's ability to provide closed-off spaces of solitude. As Bachelard writes:

> And all the spaces of our past moments of solitude, the spaces in which we have suffered from solitude, remain indelible within us … this space identified with this solitude is creative; that even when it is forever expunged from the present … even when we no longer have a garret, when the attic room is lost and gone, there remains the fact that we once loved a garret, once lived in an attic. (Ibid., p. 10)

Anchoring

Houses provide an address and a fixed location to reflect a place of residence. Homes are a venue through which to create a sense of belonging by establishing connections to ancestors, local and distant cultures, and diverse communities. Homes are adorned with various symbols that reflect this sense of belonging and thus provide anchoring to various groups of people. Political signs are proudly displayed on lawns. Flags for identification with specific communities are showcased on windows. Artwork from countries of origin decorate shelves. Generational antiques that tell family stories furnish the home. Photographs of loved ones are framed for display. Religious symbols are scattered around the home signaling connection to a faith. As humankind has strayed further away from the nomadic close-knit groups of hunters and gatherers, individuals have attempted to establish reminders of connectedness to assuage the sense of isolation that can be experienced in modern-day single family dwelling spaces. Homes have become a locus on which to establish a sense of being tethered to a larger community.

Routine

A house can only become a home when the pattern of living there becomes a familiar comfort. Thus, routine is another essential function of feeling at home. Routines can elicit emotions ranging from annoyance to comfort. The impact of routines is easily overlooked as each routine can fade into the background. The steady whir of the dishwasher, the periodic beeps of the microwave, the morning ritual of brushing teeth in the bathroom, the musty scent that wafts up as the basement door opens, and the sight of a tree transforming with the seasons outside the window all constitute the backdrop of daily existence in a home. These routines come to define the experience of being at home. Homes provide a place to carry out and experience special and mundane routines. These routines are deeply rooted in the comfort our nomadic ancestors found as they reconstructed and deconstructed their temporary living spaces, created and recreated communal areas for cooking, eating, celebrating, and mourning. In a home, major life rituals—such as prayers for a newborn, religious ceremonies marking the transition into adulthood, and traditional gatherings

to honor those who have passed—interweave with daily activities like waking up, brushing teeth, preparing meals, working, and going to bed. One of the essential experiences of being at home is the familiarity and comfort provided by each home's specific routine.

Respect

The choice of the word "respect" in this context is intended to underscore that having a home offers a certain dignity to the self in one's own eyes as well as a specific prestige received through the gaze of the surrounding others. Homes play a crucial role in establishing external recognition and internal acceptance. The absence of a home often correlates with diminished self-worth, as numerous studies indicate. For instance, a 2009 study in the *Journal of the Canadian Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry* found that homeless youth reported significantly lower self-esteem. This highlights a profound truth: having a place to call home fosters a sense of existence and significance. While a home certainly has the ability to instill dignity, it also can enhance social standing, thus conferring a sense of prestige. In *Introducing Social Geographies* (2014), Rachel Pain and her colleagues articulate how home ownership influences not only self-perception but also the perceptions of others, shaping social identity and status. This respect (the combination of dignity and prestige) derived from having a home, furnishing it, and inviting people into it is a crucial aspect of the experience of home that cultivates a solid sense of self and affirms presence in the social landscape.

Concluding remarks

In this contribution, I first proposed that the contemporary sense of "feeling at home" traces its roots back to the nomadic lifestyle, where fundamental needs for physical, psychological, and social survival were initially met within the close-knit bonds and routines of the nomadic tribe. I then used literature and songs to establish the universality of experiencing a home as a feeling in relation to a person (or people) and not at all about the tangible materials that construct a house. It is clear that once nomadic people became sedentary the essential qualities

experienced within the people of the tribe were interjected into the man-made houses. Next, I touched on the resulting duality of transitioning from the nomadic lifestyle to sedentary houses. It created venues to perceive the space as a home imbued with security, connection, and a sense of belonging as well as a space to keep secrets, daydream, and nurture neurosis and various fantasies.

I then reviewed the psychoanalytic writings on the nature and functions of home, paying special attention to the views of Freud and Winnicott. Pooling all the foregoing observations above, I distilled five essential psychological functions of a home: (i) refuge, (ii) sustenance, (iii) connectedness, (iv) routine, and (v) respect. Collectively these functions constitute the psychic "holding" (Winnicott, 1962) necessary for psychic growth and maturation. Hartmann's (1939) "average expectable environment" also implies this idea though without making it explicit. Paradoxically, the importance of these functions becomes evident only when the home breaks whether via parental death, divorce, or other unfortunate events.

Having thus reviewed the past and present of the significance of homes, it is logical to conclude with a brief comment on their future. Thanks to the advancements of modern technology, humans now possess the freedom to reclaim a lifestyle not dissimilar to that of our nomadic ancestors—one that can be far more mobile and flexible. The essential qualities we once sought in the static structure of a house—refuge, sustenance, anchoring, routine, and respect—are now increasingly being found in relationships, both with animate beings and inanimate objects and across both the real tangible world and the virtual world. The Covid-19 pandemic accelerated this transformation. With the rise of remote work, virtual education, and online recreation, many have found new ways to build meaningful connections and fulfill their personal and professional needs without being tethered to a fixed location. This shift has given birth to a growing community of digital nomads, individuals who embrace mobility as a lifestyle, using technology to weave together a rich tapestry of experiences, relationships, and activities that define "home" in a much broader, more fluid sense than in recent modern times. To be clear, the concept of being "chronically mobile" existed even just a few years before the Covid-19 pandemic. In 2006, Nowicka interviewed professionals working for an international organization who are

chronically mobile and wrote about how routines helped them cultivate the feeling of home. More recently, the travel writer, Busuttil (2022), made a call to arms by declaring "As the digital nomad community continues to grow thanks to the increasing popularity of remote work policies and the introduction of digital nomad visas, the conventional definition and contours of home are in need of serious reconsideration." Perhaps the very notion of "home" will continue to shift and transform in ways we can scarcely imagine. It may, in time, circle back to a state not unlike that of our nomadic ancestors—untethered, fluid, and defined less by the walls we inhabit and more by the refuge, sustenance, anchoring, routine, and respect we forge in virtual spaces. In an age where the physical and virtual worlds increasingly overlap, the lines between them continue to blur. Perhaps the idea of home will no longer be confined to a geographical or structural entity in the physical world. Perhaps home will become an invisible web of emotional and relational ties, spun across augmented reality spaces and embedded in the virtual world, thus binding us to each other in ways we can only begin to understand. The future is, as always, uncertain. So who knows?

Real and imaginary homes across the human lifespan

CHAPTER 2

The biography of a home

Nidhi Tewari

The word "biography" is generally restricted to the life of human beings. That the passage through time of inanimate objects might also deserve such designation has only recently been pointed out (Appadurai, 1986; Gosden & Marshall, 1999; Hoskins, 1998). Taking a cue from the trend, this contribution is intended to trace the "biography" of a home. It will span over the very first "home" within our mother's womb, our childhood homes which contribute heavily to the "waking screen" (Pacella, 1980) of our perceptual lives, and its later incarnations including college dorms, marital homes, downsized residences of late midlife, and places where we spend our old age. The discourse will seek to demonstrate that at each step in the lifespan, our dwellings both impact upon and reflect our intrapsychic goings-on.

Intrauterine "home"

The womb is the first place in our lives that offers us shelter, sustenance, and connection; after all, "the baby's development does not start at birth but with conception" (Lidz, 1968, p. 102). It is evident that it is in the womb where a fundamental sense of connectedness and familiarity begins to take root. Numerous studies (DeCasper & Fifer, 1980; Schaal

et al., 2020) illustrate that newborns are drawn to their mother's voice and scent; this highlights the primal bonds formed during gestation. Remarkably, research has shown that for premature infants, exposure to the live voice of their birth mother results in "significant early beneficial effects on physiological state, such as oxygen saturation levels, number of critical events and prevalence of calm alert state" (Filippa et al., 2013). This impact on the physical health of the preterm infant underscores the importance of experiencing the aforementioned properties of a home (refuge, sustenance, anchoring, routine, and respect) via the mother's voice while in the first home. The profound impact on the health of preterm infants upon reunion with their mother's voice further emphasizes the deeply restorative implications of "home" in the most vulnerable of states. Recall again, Madonna's song lyrics: "When you call my name. It feels like home." For the preterm newborn, hearing the mother's voice is the "home" that is essential for flourishing.

Before transitioning to the next phase in the biography of a home, it is worthwhile to reflect on questions that arise when working with individuals who possess alternative intrauterine home narratives, for instance, conception and birth through surrogacy. In many instances, surrogate mothers and newborns are not permitted to meet: a practice designed to protect the bonding experience with the genetic parents. How does this loss of routine, familiarity, and connectedness via the surrogate mother's voice and scent affect the newborn? Are there ways that this separation from the womb mother may have unintended consequences in the newborn? Are there ways in which this is beneficial for the bonding and attachment of the infant with her new home and parents? When thrust into a new world, where the voice of the surrogate is no longer present, what does it mean for the child to mourn that loss while simultaneously adapting to the presence of her biological parents? Such questions, though profoundly important, largely remain unanswered.

The connection between homes and the female body was highlighted by Freud when he discussed "house-symbolism" in his *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900a) and *Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis* (1916–17). He stated that

> the female genitals are symbolically represented by all such objects as share their characteristic of enclosing a hollow space which can

> take something into itself … Some symbols have more connection with the uterus than the female genitals: thus, *cupboards*, *stoves* and, more especially, *rooms*. (Freud, 1916–17, p.156, italics original)

If the womb is our first home then each new "house" or environment we enter after being born is, in a sense, an updated version of that original home. These new "homes" are experienced through the lens of the early infant–mother somatic relationship, and how well or poorly they replicate the emotional sustenance of that first home has a profound effect on a sense of belonging, security, and comfort. In a symbolic sense, one is constantly seeking to recreate the womb, both externally and within the internal world, in order to feel nurtured and contained. The "memory" of the womb leaves an indelible imprint on the way one engages with the world and on the spaces inhabited throughout our lives.

Childhood home

Allow me to begin this section by quoting a passage from the renowned French social philosopher, Gaston Bachelard.

> Life begins well, it begins enclosed, protected, all warm in the bosom of the house … It is the human being's first world. Before he is "cast into the world," as claimed by certain hasty metaphysics, man is laid in the cradle of the house. And always, in our daydreams, the house is a large cradle. (Bachelard, 1964, p. 7)

Now, if one metaphor for the childhood home is a large cradle, another equally apt one is the baby itself. In many ways, the childhood home is akin to the infant, both born into the world with boundless potential yet utterly dependent on their caregivers. Much like a child, the home undergoes a period of rapid growth and transformation, shaped by its surroundings and the individuals who inhabit it. The home will suddenly find itself polka-dotted with swaddling blankets and burping cloths. This new childhood home will have a crib, diapers, milk bottles, bassinets, and toys. New and "inherited" tiny clothes might be neatly folded, tossed into piles, or hung with matching tiny hangers. Lurking in corners and hidden under couches might be forgotten pacifiers, tiny nail

clippings, or the misplaced socks of tired new parents. New scents will fill the air—mother's fresh milk, the unforgettable scent of regurgitated milk nestled in the folds of the baby and in furniture creases. At times, the walls may echo with the high-pitched baby talk of parents, captivating giggles, playful pitter-patter of tiny feet, and the soothing cadence of parental lullabies. At other times, the walls may resound with children's cries, the thundering steps of angry feet, the cacophony of frustrated adults, or the stifling silence of neglect.

Refuge and sustenance are the cornerstones of the infant and childhood home. Without these the home and the inhabitants will not survive. Some homes might boast of live-in chefs and gourmet meals, while others are forced to survive on canned goods for sustenance. The grandeur and simplicity of the childhood home significantly determines the level of dignity internalized and the degree of prestige received. The home's balance of a reliable routine and unpredictable irregularity determine the stability of the home's framework and thus the endopsychic structure of the child raised within. Ultimately, the interplay of the five properties (refuge, sustenance, anchoring, routine, and respect; see Chapter 1 of this book) of a home wields significant influence in sculpting both the home and the child. The synergy of these elements in the childhood home (and thus in the child) constitutes the backdrop upon which future homes (and future selves) are imagined, created, and realized.

J. K. Rowling's (1997, 1998, 1999, 2000, 2003, 2005, 2007) epic saga about Harry Potter's life exemplifies how shifts in the five essential properties of a childhood home influence the trajectory of future homes and future selves. Its protagonist, Harry, is adopted as an infant and raised by his aunt and uncle. His early childhood is characterized by extreme isolation. Harry was deprived of knowledge about his parents, his ancestry, and his identity as a wizard. His aunt and uncle prioritized their own biological son's needs over Harry's and gave Harry leftovers or scraps of food, resulting in him frequently feeling hungry and neglected. Clearly, Harry was also deprived of emotional and cognitive sustenance in his early childhood home. Furthermore, by being assigned the smallest and least desirable "bedroom" in the house (a cupboard under the stairs), Harry was stripped of any dignity that could be salvaged in his situation.

Rowling then masterfully illustrates the impact of childhood homes by introducing Harry to a new home: Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. At age eleven, Harry discovers a new home where the synergy of psychically sustaining elements contrasts sharply with his early childhood home. At Hogwarts he obtains reliable refuge from evil, consistency, opulent sustenance, a deep sense of belonging, and respect. He even finds a comforting routine among his schedule, classwork, and summer vacations. Once in this new "childhood home," Harry flourishes into a confident leader and the champion of the wizarding world.

Like it acted for Harry, for all children, the childhood home has a lifelong impact on identity, fantasies, and personality. It lays the scaffolding for the fantasies of future homes and the degree to which these home-related fantasies of love, intrigue, fear, and sexuality are realized and which are let go.

> The rudiments of the ego, as they emerge gradually in the first half of the first year of life, take their pattern from the environmental conditions which have left their imprint on the infant's mind by way of his early pleasure-pain experiences, the conditions themselves becoming internalized in the ego structure. (A. Freud, 1954, p. 13)

Although the conditions of the childhood home become permanently imprinted in the ego structure, the childhood home itself continues to evolve and adapt with time. It undergoes a noticeable transition as the child progresses into adolescence.

Transitional residences of young adulthood

In the typical physiological development of homes, the adolescent home is predominantly preoccupied with a sense of belonging. Refuge and sustenance, having had a prior robust and consistent presence, are properties that emerge to the forefront only during times of upheaval such as the occasional desire for shelter from a storm or metabolic demands for increased food intake due to the growth spurts of puberty. Routine in the adolescent home shifts drastically. The home which once was unified with the quiet predictable cycles of parents and children sleeping together and waking up in unison now finds itself with disjointed routines.

> The adaptation to the social reality during adolescence acquires a fixity and stability which childhood never possessed. A certain degree of continuity, constancy, and sameness in the environment has a functional significance for the stability of psychic structure and function. The creation of an idiosyncratic environment is the task of the closing phase of adolescence; in the extent to which the endeavor succeeds one can gauge the individual's alloplastic potential. (Blos, 1962, pp. 215–216)

A home with an adolescent tends to have an uneven plenum. One of its corners might be in darkened silence with sleeping parents while another corner pulsates to music and glows with screens as teenagers stay up late gaming or messaging friends. The home surges with arguments and tension as teenagers assert their independence and parents try to uphold "rules." The home itself witnesses a certain decathexis as the teenager invests energy in finding surrogate homes with peers and thus forges what Blos (1962) termed an "idiosyncratic environment" (p. 216).

The adolescent home finds itself fractured as the adolescent tries to carve out personal space separate from the parents. It morphs transiently to accommodate different spheres of adolescent life. In the summers, the home is replete with the familiar sights, smells, sounds of a beloved camp where the teen reconnects with friends each year. After school and on weekends, the adolescent home is a peers' basement where teens bond over music, television shows, and food. Increasingly, the adolescent home is morphing into the virtual world. Teens create avatars and virtual spaces in which they seek a sense of belonging, routine, and respect. Many adolescent homes experience a corner where a teen is secluded from the rest of the real-world inhabitants and engaging with connections forged online. The adolescent home, with an increased percentage of time and energy invested in scrolling social media, meeting people in augmented reality spaces like the metaverse, connecting with gamers and creating imaginary squads of fighters, is in contrast to the childhood home where the child crawled on floors, marked up the walls with crayons, and soiled the furniture with messy handprints.

Urban adolescent homes experience this specific fragmentation typically much earlier than suburban ones. Young people walk, bike, use the subway, trains, and buses more readily in city spaces and find ways to

experience connectedness, routine, dignity, prestige in various parts of the city far away from home earlier than their suburban or rural counterparts. Some adolescents find a partial home in the urban park playing basketball, others may find it in the library where they escape to study. In suburban or rural homes, the acquisition of the first car often marks the creation of an "idiosyncratic environment" (ibid.), a fragmented extension of the adolescent home. The fragmentation of the adolescent home is a result of the search for highly personalized environments and is a harbinger for the next stage in the biography of a home: the emerging adulthood home.

The emerging adulthood home is increasingly becoming synonymous with the singlehood home. At one time, the emerging adulthood home would have been considered a brief transitional space like the college dorm which briefly sandwiched itself between the adolescent home and the married life home. However, this is no longer the case. As described by Gilmore (2019), emerging adulthood is now "a new phase of considerable duration" (p. 628). The zeitgeist of twenty-first-century America is an environment that no longer is finding previous markers of adulthood (e.g., living financially independently after college graduation or finding a lifelong partner) as desirable as before. As a result, the once transient emerging adulthood home is stretching its life and blurring into the singlehood home. It becomes a series of different living spaces until a decision is made to have a committed relationship or transition to the family life home. The singlehood home, like a chameleon, transforms in accordance with the immediate landscape. Unlike the more conceptually fixed homes of childhood and adolescence, the singlehood home is usually a conglomeration of multiple different dwelling spaces spanning several years or decades. Cultural norms and societal expectations greatly influence the characteristics of each singlehood home. The forms it takes depend on various social, economic, cultural, occupational, and educational factors. The variable longevity of the singlehood home is the cause of its polymorphic existence.

Alas, the singlehood home comes in many varieties: a college dormitory with unfamiliar peers, a house shared with family, a rented bedroom in another family's home, an apartment leased with other graduate students, a dwelling space paid for by the company, the first personally owned condominium, and the first privately owned suburban ranch

are all examples of singlehood homes. The financial characteristics (funded by parents, personally rented, or purchased with a mortgage), the inhabitants (strangers, relatives, or friends), and the connection to phase of life (dorm on a college campus, housing provided by work) are all factors that shift vastly in singlehood homes. Despite this considerable variation in singlehood homes the integral task to establish refuge, sustenance, anchoring, routine, and respect remains constant.

The property of a home that asserts itself more prominently during the later parts of the singlehood homes stage is respect: the pursuit of both dignity and prestige. Once out of the college dorm, singlehood homes incorporate architectural design, location, size, interior design, amenities, and personalization as ways to foster prestige. Homes with unique or impressive architectural designs may stand out in a neighborhood or community. There are thoughts of inhabiting a home in exclusive or desirable neighborhoods known for their prestige and status. The size and scale of the home becomes a more prominent concern. Energy and money are utilized to invest in high quality furnishings and decor that reflect sophistication and luxury. These homes may include upscale amenities such as swimming pools, home theaters, gourmet kitchens, and smart home technology as a way to gain prestige.

Consider Freud's (1909c) comment of fantasizing to have parents of higher social standards while understanding a singlehood home's quest for prestige:

> At about the period I have mentioned, then, the child's imagination becomes engaged in the task of getting free from the parents of whom he now has a low opinion and of replacing them by others, who, as a rule, are of higher social standing. He will make use in this connection of any opportune coincidences from his actual experience, such as his becoming acquainted with the Lord of the Manor or some landed proprietor if he lives in the country or with some member of the aristocracy if he lives in town. Chance occurrences of this kind arouse the child's envy, which finds expression in a phantasy in which both his parents are replaced by others of better birth. (pp. 238–239)

Such pursuit of prestige involves a complex interplay of desires and conflicts deeply rooted in the dynamics of the childhood home.

As singlehood homes seek to define their identities, there is a drive to reflect a higher social standing than the childhood homes where parents were the masters. There is a wish to cast off the elements of the childhood home (and parents) that were devalued and hold steadfastly on to idealized aspects of the childhood home (and parents). As per traditional linear trajectories, the singlehood home progresses to the marital home and then to the family home. This is no longer the biography of many homes. Some homes enter the married-life-home stage then transition to the divorced home. Others skip married life and go straight to the family-life home. Many homes "choose" to omit the family-life home while others retain their singlehood status until the end of the lifespan. Nevertheless, the marital home is a formidable entity that warrants its own section in this discourse.

Marital home

The newly married-life home may especially boast harmony and fulfillment. Like a couple in the throes of passion, the home and its inhabitants are bound together by a deep sense of intimacy and mutual devotion. The corners of the newly married-life home bear the imprints of love, shared past experiences, and dreams of the future. There may be a cozy nook where each morning's coffee is a shared embrace of warmth and connection. The newly married home can have a charming kitchen where flavors and anticipation for a lifetime of marital joy are stirred into every dish. The home becomes a living testament to the strength of their desire to maintain the bond. Yet, even in the midst of this bliss, the married-life home is aware of tension and challenges that must be faced. This newly married-life home is the union of two distinct histories of refuge, sustenance, connectedness, routine, respect. The merging of these unique histories under one roof requires a reckoning of forces. As the honeymoon period wanes, the newly married home tries to find a compromise between these forces. "Some relaxation of the boundaries of the self (on both partners' part) is essential to evolve marital mutuality" (Akhtar & Billinkoff, 2011, p. 112).

Living together often requires adjustments in physical space and privacy, which can impact the sense of refuge from the outside world. One moment, the home may find its windows being opened by one

inhabitant who welcomes the sounds and fresh air, only for these same windows to be slammed shut by the other partner who is troubled by the warm breeze creating a draft. Similarly, the newly married-life home might experience squabbles over the thermostat. The home also experiences rifts from the merging of two varying histories regarding sustenance. A refrigerator may grapple with discordant food dynamics as fresh fruits and vegetables compete for real estate with processed meats and sugary desserts. The kitchen might experience an array of new smells as herbs and spices from two different cultures line the cabinets. The married home may eventually find itself with concerns over financial goals, lifestyle choices, spending habits, and secrets. One remote closet might be overflowing with compulsively purchased items, in attempts to hide ongoing battles with hoarding. There could be a hidden reserve of cash in a drawer, set aside for an emergency getaway that wouldn't leave a credit card trail.

There is a fresh new bond between the partners that deepens the home's sense of anchoring in itself; yet it feels the force of the tug to maintain lifestyles from the past singlehood homes. The home might find itself alone on evenings; some evenings it may find itself with one fuming partner upset about being left out of the camping trip planned that excluded them. The home might notice the tension of balancing demands of work, social connections outside the home, and connections within the home. The routine of the married-life home also goes through a period of adjustment until settling to a balanced place that feels satisfactory. At first, there may be surprise in the shower turning on multiple times a day as the expected routine was to shower just once a day. There may be discord in establishing times for exercise, watching television, and even meals. The home may experience resistance to frequency and timing of vacuuming, sweeping, and having the bathroom cleaned. Undergirding all these are the gradually accruing psycho-structural and psychodynamic transformations within the couple. "The superego directives of each partner also change to meet the superego standards and cope with the id impulses of the spouse. Each partner grew up with differing parental and societal directives that have been internalized as superego directives" (Lidz, 1968, p. 437).

In successful marital homes, the inhabitants quickly learn that compromise is essential, particularly when it comes to those aspects of

their partner's behavior that may seem unreasonable. In one case, for instance, a husband agreed to let his wife control the thermostat as she wished, in exchange for her turning off the annoying narration from the GPS during drives to familiar places.

The arrival of children has the potential of enriching as well as complicating the life of a marital home. The family-life home becomes a rich tapestry of human connection, a sanctuary where the complexities of relationships unfold in myriad forms. It is dedicated to the nurturing of children; the home now takes on a uniquely tender and transformative significance. It strives to become a shelter from the harshness of the outside world as well as from the uncertainties and fears that naturally accompany childhood. The family life home tends to become a cocoon, a protective shell where children are sheltered from external pressures and allowed to grow in a space that nurtures their emotional and psychological development. It is in this refuge that they learn to perceive the world as a place of safety and wonder.

Sustenance in a family life home transcends the physical act of feeding. It embodies the emotional and intellectual nourishment that children receive through care, education, and affectionate engagement. The home becomes a crucible of growth where the daily rituals of care and the rhythms of love are the essential nutrients for a child's development. Every meal shared, every story told, contributes to a deeper sense of being sustained by love and attention. Such connectedness fosters a sense of belonging and security in children. Parents vicariously revisit the past relationship with their own parents. Each shared experience and mutual understanding helps to solidify the connections and the fabric of familial unity.

Respect in the family life home is manifested in the care with which children are treated and the respect afforded to their individuality and potential. Prestige is derived from the home's external status but more so from the pride and honor associated with the nurturing role of parenthood. The home becomes a place of inherent worth, where honor is found in the cultivation of character, the fostering of self-respect, and the deep, abiding pride in raising children with love and integrity.

The end of the marital home means the dissolution of future hopes and dreams (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 2003). The divorced home initially represents the unforeseen outcome of a failed marriage and the

unexpected shift to a new stage in a biography of a home. Depending on the circumstance of the ending of the married life, the divorced home may experience a sense of relief and freedom as it emerges from a difficult or unfulfilling relationship. This relief may also be coupled with newfound joy in rediscovering individualized ways of establishing refuge, sustenance, connectedness, routine, and dignity. However, this emotional liberation is often accompanied by sadness and confusion as the reality of the loss sets in, leading to a period of grieving over what once was. The uncertainty of the future can be daunting, compounded by pressure to adjust to new routines and responsibilities. For the divorced home the journey to finding stability and a renewed sense of self is both deeply personal and profoundly transformative.

Divorce and the financial instability that frequently accompanies it can profoundly affect the sanctuary that the family life home is meant to provide (Akhtar & Blue, 2017). Turbulence or estrangement among the inhabitants can erode the comfort and protection that the family life home traditionally affords. Such disturbances introduce a discordant note into the otherwise harmonious symphony of domestic life. The once-secure space that nurtured the imagination and provides solace becomes fraught with emotional dissonance.

Empty nest, downsized accommodations, and elderhood homes

With the children leaving for college and/or employment, the home—once bustling with activity—settles into a calmer rhythm. This is often most evident in its kitchen. The air fryer, oven, and stove that used to hum with ceaseless energy now operate at a leisurely pace or not at all. The plethora of dishes that once relentlessly cycled from cabinets to microwave to table to the dishwasher and back to cabinets now mostly rest untouched. Now just a couple of plates rotate between the dish rack and the microwave. In the "empty nest," the vibrant bedrooms that once throbbed with contemporary pop songs and active teens fall silent. The stillness of the empty nest is most palpable at the front door, once a lively portal swinging open to the flurry of school days, piano lessons, karate classes, soccer games, and concerts. Now, it stands quietly closed, a mute witness to the reduced traffic through its threshold.

This silence embodies a bittersweet duality: the loss of separation from children is paramount but the hidden joy of transformation also beckons (Coburn & Treeger, 1997; Usher, 2017). With children gone, the spaces once devoted to their nurturing now brim with potential growth for the parents themselves. Rooms that served as study havens or cozy retreats for sleeping teens can be transformed into yoga studios, art spaces, or personal gyms—reflecting interests that were formerly overshadowed by the responsibilities of parenting. The duality of loss and potential in the empty nest home is then left to be navigated by the home as it finds ways to fulfill its five essential functions.

Time passes. The home begins to show its age and has to confront the poignant reality of its own limitations. Just as the aging body learns to cope with its frailties, the home must now acknowledge its creaky floorboards, inefficient heating, and the unwelcome damage from mold and moisture. At this point of its lifetime, the home begins to prepare its transition into the first of the emerging elderhood homes: the downsized home. The downsized home becomes a repository of memories: infused with decades of sentiment. Downsizing compels a selective preservation of cherished moments, turning the process of sorting through furniture, clothing, and trinkets into a poetic journey of reflection. What memories will be retained? What can be generously given away? What must be let go?

This act of condensing a lifetime of belongings into a smaller space embodies a paradox: while a downsized home may initially feel limiting, it can also cultivate a sense of coziness and intimacy. Thus, leaving behind a larger home often evokes sadness, yet it simultaneously opens the door to new beginnings and a different kind of closeness.

And so, all homes eventually enter the harbinger of the final stages in the biography of a home: the elderhood home. This can take diverse forms—an apartment within a senior community or a shared suite in a grown child's home. This might manifest as a seasonal division, with the elderly residing in two distinct homes—one for the warmth of summer and another for the chill of winter. Alternatively, it may involve sharing space with adult children and their nuclear families, creating a tapestry of interconnected lives that reflects the ego pleasures of generational continuity.

An unanticipated element that often punctuates the routine of the elder years is the resurgence of dreamlike memories: echoes of one's home's earlier chapters. The front-yard pink-flowered dogwood tree can awaken memories of the vibrant pink roses that once graced the porch of a childhood home. The winding staircase, now a fall-risk zone of hazard, may stir memories of the freedom and independence of carelessly running up and down the steps of a rented singlehood home. Squirrels darting across the yard can ignite recollections of a beloved pet that once playfully ran in the backyard of the first home ever owned. Cool evening drafts may conjure memories of waiting for a partner to return from work to the married-life home. Thunderstorms pounding on the roof might stir anxious memories of waiting for adolescents to return to the family-life home. A blanket, having survived downsizing, may rekindle the poignant sense of loss experienced in the empty nest. The emerging elderhood home, more than its predecessors, becomes a cave rich with bejeweled memories that sparkle with nostalgic joy and simultaneously wound with the sharp edge of loss. No wonder nostalgia has been described as a "bitter-sweet pleasure" (Kleiner, 1970, p. 11).

Finally, the end of life appears on the psychic horizon. With it comes assisted-living centers and specialized facilities providing medical care ("nursing homes"). Such homes often echo the safety and simplicity of childhood (Madow, 1997). Just as strollers and cribs once ensured safety, the elderhood home provides similar tools for mobility and security: wheelchairs and bed railings. Sustenance carries the reverberations of infant feeding: with pureed foods and nutritional liquid supplements replacing mother's milk. Daily routines revolve around the shifts of compassionate staff and healthcare workers, while visits from children and grandchildren become vital lifelines of connection. In this environment, a reliance on staff and community fosters a sense of dignity and belonging amid the gradual loss of independence. The shared stories and nostalgia of lives well lived become the soul of the elderhood home, offering both solace and strength.

The "nearness of death" and extinction of self is the predominant feature of the elderhood home; however, there is more to the elderhood home. News of its various inhabitants, friends, colleagues, and family passing also become part of the routine. The elderhood home itself,

unlike its inhabitants, does not culminate into an extinction of itself. Instead, a nursing home is destined to forever be the impasse holding area as its inhabitants succumb to their fated death.

A particular importance to the significance of dreams in the elderhood home must be noted. The elderhood home routinely will experience moments of both actively recalling and seemingly unsolicited spontaneous recollections of the experience of the five essential properties of the previous homes. In the elderhood home, these dreams of previous iterations of homes have particular poignancy. These dreams of previous homes bear the essence of the long-held wish to return to the original "home": the mother's womb. The reality that returning to this first protected state when all that was needed was comfortably accessible will never be realized is juxtaposed with the acceptance that there is a certain permanence and finality that comes when life is over.

In this context, the home of one's waning years stands as a vessel that contains the space that tries to coalesce the experiences of this stage, some of which include: (i) the wish to return to the womb, (ii) the pull to again become a part of nothingness, (iii) the longing to find meaning, (iv) the desire to continue to contribute to the lives of the next generation, (v) coming to terms with what was and was not accomplished in life, and (vi) adjusting to the aging body. Elderhood homes are thereby spaces that offer refuge and sustenance, both physically and emotionally. They become sanctuaries where elders, with their increasingly fragile bodies and minds, find a semblance of safety and care that echoes the nurturing qualities of the womb and early childhood homes. Yet, beyond the basic provision of physical care, these homes also strive to provide connectedness and anchoring. In a world that often neglects the elderly, they offer a community that mirrors a family—caregivers, fellow residents, and staff alike becoming an extended network of relations that fill the emptiness left by lost loved ones and fading memories. The elderly in these homes find a form of respect that reaffirms their sense of self-worth—often compromised by age and illness—through rituals, individualized care, and moments of personal recognition.

When a nursing home or assisted-living facility fails to provide sufficient refuge, sustenance, anchoring, routine, dignity, and prestige, the consequences for its residents can be devastating. In the absence of a safe haven, elders are left vulnerable to feelings of abandonment,

isolation, and despair. The lack of refuge means that they may feel as though they are adrift, untethered from the sense of security that elderhood homes are supposed to offer. In this environment, their dreams—already fragile and imbued with a sense of loss—become infused with anxiety and disillusionment, for the ideal elderhood home, as a place of healing and peace, remains unattainable. Without adequate sustenance, both in the form of emotional support and physical care, they may experience a kind of existential hunger—an emptiness that no medication or clinical intervention can alleviate. The absence of connectedness and anchoring, meanwhile, leaves them in a state of profound loneliness, as their relationships with staff and fellow residents become transactional rather than relational. In these sterile, impersonal spaces, the elderly often lose their sense of dignity, their personal histories reduced to mere medical charts, their uniqueness erased in the mechanical rhythms of institutional life. The deprivation of prestige, too, exacerbates this sense of invisibility; without recognition of their lived experience, their contributions to family, culture, and society are forgotten, rendering them irrelevant in the eyes of those around them. In such conditions, the elderhood home becomes not a sanctuary but a prison of sorts, where the elderly exist in a state of suspended grief—not only for the loss of health but for the depletion of the sense of self and its connections to the world of living beings. Regardless of the old-age experience being good or bad, death finally arrives and severs the tie to both the pleasures and pain of being alive.

Posthumous dwellings

It is in keeping with the spirit of this biography of domiciles beginning with the mother's womb that I mention that the last stop is constituted by the graves which become corporeal selves' final resting places or the urns that contain cremated remains. Typically, followers of Hinduism, Sikhism, and Buddhism choose to be cremated and followers of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam choose to be buried. However, many prominent members of the latter faiths (e.g., Aldous Huxley, Alexander Fleming, Janet Leigh, Bram Stoker, Peter Sellers, and Sigmund Freud) have chosen to be cremated and "reside" in the Golders Green Crematorium in London (Akhtar, 2005), and cremation is on the rise in Western countries at large.

There's an opportunity for more in-depth exploration of cremation and urns in psychoanalytic literature. Discussion currently centers on references to patients attending a cremation ceremony and their memories of the experience (Brodsky, 1959; Goodman, 2013). Arlow (1955) included a statement suggesting that "ritual pyre and cremation may be interpreted, as is burial in the earth, as a re-entry into the immortality of the womb" (p. 70). Additionally, there are some papers that specifically address an individual's experience regarding placing an urn in their home. For example, Hofer (2015) reflects on placing her husband's urn above the fireplace, alongside personal items like his glasses and his childhood toy. She explores how the urn's placement, alongside personal items, anchors her sense of belonging. By merging the past with the present, it creates a space where memory, mourning, and connection to her husband coexist. Arranging her husband's final "home" in this way offers a way to foster an anchoring sense of community, sustenance, and respect in her own current home. It would be beneficial to further engage in exploratory discourse regarding the psychic aspects of cremation ceremonies, spreading of remains, and placement of urns for both the living and the departed.

The topic of graves has been elucidated in detail by Akhtar (2011b) who appreciated the complexity of the final tangible home for both: the deceased and the living. Essential aspects of his discussion include: (i) Graves symbolize a complex balance between the understanding of the finality of death and the wish for continuity of life. Graves can both aid and hinder the mourning process for the bereaved. (ii) Burial processes and grave visits involve various psychic dimensions: including the impact of the ceremony, experiencing control through participating in the rituals during the burial, the subsequent emptiness, and varying responses to grief, such as engagement with or avoidance of the grave. (iii) Epitaphs, shaped by cultural and historical changes, are windows in language, religious beliefs, and emotional expression, often revealing the deceased's views on life, death, and legacy, while also reflecting psychological elements like narcissism and the desire for immortality. (iv) For those who lost their parents prior to developmentally consolidating their ambivalence toward their parents, visiting the parent's grave at significant life moments helps process grief, shape identity, and resolve lingering emotional

conflicts. Ultimately, graves serve as spaces that offer psychic sustenance, anchoring, routine, and a respectful means of maintaining a connection to the deceased within the living's ongoing life.

Concluding remarks

In this contribution, I have delineated the various phases in the "biography" of a home. These included intrauterine existence, childhood homes, transitional residences of young adulthood, marital homes, downsized places, elderhood homes, graves, and urns.

I have looked closely at each phase of the biography and examined (i) how the sights, sounds, and appearance of the home changes while its essential properties remain, (ii) the dynamic nature of the home's five essential properties and how they shift from the forefront or background during each phase, (iii) the physiological way in which the five properties are entangled with the developmental stages of its inhabitants, (iv) possible consequences when the ego supportive functions of home fail, and (v) the ubiquitous and gradual shift from a linear trajectory of a home to a winding path with various detours and offshoots before reaching its final phase.

In concluding with the final tangible "home" as graves or urns, there is a missed opportunity to consider the now and forever increasing ways that each phase of the home's biography is immortalized in the intangible iCloud accessible through smartphones, laptops, and desktop computers. Smartphones' daily notifications of flashing unsolicited pictures as well-intended "reminders" of the past offer a superficial ongoing connection to past homes. These pictures and videos, effortlessly appearing on home screens, serve as constant visual and auditory reminders of the sights and sounds of past homes. Pictures and videos, now stored on the iCloud and viewed on smartphones, offer an illusion of connection to the past, and deny the opportunity to allow for details like a fuzzy carpet or marked-up tiles to recede into the inner psyche. Thus, these digital images, fleeting and filtered through the lens of technology, may possibly be hindering us from fully engaging with the emotional landscape of our former homes. Instead of a lived, genuinely internally recreated memory of colors, shapes, and sounds of previous homes, we are left with only a superficial, curated visual echo. In this sense, we may

not be truly keeping our memories; we may be merely storing them for later consumption.

In this way, could it be, for the current Generation Alpha (individuals born between 2010 and 2024), that by storing memories digitally, they are experiencing a kind of psychological distancing, preserving not the lived experience of the past, but a sterile, digital version that renders them unable to fully grieve or reconnect with what was once so vividly real? The question then arises: In the quest to hold on to everything, are they not inadvertently letting go of the very thing they hope to preserve?

Or perhaps a less cynical ponderance could be: that for Generation Alpha, digital memory storage is not a distancing mechanism, but a tool that enhances their ability to internalize and process past experiences. By capturing moments in photos, videos, and other digital formats, they are able to preserve the essence of their lives—allowing for a deeper connection to the past. In fact, these digital repositories may provide them with the means to reflect on and integrate memories in ways that transcend mere nostalgia, offering a continuous thread of emotional continuity. Rather than losing the past, they may be creating new avenues for sustaining and experiencing it, enriching their emotional lives in ways previously unavailable.

Perhaps the answer, as it is many times, is not either this or that … but likely BOTH are possible and both are happening simultaneously.

CHAPTER 3

The search for a sense of home

Sarita Singh and Rajiv Gulati

Freud resisted leaving Vienna well after it was safe for him and his family to remain at Bergstrasse 19. It took heroic efforts on the part of Princess Marie Bonaparte and others to rescue him and his immediate family. Unfortunately, four of his sisters could not be helped and died in the Nazi concentration camps.[1] One could see Freud's reluctance to leave Vienna as his denial of the danger he was in; however, we know that being forced into exile—giving up one's home and one's homeland—is extremely difficult. Therefore, one can understand Freud's reluctance to leave his home until the very last minute. He resisted the sense of displacement and exile[2] which Akhtar (1999a) has beautifully captured in his writings. Freud, after living in Freiberg in Germany from birth until the age of three, was moved to Leipzig and then at the age of four from Leipzig to Vienna. He perhaps, unconsciously, resisted being forced to move lest the pain from those childhood moves resurface (Gay, 1988). Though Freud had to literally give up his home, this chapter focuses on not just the literal (*à la Freud*) loss of home but also the psychic loss of being at home in the world. Of course, all literal loss of home has an impact on the psychic loss as well.

[1] See Andrew Nagorski's book *Saving Freud* for more details (Nagorski, 2023).

[2] Please see Akhtar (1999a) for the difference between an immigrant and an exile.

In a broader sense, human development forces a loss of home on all of us, during birth, during separation as a toddler, then as an adolescent, and finally with the move into adulthood. These developmental points, potentially painful experiences of loss, are shared by all humans. They are pivotal phases that can be growth-enhancing, and lead to the important work of identity formation. In this chapter, our focus is on the loss of a sense of being at home, both psychic as well as literal. We start with what we mean by home, then spend some time looking at factors contributing to the psychic and literal homelessness. Finally, we present three short clinical vignettes[3] from our practices that exemplify patients whose struggles in treatment revolved, to a large extent, around having lost home and working to find again a sense of home.

Home

What is home and what is the psychological aspect of feeling at home? Home is a powerful metaphor, the secure base, per Bowlby (1969), that allows us to face the world and to face loss. The developmental importance of a sense of home is described by Dunbar (2017) as

> being at home in our body, feeling at home with the other while being at home for the other, and feeling at home in the union of differences … and through all these, finding a home in society at large with its norms, values and culture. (p. 183)

Togaz (2021) in his review of a book by Kennedy (2014), *The Psychic Home*, explains that it "is not only a psychical/external space that protects us, but also a psychological/internal structure that supports us." All humans need to have a sense of "home" to feel secure in the world and they experience losing it as a trauma. Kennedy links the sturdiness of the internalized psychic home with the nature of early home life—an early life that feels unsafe and unpredictable, one where a stable psychic home has not had a chance to develop, can lead to

[3] All patient material has been disguised.

unstable attachments and identifications. Gunsburg (2023) further develops the idea of what home is:

> [It] comprises of dreams, memories, actual experiences (both positive and negative), mother, father, family, and positive and negative smells. Home is an idealization, it contains fantasy and provides one's need for safety, refuge and comfort. Home is where we define ourselves and how we choose to make our way in the world. It is the blueprint of our lives. It is where we learn to dream, where we become who we are and where we can always return.

Other chapters in the present volume explore what leads to humans feeling at home. We, in this chapter, will focus more on the loss of a sense of home and through clinical vignettes show how such a loss can be mourned and that the process of mourning might lead to recovering a sense of feeling at home.

Psychic and structural homelessness

Our first loss of home begins at birth.[4] We all must give up the protection of the womb, our first home. As stated earlier, normal human development requires dealing with disruptions to the sense of being at home. In addition to birth, individuation (separation from the primary maternal unit), adolescence, and emerging adulthood[5] can all lead to a sense of alienation and hence a loss of feeling at home in the world. To add to the above-mentioned normative developmental stages, there are certain other factors which not everyone experiences but which may lead to a psychic sense of loss of home or a literal loss of home. These include but are not limited to: trauma during birth, death of a parent, maternal object depression, divorce or separation of parents, death of a sibling, being given up for adoption, sexual and physical abuse or neglect in childhood, war, literal homelessness (due to natural disasters—fire, flood, etc.), and immigration—involuntary or voluntary.

[4] Please see Dr. Tiwari's chapter in this book for a comprehensive review.

[5] See Karen Gilmore for a discussion why emerging adulthood should be considered a distinct stage in human development (Gilmore, 2019).

We will touch upon all the above-mentioned factors briefly and then go on to explore two specific factors which lead to homelessness, namely, maternal object depression and immigration, in detail. We do this because the clinical vignettes we have chosen, to illustrate our point, are all about patients for whom both these two factors have had a profound impact on their sense of feeling at home in the world. Trauma during birth (depending upon the extent) could potentially lead a child to feeling alienated from her siblings in the family and hence lead to psychic lack of feeling at home. The death of a parent is potentially traumatic and depending on when it happens could lead to a psychic and/or a literal homelessness. Winnicott (1971) writes about a therapeutic interview with a sixteen-year-old girl who had lost her mother early in her life where it led to her feeling psychically homeless. Divorce and separation of the parents deprives the children of a sense of home with both their parents in it. In many instances, children must get used to two new homes, new partners of their parents, new siblings, etc. Gunsburg (2023), who works with many such children, argues that they can often end up feeling an inadequate sense of feeling at home even when they are with their parents. Crehan (2004) in her latest paper writes, "The death of a sibling in childhood is a complex loss to manage … the effects of this loss on the surviving sibling can give rise to a variety of symptoms that may impair emotional development." The guilt for surviving may mar the ability of the surviving sibling to fully participate in life and lead to feeling alienated from others, what we are calling psychic homelessness. Being given up for adoption leads to a literal as well as a psychic loss of home. Guittard (2022) in her article, "When the good object is also a thief: A memoir of adoption," explores the possible existence of an intrapsychic, adoption-specific preoedipal triad including the child, her birth mother, and her adoptive mother. She shows how adoption might lead to a sense of non-belonging (homelessness) in a child. Adelman (2023), in her paper about her family's personal experience of the Holocaust and its impact, observes:

> Where traumatic loss has threatened the safety and integrity of home, leave-taking can be uncertain, incomplete, stagnant or damaging. The ordinary developmental need to separate can

> become confounded with the extraordinary circumstances of trauma, and thus threaten to repeat the distressing losses of the past. Bridging the past and the present may offer a pathway forward.

Maternal object depression

Many psychoanalysts, including but not limited to Bowlby (1963, 1973), Fairbairn (1952), Freud (1895d, 1900a), Green (1986), D. N. Stern (1992), and Winnicott (1965b), have written about maternal depression and its impact on the child. Growing up with a depressed maternal object a child identifies with the depressed part of the maternal object and hence grows up having a sense of alienation from herself and her surroundings and feels a lack of a psychic home. How this might happen is addressed by several authors. Winnicott (1965b) writes:

> In certain cases, however, the mother's central internal object is dead at the critical time in her child's early infancy, and her mood is one of depression. Here the infant has to fit in with a role of *dead* object, or else has to be lively to counteract the mother's preconception with the idea of the child's deadness. Here the opposite to the liveliness of the infant is *an anti-life* factor derived from the mother's depression. The task of the infant in such a case is to be alive and to look alive and to communicate being alive; in fact this is the ultimate aim of such an individual, who is thus denied that which belongs to more fortunate infants, the enjoyment of what life and living may bring. (p. 191–192, italics original)

For Winnicott's baby, a sense of alienation from her true self would be a psychic reality and she will grow up not feeling connected to her true self and hence not feel a true sense of belonging in the world. The maternal object lost to depression is also well illustrated in Green's "dead mother complex." He writes:

> An imago which has been constituted in the child's mind, following maternal depression, brutally transforming the living object, a source of vitality for the child, into a distant figure, timeless and practically inanimate … dead mother … is a mother who remains alive but who is, so to speak psychically dead in the eyes of the young child in her care. (Green, 1986)

A child with such a presence of the "absent maternal object" would be alienated from the world and not feel at home in it and would grow up with a sense of psychic homelessness. D. N. Stern (1992), taking up the "dead mother complex," beautifully demonstrates from a developmental perspective what might transpire in the baby's mind when she encounters a depressed mother. The maternal object's depression perhaps most frequently results in a child growing up feeling alienated in the world. The child would not be able to form close libidinal ties and hence feel unmoored and psychically homeless. This alienation would permeate all aspects of her being. Only when she can mourn her loss of belonging can she feel at home in the world.

Immigration

Another cause of both psychic as well as structural loss of home is immigration. Immigration obviously dislocates and disrupts a sense of belonging because of the loss of continuity (Ainslie et al., 2013, p. 666). Only relatively recently has psychoanalysis accepted the significance of the cultural context in which one grows up, despite Winnicott's (1971) recognition of the cultural environment which is woven in the care that an infant receives. This cultural context is obviously disrupted by immigration. The context in which the loss of one's home has happened and the circumstances that the immigrant or exile finds herself in have an enormous impact on how an immigrant feels in her adopted country. Akhtar writes,

> Immigration from one country to another is a complex and multi-faceted psychosocial process with significant and lasting effects on an individual's identity. Leaving one's country involves profound losses. Often one has to give up familiar food, native music, unquestioned social customs, and even one's language. (Akhtar, 1999b)

The lasting effect of immigration could be never feeling at home again. The most important factor which determines how at home an immigrant will feel, in her adopted country, is the immigrant's capacity as well as the opportunities she might have to mourn her losses. For further discussion of the mourning secondary to immigration, please see Ainslie et al. (2013), Akhtar (1995, 1999a, 1999b), Klebanoff (2023),

Tummala-Narra (2001). Psychoanalyst Anni Bergman's statement made to Akhtar perhaps best encapsulates all immigrants' dilemma:

> I love my home. I have put a lot into it. But is it really home? Home, as Winnicott says, is where we come from. When I go to Vienna I always go to the house where I was born and lived for twenty years. Is it home? It isn't. So in a certain way I don't have a home, but feel at home in many places. Emigration means among many other things being at home in at least two languages and maybe in many places. Having family and friends in many places, it also means to me, I think, an eternal longing to belong which is never quite fulfilled. I "belong" to several analytic groups. I don't fully belong to any one. Only my children and grandchildren, who certainly don't belong to me, do I really belong to. (Akhtar 1999b, p. 104, quoting Anni Bergman's personal communication to him in May, 1999)

Could an immigrant ever feel a sense of belonging? Yes and no, as Bergman's statement above helps us see. But immigrants are not the only patients who might struggle to feel at home in the world. And yet, interestingly, most of the psychoanalytic literature on the impact of the loss of a literal space, as in a home or a country, has been through the experience of immigration (Nayar-Akhtar, 2023). We have learned much from this literature about the interplay between culture and intrapsychic conflicts. Nayar-Akhtar (2015b) points out that the loss of "cultural homes" is a more universal phenomenon that applies broadly to all patients. Immigrants, obviously, must contend with the literal loss of their home, nonetheless both psychic as well as literal homes are important to all humans. All analysts work with their patients' subjective loss of home as well as deal with the literal loss of home for some. One could go as far as stating that the most important motivating factor to seek analytic treatment might be a search for a psychic home in the world. We are in total agreement with Nayar-Akhtar (2023) when, writing about her immigrant patients' loss of home, she observes: "The relationship between structural (literal) and psychic space (home) is complex but universal and emerges during the course of any analytic discussion about such matters."

We will now present three vignettes where the search for a sense of home becomes a key focus of the treatment.

Clinical vignette: 1

"*The door is closed; I sit outside waiting and waiting. The door rarely opens when I need it to*."[6] This is a childhood memory of C, who sought treatment for depression. Having grown up with a depressed mother, a father who was out of the house for long hours (he was a trauma surgeon), and an older sister who was the apple of her mother's eye, she never felt at home with her mother. Her sister was a star athlete and hence was adored for her athleticism by the mother. On the other hand, C unfortunately was born with a mild injury to her arm which necessitated regular physical therapy. Only when her father was back from the hospital and not drinking, did she feel the comfort of being at home. Her sister left home for a boarding school when she was ten and the patient herself, at the age of thirteen, voluntarily chose to go to the same boarding school, even though by that time her sister had left the boarding school to go to college. At the age of seventeen she graduated and went away to college. Her parents divorced during her sophomore year of college and soon thereafter her childhood home was sold, and she was never able to go back to it. Eventually, after graduating and finding a job, she found a woman to marry who was like a longed-for maternal object—she cooked for her, doted on her, was smart and charming. Her marriage with her wife was a "*happy*" one until she gave birth to a son. Her wife could not tolerate her paying attention to their son; she slowly began to, more and more (in C's estimation), resemble her own mother at which point she sought help.[7]

Early in the treatment, she shared a fantasy of sitting on the floor of my office and "*just staying there all day long while you see other patients*." I understood this to be her fantasy of being in the womb, a place where she felt safe and cared for. I could just go on working with her sitting in the corner listening to my voice. C felt that it reflected her desire to have a "*home base*" in me, like a "*toddler, who comes back to refuel*." Though C could express the aforementioned wish, she wasn't sure I wanted her in

[6] All direct statements by the patient are italicized.

[7] This understanding of her relationship was arrived at in the analysis.

my office or to even work with her. Every day upon arriving at my office door, she worried whether I would allow her back. She was momentarily panicked in the intervening seconds between the time that she pressed the buzzer and when I let her in, panicking about me not being there. This panic took several years to subside since my closed door always reminded her of her mother's closed bedroom door. Her terror that I would shut her out because she was "*too much*" (her fantasy of her mother's rejection) had to be worked through before she began to feel more at home with me and in my office. However, once she settled in her five-times-per-week analysis, she struggled to separate from me. Having to leave the session at the end was painful. Weekend breaks were excruciating. In the early days, countertransferentially, I would feel cruel asking her to leave on Fridays. Often after her sessions, she would sit in the waiting room and write in her journal, for several minutes, attempting to cope with the separation from me by writing down my words to read them while away from me.

In addition to my words, my voice carried a lot of weight in her mind. The tone and timbre of my voice was important to her: she found it very caring and soothing. In my opinion, my voice is unremarkable apart from its pitch. I have a high voice and could easily be mistaken for a woman, in fact, on the phone it frequently confuses the caller. She found her mother cold, and my voice was an antidote to her internal maternal voice which was harsh and critical. Not infrequently, she would call my voicemail during the weekend to help her bridge the weekend gap. As she felt more at home with me this need subsided. Eventually, she only called my voicemail on rare occasions and eventually stopped calling it.

My literal home played an important role in this analysis. I practice from home; patients enter through a separate entrance. The office is located on the ground floor of the house and hence partially underground. There is a mild earthy smell. It reminded C of her grandmother's house. She had visited her Iranian grandmother during the summers, and the house her grandmother lived in was mostly underground and had an earthy smell like my office. Her being able to come into my home for her sessions led to her being forced to remember her own

childhood home, her grandmother's home which although being painful was nonetheless in the long run helpful. Both structural as well as psychic aspects of not feeling at home in my office led to mourning the loss of growing up in a home where she did not feel she belonged. Working her loss in the transference led to eventually feeling more at home in the world. During her last session she stated, "*I loved coming into your home, it made me see that I could find a home for myself, with somebody.*"

Clinical vignette: 2

A young man, we will call him D, came in for psychotherapy because he felt anxious. D had moved voluntarily to the U.S. from Europe to study mathematics, had recently moved in with his American fiancée and felt anxious about committing to the relationship. We spent some time talking about his ambivalence of committing to his fiancée and its childhood antecedents. After a few sessions, it dawned on me that he seemed to be talking about everything else but about the loss it would entail to marry his fiancée because it would lead to him permanently settling in the U.S. (because of being American and specifically because of her professional licensure, his fiancée could not find work in his home country and hence marrying her meant permanently settling in the U.S.). Once I brought this to his attention, the floodgates of sadness and loss opened. Despite having moved several years prior to our meeting he had not begun the mourning process of having made the move to the U.S. in the first place, let alone to recognize and deal with the loss that he would have to tolerate by marrying his fiancée. Once we focused on his sealed-off sadness and loss that he felt about leaving his home country forever, his anxiety subsided, and he was able to make the decision to proceed with his marriage and eventually had two sons with his wife.

Clinical vignette: 3

"*I took a picture of myself after leaving our session yesterday … I felt I was leaving home and wanted to capture myself feeling at home. It's so different from how I usually feel.*" B is a young man who had been in treatment for four years which became

four-times-a-week psychoanalysis in the latter two years. A few years before, he had left his war-torn country because of a risk of arrest due to his work in aiding people during the conflict there. He felt a lot of responsibility to help people in his home country and felt ambivalent leaving. Much of his leaving was focused on escaping secretly without being noticed by the authorities. After the initial excitement of having escaped, feelings of isolation that were familiar re-emerged. "*I never really knew what it was to feel at home*." His mother had moved to work in a different country when he was six years old, leaving him and a sibling with their father and other relatives. "*I don't remember missing her because I don't remember much about having a mother at home. You can't miss something that's always been absent*." His early memories were more about the fights between his parents, sometimes physical. They lived in a family home with an aunt who had severe OCD and who berated them often. "*We would be afraid to touch anything and especially afraid of eating something that was hers*." Family members would often say his mother had left them because she only cared about money, leaving him feeling confused and ashamed. It was only when she had saved enough money to register B into a private university, did he and others then realize her true motives. However, a few years after he started university, his mother died of cancer. B came to treatment because he was now in graduate school and often unable to focus. He struggled with how he should present himself and how much to share about his past to anyone. He didn't want to overwhelm others, be pitied, or be reduced to his traumas. He would work extra hard to help a professor or classmate, but also become enraged if he felt unappreciated or overlooked. He often commented on interactions with people who seemed genuine vs. those who seemed performative.

As he became more comfortable in the treatment, he started to tell me more details of traumas he had witnessed. Before he transitioned to using the couch, on a few occasions when he noticed my eyes become teary, he would feel cautiously gratified. "*I wasn't trying to get a response from you, but seeing your genuine reaction helps me affirm my reality, the magnitude of what I'm dealing with*."

Much of our early work was around recognizing the impact of being separated from his mother, although he had no memory of missing her. During high school, he and his brother moved to live with his mother, in the country where she worked. Those years were marked by his often getting angry at her if she did not give him a special item he might want, or kicking open the door where his mother kept the video games locked. He would go through her drawers, trying to figure out who she really was. He described his mother as serious, quiet, and patient, responsible, but an enigma. Toward the end of one of the recent sessions, B has a feeling of being at home in his analyst's office. In that session he was remembering two different occasions where he had gotten hurt and his mother, a physician, had treated him. "*I still have the stitches she sutured*,"—marks of both pain and care. In that moment of feeling more connected to a range of feelings about his mother, he was able to feel more whole and hence feel more at home in the room. Feeling at home was a state of no longer having questions of how he should present himself, or doubts about his or others' motivations. It was, though, a transient feeling. There are still times when he leaves and doesn't want to make eye contact, but he recently said, "*I hope that by the end of this treatment, I'll be able to look at you with my full self*."

Discussion and conclusion

The desire for feeling at home is one that touches something at the core of all of us, and clearly for all the three patients above. Seiden (2009) describes the state of feeling at home as "a state of mind that reflects belonging, safety, self-definition, and unquestioned acceptance." He even concludes that "I have come to think of Odysseus—and not Oedipus—as the figure from antiquity most representative of the universal psychological experience of our species." Togaz (2021) suggests that "this concept of internalized psychic home … is not as technical as the term 'internalized object relations' and hence can be utilized by patients in a more direct, vivid way."

The search for home was clearly significant and useful for all three patients. The first patient deals with a general loss of feeling at home,

the second presents aspects of voluntary immigration, and the third deals with forced immigration. As you would have noticed, the third case has many aspects which overlap with the first, namely, the patient had difficulty feeling at home in his home country in addition to having to go into exile. For C, the analyst's office and voice evoked her deep yearning for a home and her being able to be at home with the analyst led to eventually mourning her losses and finding somebody with whom to feel at home in her life. The literal space of the office itself allowed her to explore the loss of home. For D, the avoidance of feelings around his loss of home kept him confused and anxious. B clearly contends with his inability to feel at home in the world and in his analyst's office; he perhaps is terrified that he will be exiled once again, but this time by his analyst. Through greater access to his feelings around the absence of his mother and with an increased sense of safety with his analyst, he became aware of a developing sense of home. In fact, it became a barometer by which he could gauge/recognize his progress in treatment. For both C and B, the use of the couch led to deeper exploration, mourning, and a resultant restoration of a sense of being at home to be established. Although the factors leading to these patients' struggle with finding a sense of home varied, the opportunity to mourn their losses in the therapeutic space was key in allowing them all to feel freer to find a sense of home in the world. In addition, treatment provided the transitional space (Winnicott, 1953), continuity of environment, and an object that facilitated separation.

We conclude by reflecting on T. S. Eliot's poem, "East Coker," named after the village where Eliot was ultimately buried. The poem became a source of inspiration post World War II (Ackroyd, 1984). Among its various meanings, the poem became a shared experience of acknowledging the devastation and loss, and searching for hope from recognizing human interconnectedness, both in the present and through time, the past and the future. The title of Winnicott's (1967) book, *Home Is Where We Start From*, is also taken from this poem. An internalized sense of home helps us accept and grow from what we must endure.

CHAPTER 4

Homesickness, nostalgia, and the development of a stable internalized home

Aisha Abbasi

Homesickness and nostalgia are universal experiences that touch on the core of human emotional life. They manifest as both a longing for a place left behind and a yearning for an idealized version of the past. These phenomena are not merely fleeting emotions but can profoundly impact an individual's psychological well-being and sense of identity. At the heart of these experiences lies the concept of "home," a multifaceted construct that holds significant emotional weight and plays a critical role in psychological stability. In psychoanalytic terms, the sense of home is more than a physical location; it is also an internalized mental space that provides emotional security and a grounding sense of self.

Seiden describes the concept of home beautifully:

> Home is an English word virtually impossible to translate into other tongues. No translation catches the associations, the mixture of memory and longing, the sense of security and autonomy and accessibility, the aroma of inclusiveness, of freedom from wariness, that cling to the word home … Home is a concept, not a place; it is a state of mind where self-definition starts; it is origins—the mix of time and place and smell and weather wherein

> one first realizes one is an original, perhaps like others, especially those one loves, but discrete, distinct, not to be copied. Home is where one first learned to be separate and it remains in the mind as the place where reunion, if it were ever to occur, would happen. (Seiden, 2009, p. 193)

In a paper by Abramovitch and Wiener, Abramovitch says,

> Home is both a place and a cluster of feelings about that place. It provides a natural container for the Self. When I am feeling most grounded and most at peace, then I am home … Home holds together archetypes of both Mother and Father: the security and nest-warmth of the maternal, and boundary-separating inner from outer of the paternal; strong walls around the warm hearth. (Abramovitch & Wiener, 2017, p. 88)

He goes on to illustrate his idea of the feminine and masculine aspects of home by quoting a poem by Robert Frost. In the poem, Frost describes a farmer telling his wife that the definition of "home" is the place where, when you need to go there, they have to accept you, no matter what. The farmer's wife, however, offers a different perspective, suggesting that home is something you don't have to earn or deserve—it's a place that should simply feel like home, without any conditions. The poem seems to explore the different conceptions of what "home" means. The farmer sees it as a place of refuge and acceptance, while the wife sees it as a more innate, unconditional sense of belonging (Frost, 1914, pp. 164–165; Abramovitch & Wiener, 2017, p. 89).

This chapter explores homesickness and nostalgia and raises the possibility of moving through and beyond these feelings by developing a stable, internalized sense of home. I believe that accomplishing this milestone is an important aspect of adult development: one that makes life losses, betrayals by those we trusted, relocations, professional changes, and other inevitable fluctuations we experience throughout life, more bearable. I find that the notion of developing this inner sense of home also has significance for the theoretical and technical aspects of the termination phase of analysis. The exploration of *this* idea, however, is beyond the scope of this chapter, and I will write more about this elsewhere.

Homesickness and nostalgia

Homesickness and nostalgia both involve longing for something from the past, but they differ in their focus and emotional tone. Homesickness is a feeling of sadness or longing for one's home or familiar surroundings, often experienced when someone is away for an extended period. It tends to be more specific, related to a particular place or people, and is usually accompanied by a desire to return. In contrast, nostalgia is a sentimental longing for the past in general, not necessarily tied to a specific location, but rather to earlier experiences, people, or times. Nostalgia can involve a retrospective longing for food, sounds, songs, languages, even particular words of a language, rituals, etc. While homesickness can feel more intense and distressing, nostalgia often has a bittersweet quality, where fond memories are recalled with both joy and sadness. Both emotions can evoke a sense of yearning, but homesickness is more present-focused, while nostalgia looks back with a sense of emotional reflection on past experiences.

Homesickness

Homesickness is often experienced when an individual is separated from their familiar environment, triggering feelings of distress and discomfort. It is not merely about missing a place but involves a deeper sense of loss related to one's identity and belonging. Homesickness is often characterized by a deep yearning for one's home or familiar environment, particularly when someone is away from it. It typically manifests in feelings of sadness, anxiety, and longing for the comfort and security of home. Homesickness can occur during transitions, such as moving to a new place or starting a new chapter in life (attending college, beginning a new job, moving into a new residence, etc.). It can be understood as a regression to an earlier developmental stage where the individual's primary needs for security and comfort were met. This regression underscores the significance of home as a crucial anchor for emotional stability. Separation from this anchor can evoke a profound sense of vulnerability, prompting a reevaluation of one's sense of self and security. Homesickness extends beyond a mere yearning for a familiar place. It's a profound psychological response that disrupts an individual's sense of emotional security and identity.

Buxbaum writes about a paper written by Sterba (1934):

> In an interesting analysis, the author shows the meaning of homesickness to a girl of five years. After being settled in a new home and country for several months the child suddenly began to long for the estate of her grandmother where at the age of four, she had found consolation for the frustrated attendant upon the birth of a little sister. The grandmother and a friendly dairymaid had helped her to get over the disappointment of having to share mother's love with the new baby. Her jealousy was particularly aroused by the mother's nursing the baby. A cow which "had four nipples and belonged all to herself" was accepted as a satisfactory substitute. What appeared to be homesickness proved to be a longing for the mother's breast. (Buxbaum, 1941, pp. 500–501)

Another deeply stirring and heartbreaking description of homesickness is found in Robert Ehrlich's discussion of Bion's description of the first twenty-one years of his life in the first volume of his autobiography, *The Long Week-End* (1982). Ehrlich (2017) describes how Bion delves into the significant yet complicated influence of his mother during his formative years. They had a relationship fraught with discomfort despite her expressed love for him. Bion writes about moments of warmth when she held him, yet these were often overshadowed by feelings of sudden coldness and fear. This internal conflict led him to often instinctively slip off her lap, highlighting his struggle to reconcile his love and longing for her, with anxiety he felt when with her. Bion's early life in colonial India adds another layer to his experiences of homesickness. Born in 1897 to a British irrigation engineer, he hints at the profound effects of this colonial background on his identity and emotional development. While he does not explore this aspect in great depth, he acknowledges that the rigid structure of authority in his upbringing significantly shaped his perspective. His experiences with his parents were marked by strictness, contrasting sharply with the more positive feelings he harbored toward his ayah, the caregiver who provided him with warmth and affection. This contrast reflects Bion's conflicts about belonging, further entrenching his sense of homesickness.

Bion notes his mother's sadness and her difficulties in acknowledging her emotions, which profoundly affected him, particularly during a

pivotal moment when he left India to attend boarding school in England. At the train station in Bombay, he experienced a profound yearning for home, though he admits that at the time, the term "homesickness" had little meaning in his vocabulary. This lack of understanding reflects the complexities of his emotional landscape as a child, navigating the challenges of separation from a familiar world.

Bion's recollection of his goodbye to his mother is especially moving. Accompanied by her to England, he remembers their farewell as dry-eyed and emotionally numbing, leaving him in a state of shock and disorientation. As she left, he captured the moment vividly, describing how he watched her hat bobbing "like some curiously wrought millinery cake carried on the wave of green hedge" (ibid., p. 648),a poignant image signifying both his mother's departure and the nourishment he felt he was losing. This evocative imagery created by Bion powerfully captures the pain of separation and the longing for maternal comfort, leading to a deep sense of homesickness that lingered painfully in his mind.

Nostalgia

Nostalgia, while related to homesickness, operates on a different level. It involves a wistful longing for the past, often idealized and imbued with a bittersweet yearning for a time perceived as simpler or more fulfilling. Psychoanalytically, nostalgia can be seen as a defense mechanism that helps individuals cope with inevitable changes and losses. It provides a way to maintain a connection with one's past and to reconcile with the present. While nostalgia can also evoke feelings of sadness, it often includes a sense of warmth or comfort associated with positive memories. Nostalgia can serve as a coping mechanism that can enhance mood and provide a sense of continuity in one's identity.

By revisiting and reinterpreting past experiences, individuals can forge a sense of continuity and coherence in their identities. However, nostalgia can also become a double-edged sword, where the idealization of the past impedes present engagement and growth. While it can offer emotional solace, excessive or maladaptive nostalgia may prevent individuals from fully embracing the present and adapting to new circumstances. This duality of nostalgia—its capacity to support and

hinder psychological adjustment—highlights the need for a balanced approach to the past. Recognizing nostalgia as both a protective mechanism and a potential barrier to growth is crucial.

Werman (1977) states:

> Nostalgia is distinguished from homesickness from which it was originally derived, and from fantasy to which it is related. It is described as an affective-cognitive experience, usually involving memories of places in one's past. These memories are associated with a characteristic affective coloration described as "bittersweet." It is concluded that the locales remembered are displacements from objects whose representation was repressed. Nostalgia is a ubiquitous human experience that is evoked by stimuli under special circumstances, and, while it is generally a normal occurrence, pathological forms occur. Among those … are: nostalgia as a substitute for mourning, as attempted mastery through idealization and displacement of a painful past, as a resistance in analysis, and as a counterphobic mechanism. Nostalgia not only serves as a screen memory, but may also be said to operate as a screen affect. (pp. 397–398)

Seiden goes on to share with us the myth of Odysseus and elaborates strikingly how the *Odyssey* illustrates the deeper meanings of nostalgia (2009, pp. 196–199). The ancient tale of Odysseus serves as a powerful metaphor for the human experience of longing and nostalgia throughout life's journeys. Odysseus's return to Ithaca represents more than just a physical arrival; it symbolizes a deeper emotional and psychological struggle. While he does indeed return to his homeland, the home he finds is irrevocably changed. Both he and Penelope engage in a series of intricate tests to confirm that the other has not been replaced by an impostor. This dynamic is a reminder that even when the physical location remains the same, the essence of home evolves over time. The place he left, once filled with dreams and expectations, is not the same as the reality he returns to, nor is Penelope the same woman he once knew. The nostalgia that Odysseus feels throughout his journey reflects not only a desire to return to a familiar place but also an intense yearning for the past—the experiences and relationships that defined him. However, the realization that his home, and the people within it, have changed,

complicates his return. The myth illustrates that the longing for home often comes with the painful acknowledgment that the past cannot be reclaimed in its entirety.

Thomas Wolfe's (1940) assertion that "you can't go home again" further deepens this exploration of nostalgia. He suggests that the inability to return to a previous state is tied to the psychological and developmental changes that occur over time. For many, the return home can be filled with a sense of loss and disorientation, as they confront the reality that what they have yearned for may no longer exist in the same form.

The acceptance of a new home or reality can often be a reluctant process, characterized by hidden rejection of the changes that have taken place. The nostalgia that Odysseus embodies reflects this inner conflict, as he grapples with the memories of his former life while facing the reality of his transformed surroundings. His journey illustrates that *while we may physically return to familiar places, the emotional landscape is forever altered.* Odysseus' odyssey is not merely a tale of adventure; it is a profound exploration of nostalgia and the relentless passage of time. His return to Ithaca highlights the bittersweet reality that, despite our deepest longings, the homes we seek to reclaim may exist only in our memories, forever out of reach in their original form.

Earlier, Akhtar, in 1999, described a similar process, focusing specifically on the feeling of nostalgia in the emotional experiences of those who are immigrants and/or exiled:

> Facing the "mental pain" (Freud, 1926[d], p. 169) of separation, the immigrant readily resorts to a hypercathexis of the objects he has lost. Described originally by Freud (1917[e]), this mechanism results in an idealization of the immigrant's past. Everything from that era acquires a glow. Such over-estimation often centers more upon memories of places than of people. This is not surprising. Throughout childhood and adolescence, the nonhuman environment presents itself as a neutral alternative area in which all the vicissitudes of human interactions can be expressed, experienced, and worked through in relative psychic privacy (Searles, 1960). The screen functions of longing for lost places (Freedman, 1956) notwithstanding, the immigrant

> employing this mechanism comes to live in the past. His most powerful affects become associated with his recall of the houses, cafes, street corners, hills, and countryside of his homeland. Like an emotionally deprived child with but one toy, he clings to their memories. Ever wistful, the immigrant develops an "if only" (Akhtar, 1996) fantasy which says that had he not left these places, his life would have been wonderful or that when he was there he had no problems … This fantasy of a lost paradise expresses a position whereby primary objects are neither given up through the work of mourning nor assimilated into the ego through identification. The result is a temporal fracture of the psyche. This, at times, manifests itself in the immigrant's fervent plans to "someday" (Akhtar, 1996) return to his homeland; fantasies of retirement or burial in one's country of origin are further temporally displaced versions of this wish. With such a dynamic shift, the future becomes idealized, robbing the present of full psychic commitment. Often such "if only and "someday" fantasies coexist, with longing for the past fueling the hope of return to "home" in the future. Meanwhile, the immigrant might continue to seek "a climate and ethnic surrounding, much like his original, and may become involved in a lifelong attempt of symbolic restitution of his mother land (Krystal, 1966, p. 217). (Akhtar, 1999a, pp. 125–126)

Also referring to immigration and immigrants, Denford presented a slightly different point of view about the internal processes involved in leaving one's home, and settling in another location:

> Emigrants are noted for their energy and confidence—at least those who left to further their careers. The factors contributing to that greater confidence may be summarized as follows: Escape from the inhibitions of the parents and their derivatives, that operated at home. For example the difficulty in being effective as a person where one has been a helpless child, and having to contend with memories of that relative insufficiency in other people. Also the unconscious sexual meanings of being potent where one's parents were before. The change of the primary objects to being wholly internal ones, wholly possessable and integratable and with which one can wholly identify. Because one is the only possessor of them one is imbued with the power and

> excitement of such possession. The rich possibilities of cross-fertilization at abstract or imaginative levels between the original, now wholly internalized objects and the fresh objects of the new world using capacities from the original world with no inhibiting parental presence. One is released to react to the excitement and interest evoked by new people and places, the novelty that stimulates curiosity and the challenges that demand an energetic response. The act of emigration might be understood as having converted the individual's whole world into a play or "transitional space" (Winnicott, 1971), where the freedom to be himself and to develop is not inhibited by the unconscious elements derived from primary experience or that are associated in his mind with his incompleteness or the years of his childhood. (More simply, emigration is "playing" at getting away from mother and father, and their derivatives, so that one can more freely be oneself.) (Denford, 1981, p. 329)

In a lovely paper on "The anatomy of nostalgia," Nikelly (2004) tells us that it was Johannes Hofer, a Swiss doctor, who observed that Swiss mercenaries in European foreign legions often experienced a gloomy demeanor and recurring memories of home, but they showed remarkable improvement upon returning. Their nostalgia was accompanied by physical symptoms such as heart palpitations, fatigue, insomnia, loss of appetite and weight, anxiety, stupor, and fever. If these symptoms persisted, it was feared they could lead to severe mental illness or even death, as noted by Rosen in 1975. Hofer was the first to document this condition and introduced the term nostalgia in 1688, combining the Greek words *nostos* (meaning return) and *algos* (meaning pain), to describe the sorrow associated with an unfulfilled desire to return home. The sense of alienation and loneliness caused by being away from one's homeland was seen as a key factor in the emergence of nostalgia. Therefore, the recommended treatment was to return home, which typically resulted in recovery. A similar condition was observed in England during the Industrial Revolution in the eighteenth century and was called homesickness. In the nineteenth century, the term *Heimweh* emerged in Germany, loosely translated as "pain from missing the beauty of one's homeland" (Nikelly, 2004, pp. 183–184).

Nikelly adds:

> Today, nostalgia is considered pathological when it becomes a substitute for mourning, when it is accompanied by self-devaluation, and particularly when it involves a masochistic subjection to an over-idealized, unavailable, and unrequiting love object (e.g., homeland) (Garza-Guerrero, 2000; Werman, 1977). While fantasy life over object loss, whether realistic or fictional, can have a compensatory purpose of enhancing self-esteem, it becomes pathological when used as an escape or evasion from responsibility or as a form of magical restitution in order to regain the love of the lost past and to restore the ego's self-regard (Rado, 1956). It is clear from the foregoing that the basis of nostalgia is an attempt to preserve the succession of an uninterrupted connection with times and things gone by through retention, recall, and recognition. (Nikelly, 2004, p. 188)

And he goes on to share with us a powerfully nostalgic poem by Kostas Ouranis from his collection *Nostalgias* (1920):

> I want nothing more than to live like a tree
> Where it rustles gently in an April morn
> In a peaceful prairie full of bluish glow
> And red poppies and white chamomile.
> I want nothing more than to live like a rose
> That bloomed all alone in a mild winter
> In a humble and sunny stone wall that has
> A whitewashed ledge to hold the ground.
> My God: Let me live like one of the myriad,
> The futile insects that are raptured from the light
> And spend their lives among the flowers.
> Alone in a small white cabin away from the world:
> To have in my soul the peace of the aged
> And in my heart the God-given goodness of the poor.
> (Trans. by A. G. Nikelly) (Nikelly, 2004, pp. 191–192)

In summary, while homesickness focuses on a current longing for home and its associated comfort, nostalgia reflects a wistful yearning for the past and its memories. Both emotions can involve feelings of loss but differ in their focus and emotional undertones.

Developing a stable internalized home

Central to dealing with both homesickness and nostalgia is the role of an internalized sense of home. This internalized home serves as an emotional and psychological resource that helps individuals navigate the complexities of life. It functions as an internalized sanctuary, providing a sense of belonging and emotional stability irrespective of external circumstances. The dynamic nature of the internalized sense of home reflects the ongoing process of psychological development and adaptation. As individuals navigate various life transitions and experiences, their internalized sense of home can expand and adapt, integrating new aspects of their lives. This capacity for growth underscores the importance of maintaining a flexible and resilient internal sense of home, which can accommodate both continuity and change, and act as a buffer against life's disruptions.

The development of a stable internalized home is a dynamic process influenced by various factors throughout an individual's life. These include but are not limited to:

- *Early emotional experiences*: The foundation of a stable internalized home is laid in early childhood through interactions with primary caregivers. Consistent, nurturing, and responsive caregiving provides a secure base from which children can explore and develop. These early experiences help establish a positive internalized sense of self and others, fostering emotional stability and resilience. They then become an internal resource that individuals can draw upon when faced with stress or adversity. This concept resonates with psychoanalytic ideas about the internal object world, where early experiences with caregivers shape the internalized images and emotional states that individuals carry with them throughout life. Secure attachment relationships foster a stable internal sense of home, which supports emotional well-being and adaptability. Conversely, disruptions in early attachment can lead to an unstable internal sense of home, making individuals more susceptible to the challenges of homesickness and nostalgia.
- *Adaptation and flexibility*: A stable internalized sense of home is not a static construct but an evolving one. As individuals encounter new experiences and relationships, their internalized sense of home can

adapt and expand. For instance, positive experiences in new environments or with new people can contribute to a broader and more flexible internalized sense of home. This adaptability is essential for emotional resilience, allowing individuals to integrate new aspects of their lives while maintaining a core sense of stability.

- *The role of narrative and meaning*: Individuals' internalized sense of home is also shaped by the narratives and meanings they construct about their experiences. The stories we tell ourselves about our past, our relationships, and our sense of belonging contribute to the formation of our internalized home. By making sense of our experiences and integrating them into a coherent narrative, we create a stable internal sense of home that provides continuity and coherence in our emotional lives.
- *Positive reinforcement and support*: Throughout life, positive reinforcement and support from significant relationships continue to shape and reinforce the internalized sense of home. Encouragement, validation, and emotional support from family, friends, and mentors contribute to the maintenance and strengthening of a stable internalized home. These supportive relationships help individuals feel secure and valued, reinforcing their internal sense of belonging.
- *Coping with challenges*: The ability to cope with challenges and adversities plays a crucial role in developing a stable internalized home. When individuals encounter difficulties, their internalized sense of home provides comfort and resilience. Navigating and overcoming challenges can enhance this sense, contributing to greater emotional strength and adaptability.
- *Integration of new experiences*: As individuals encounter new experiences and relationships, they integrate these into their internalized sense of home. The ability to assimilate new aspects of life while maintaining a core sense of stability is essential for emotional well-being. This integration process allows individuals to adapt to changing circumstances while preserving a stable internal sense of home.
- *Self-reflection and personal growth*: Self-reflection and personal growth contribute to developing a stable internalized home. Individuals can strengthen their internalized sense of home by

reflecting on their experiences, understanding their emotional responses, and working through personal challenges. This process of self-discovery and growth enhances their ability to maintain emotional stability and resilience.

- *Good enough analytic work*: I have written this at the end of the list, but it is not the least important. Specially for those whose earlier development has not provided the basic foundation stones necessary for accomplishing what I've listed above, psychoanalysis or psychoanalytic therapy are vitally important tools to aid in mourning what was not available in one's earlier life, in having the experience of containment and being able to internalize that, in understanding oneself and one's life, and in feeling analytically loved and truly at home with one's analyst. This then opens up the possibility of being able to develop and carry this feeling and capacity within oneself wherever one goes.

In describing the work of John Hill, Bedi tells us,

> Hill postulates that a therapist cannot provide home as a material replica of childhood, but home's meaning or lack of meaning can find reappraisal within the context of analysis as a building block in one's individuation. An awareness of being at home is a development of the original attachment to the mother … home as a transitional, holding and life-affirming temenos for the developing psyche of the child. According to the author, psychotherapy can provide a setting in which the hidden tragedies of the heart, transpired in soulless homes, are received by an empathic listener. The analyst has to provide a containing environment for the abandoned parts of the personality. Analysis provides a home so that the fullness of the arrested life may yet unfold and blossom to its potential, particularly when clients reveal deficiencies of their childhood home.
>
> Sometimes, our dreams give us a glimpse of our inner home—a dwelling of the soul. The author cites several case examples of his clients who were able to reconnect with the lost home of their soul via dreams, leading them in a new direction toward an engaged and meaningful life. Others find a symbolic home in the transference with their analyst, where the way opens to repair the wounds and abandonments of earlier relationships. (Bedi, 2011, p. 550)

The analyst's role in facilitating the development of a stable internalized home

Analysts play a pivotal role in facilitating the development of a stable internalized home for their patients. This involves several key aspects:

- *Providing a secure therapeutic relationship*: The analyst's role is to provide a secure and consistent therapeutic relationship that is a foundation for the patient's emotional development. This relationship helps individuals build and strengthen their internalized sense of home. In the words of Klein (1946), "The analyst's role involves providing a secure base from which the patient can explore and integrate aspects of their internal experience" (p. 105).
- *Supporting emotional integration*: Analysts help patients work through losses, changes, and transitions. Treatment offers support through experiences of loss, change, and separation. This includes processing disruptions in personal relationships, professional environments, or geographic relocations. By addressing these experiences, individuals can integrate them into their internalized sense of home, fostering resilience and continuity, and helping patients develop a coherent sense of self.
- *Encouraging self-exploration and growth*: Analysts facilitate self-exploration and growth by helping patients understand and integrate various aspects of their identity. Psychoanalysis allows individuals to explore their internalized experiences and relationships. Individuals can then develop a more coherent and stable internalized home by understanding how early relationships and experiences have shaped their current sense of self. This process contributes to developing a stable internalized home and supports the patient's overall emotional resilience.
- *Fostering independence and autonomy*: Analysts encourage patients to develop independence and autonomy as therapy progresses. This involves supporting patients in applying the insights and skills gained during therapy to their broader life context, thus fostering a sense of autonomy and stability, and helping create a stable internalized sense of home. In a beautiful paper, "Going away," Denford (1981) describes the process of growing apart from objects and

developing a sense of individuality, which involves both independence and interdependence with those objects. He writes that this process highlights the increasing ability to experience appropriate emotions related to this separation, such as grief over loss and sadness due to conflicting feelings. It also emphasizes the ability to develop love and concern for those objects while recognizing their significance in relation to oneself and the broader world. As one grows, there is a deeper understanding of the true nature of these objects, which leads to more refined perceptions and the capacity to find joy in them. Ultimately, this process results in a detachment where one can relinquish the need for external representations of those objects, signaling a mature sense of independence and internalized understanding.

- *Developing emotional resources*: Psychoanalytic treatment helps individuals develop emotional resources and coping strategies that support the maintenance of a stable internalized home. This includes building self-compassion, emotional regulation skills, and a sense of internal security. Winnicott (1958) speaks about the developmental achievement of the capacity to be alone. For this to take place there is the presumption that the infant/toddler learns to be alone in the actual presence of the mother. Winnicott talks about there being three steps to achieving this capacity. The first step is the development of "I." The child now is a unit that is integrated and has an internal world. The second step is "I am." This is where the child exists only with the protection of the mother and the mother's identification with her infant toddler. The third step is "I am alone." The infant/toddler still needs the continued presence of the mother who must be reliable. In this environment the infant can be alone and enjoy being alone for a limited period of time. Winnicott emphasizes that the capacity to be alone is actually based on being alone in the presence of the mother. If the infant/toddler does not achieve being alone in the presence of the mother, the capacity to be alone without the mother cannot develop. Winnicott relates the capacity to be alone with the discovery of one's own personal life. At this point, the supportive environment of the mother is internalized and available to the child so that the child can be alone. Thus, being alone is always associated, whether unconsciously or consciously, with the presence

> of the mother who is totally preoccupied with understanding and meeting the care and needs of her infant …. Again, I would like to reiterate that the "sense of home is intricately connected to the mother, assuming that the mother is the primary caretaking parent of the young child" (Gunsberg, 2023, p. 489).

The heartbeat of the mother and the heartbeat of the analyst

The television series *The Resident* was aired on Fox from January 2018 to January 2023. It was described as an American medical drama series that lasted six seasons. In episode eleven of season five, Dr. Conrad Hawkins receives the emotional news that a patient has been admitted who is the recipient of his late wife Nic's donated heart. This revelation profoundly impacts Conrad, as it intertwines his grief over Nic's death with the hope of seeing a part of her live on in someone else.

As Conrad grapples with his feelings, he's drawn to the patient, whose condition requires careful management. Throughout the episode, Conrad's dedication to his work is coupled with his personal struggle to process his wife's death. The knowledge that Nic's heart beats within the body of another person adds a layer of complexity to his emotional journey, as he feels both a sense of loss and a strange comfort knowing a part of her remains alive.

In a particularly touching scene, Conrad's three-year-old daughter, Gigi, is brought to the hospital to hear her mother's heartbeat. This moment is both tender and heartbreaking, as Conrad puts a stethoscope on the chest of the female patient who received Nic's heart. Gigi listens to the sound of her dead mother's heart, bridging the gap between life and death, and says, "Hi, Mommy." It serves as a powerful reminder of the love Gigi can feel from and toward her mother, even in her absence.

This is the love that, once internalized, can make a child, and later an adult, feel a profound sense of belonging, of being at home in the world, no matter where they live. We and our patients experience this either with our earliest caretakers and/or beloved and loving others later in life and/or in a good-enough analysis. This internalized and stable sense of a home within becomes a buffer against feelings of loneliness even when alone, against homesickness that feels unbearable, and nostalgia that impedes growth.

Conclusion

In this contribution, I have elucidated the concepts of "homesickness" and "nostalgia," paying comparable attention to their similarities and differences. Following this, I have focused my attention on the emergence and sustenance of a stable internal sense of having a home and highlighted the subtle or not-so-subtle interpersonal and intrapsychic processes that undergird such development. I have also commented on the technical and therapeutic implications of these proposals.

While far from being narrow in scope and thin in conceptual texture, my discourse has largely been patient-focused. Such an approach has the built-in limitation of omitting home-related issues on the analyst's part even though myriad questions exist in this realm. How "at home" does the analyst feel in her office, her profession, and, if she is an immigrant, in her adopted country? Does the traffic of lending—creating a psychic home to the patient in her containing reverie—flow only in one direction? Does she harbor no hope, no wish (conscious or unconscious) to find a permanent "home" in the patient's heart, memory, and life? Is a training analysis different in this regard with the candidate analysand silently "expected" to provide a permanent home for continuing the technical style of his or her analyst? And, finally, does the analyst miss doing analysis as his or her "home of praxis" upon retirement from clinical practice? To be sure, these questions deserve serious attention but, due to the limitations of space, I fear this effort and its results have to wait for another book or a journal to give them a "home" in its pages.

CHAPTER 5

Home, bitter home

Gurmeet S. Kanwal

Home is where my parents yelled and screamed at each other every day.
Home is where I was raped and could never talk.
Home is where I went hungry to bed most nights.
Home is where my parents got drunk and passed out.
Home is where I lost my family to a missile.
Home is where my father beat me with a hockey stick.
Home is where my brother committed suicide.
Home is wherever I found a bench to sleep on.
Home is where my mentally ill mother lived when not hospitalized.
Home is wherever the army posted my father.
Home is where I was tied to a pole in the basement for hours.
Home is where I was disowned for being gay.
Home is where my psychotic mother waterboarded me over the kitchen sink.
Home is an orphanage.
Home is what I fled to save my life.
Home is where I never want to return again.
And yet I keep doing just that.

When Bill was still an infant, his mother, who believed that she had been raped by the devil, leading to getting pregnant with him, would feed him small amounts of lead paint on a regular basis. Eventually he developed lead poisoning, was misdiagnosed as having leukemia by a doctor, with encouragement from his psychopathic sadistic father, given up on as being terminally ill, then due to the intervention of a powerful man in town, sent to an out-of-town hospital by train. There his life was saved physically by the doctors, and psychically by a group of nuns who gave him touch and love for the first time in his life. This was back in the 1940s. When he began to tell me detailed stories of his traumatic home life, I would often recoil emotionally, wanting to withdraw from him therapeutically, and the only word that would keep popping into my head would be, "unbelievable." Stories of being waterboarded by his mother, being locked up in a closet with a bag over his head, being chased by the mother with a kitchen knife in her hand, and many more. We analyzed my reactions repeatedly until I could open my heart to the horrors of home and learn to endure being a witness. Witness to what home could be. Witness to a home where a child makes his first suicide attempt at age five by trying to hang himself, and when the mother walks in, she laughs and says, "You can't even do that right," and leaves. Bill left home as soon as he could get into university, far from his hometown, and never returned.

Except, every time something would trigger his trauma—a memory, an incident of hostility from his wife, a betrayal by someone he trusted, a medical procedure—he would be right back there in an instant. We called his flashback experiences "wormholes" in space-time that would transport him into the past, back in his basement, making friends with a cockroach crawling by as he sat tied to a pole.

Home is the place we regress to

After 9/11, the term "homeland" suddenly became a very popular term in American politics. This began with President George W. Bush announcing the establishment of the Department of Homeland Security on September 20, 2001 (Bump, 2014). It was not just a country that needed to protect its integrity, it was a "homeland." That's what was needed to evoke unity, patriotism, and passion. All those who were

outside America and seen as potential threats were now enemies of the homeland. Even many of those who were living within the U.S., thinking of it as their home, were suddenly forced to realize that the home they thought they had been accepted into was not a home they could take for granted. Many, like myself, became targets of prejudicial assumptions and misidentifications, leading to attacks and alienation. Those of us who were identified as being of Middle Eastern origin, whether accurately or inaccurately, suddenly began to not feel at home in the country. The same malevolent transformation was experienced by many of Asian origin during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Home, like love, is never unconditional

One patient spoke often about how he knew since early childhood that if he was going to be allowed to stay at home with his stepmother, he needed to behave very well, because he didn't really fit in with his physical appearance being racially different from the rest of the family. He grew up with an ever-present threat of being thrown out of the home and separated from family. There are conditions to be allowed a home, and conditions that pertain to returning home. When Dorothy finally finds a way to get back home in *The Wizard of Oz,* she has to click her ruby slippers together and say repeatedly, "There's no place like home. There's no place like home. There's no place like home." This is a phrase that has been around in English at least since 1781, and possibly since the fourteenth century. It is often incorrectly attributed to the famous song by John Howard Payne in 1823 (Martin, 1997). The title of that song is another culturally defining phrase, "Home sweet home." "Home sweet home" became very popular with soldiers during the American Civil War (Ballad of America, n.d.)—a fantasy of being in a fantasy home while they were struggling through the horrors of war, sickness, and death. One of nine children, with several siblings who died young, and a father who did not encourage his musical ambitions, there is no evidence to suggest that Payne himself had the kind of home he sang about (Mead, 2005). Neither did Dorothy. Her real home, which we get a glimpse of at the very beginning of the story, is a home where she feels neglected, dismissed, lonely, and undefended. Her desire is to run away. But like many of our patients, she ends up returning home under the pressure of guilt, fear, and loyalty.

There's no place like home is a phrase that should perhaps be read differently: There is no actual place like the home we fantasize

And yet, we have an insuppressible desire to idealize home, to imagine home, to long for home, to search for home, sometimes traveling thousands of miles, across cultures, and through the most difficult challenges to get to a home. So deep is this impulse within us to create and recreate home that we have even structured our digital technology and our sporting events to represent our longing. Every website is built out from what is called a "homepage." It's the page we get back to when we need to find the right resource or reorient ourselves to a website. "Homepage" is a term first coined by Tim Berners-Lee who conceptualized it as each person's spot in the digital world (J. Hoffman, 2020). In the American national sport, baseball, the home base, or home plate, is the one the players return to for safety and to complete a home run. The other national sport, football, has its own tradition of the "homecoming game," when alumni are expected to return "home" to their alma mater to attend the football game.

Home has evolved into a cultural metaphor that has little to do with home as a reality, and much to do with the creation of a "home-myth"

The notion of homecoming is of course much older than our sports. Exile and homecoming have been the subjects of epic stories and legends for millennia. Both of the great Indian (Hindu) epics—the Mahabharata and the Ramayana—have plots related to exile and homecoming. In the Mahabharata the five Pandava brothers are forced into exile for thirteen years by their cousins after losing in a game of dice. For the last year of their exile, they have to live in disguise to avoid being exiled for another thirteen years. In the Ramayana, the protagonist prince, Rama, is exiled from home for fourteen years, at the behest of his stepmother who forces the king's hand. In another example of homecoming, when the Greek commander, Agamemnon, returns home after ten years of fighting in Troy, he is murdered by his wife and her lover. And in Homer's epic tale, Odysseus was away for twenty years—ten years fighting the Trojan war and ten years wandering around the seas, trying to return home. His homecoming isn't ideal either. He returns to a dangerous Ithaca, shipless and

crewless, with his wife's suitors ready to kill him. He arrives in beggar's rags and must remain in disguise to avoid being killed, until he can claim his own home back by winning an archery contest. Ultimately, he gets killed by his own son, on his own home island of Ithaca.

Immigrants repeat the narrative of these epics every day, with many being similarly disappointed and disillusioned, yet refusing, or being unable, to leave home behind. They try and try to heal "the wound of no return" (Nayar-Akhtar, 2015a), which is actually a non-healing wound. It is non-healing, because we cannot help but return, psychically, over and over again.

Home is a wound we don't really want to heal

Too many homes are dangerous living places. Intimate partner violence (domestic violence) accounts for 15% of all violent crime in the U.S. (NDV Hotline, 2025; Safe Homes, 2024). Twelve million people are victimized by intimate partners in the U.S. every year. Children are raped, beaten, starved, and even killed in homes all around the world every day. In Canada, "One-third (32%) of children and youth who were victims of violence that came to the attention of police were victimized by a family member" (Conroy, 2021). In 2018 *Time* magazine published an article titled, "Home is the most dangerous place for women." The article quoted the UN's Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) as reporting that more than half of female murder victims killed in 2017 were murdered by their partners or family members (Meixler, 2018). "East or West, home is the best" is a phrase I heard my father use regularly as I was growing up. A phrase that he adopted, unknowingly, from the colonizers of his homeland. According to Gary Martin, the author of the "Phrase Finder" website, "It first appeared in print in a collection of international proverbs by the English writer Walter Keating Kelly, *Proverbs of all Nations*, 1859" (Martin, 1997). Yet another cultural attempt at reinforcing the home-myth. The home my father was referring to was not exactly "the best" for the rest of us. But in the moment it was uttered it worked as a very seductive fantasy. Like the Good Witch of the East, from the *Wizard of Oz*, he was waving a psychic wand that made us swoon into a belief of our home as a place we should all be absolutely thrilled to return to.

Romanticizing home comes at the risk of serious physical and psychic peril

Home is as easily used for nefarious intentions as religion or God. There is a common law in the U.S. that allows one to use deadly force as first instinct rather than last resort if one feels that one's home is being invaded. The state of Florida passed a law in 2005 based on this, called the "stand your ground" law, that gives individuals the right to shoot and kill anyone who is felt to be invading their place of dwelling. Similar "stand your ground" laws exist in nine other states in the U.S. (NCSL, 2023). In April 2023, Ralph Yarl, a Black sixteen-year-old walked up to the door of a white man's home, having mistaken the address because of substituting "street" for "terrace," in Kansas City, Missouri (Equal Justice Initiative, 2023; Bryson, Bosman, & Smith, 2023). He thought he was picking up his siblings. He was shot in the head and his killer released.

Home and aggression are deeply linked by evolution, yet this is not the association to home that psychoanalysts focus much on when theorizing about home. Home is human, territoriality is animal. "Territoriality is a pattern of behavior and attitudes held by an individual or group that is based on perceived, attempted, or actual control of a definable physical space, object, or idea. It may involve habitual occupation, defense, personalization, and marking of that space" (Gifford, 2012). Territoriality is all about aggression and borders and defending a space. Home is thought of as warm and cozy and libidinal. This fabricated distinction keeps us from remembering that the human home is simply another form of animal territoriality. Aggression abounds in and around homes, as much as nurturing and protection. Sometimes wars are fought to protect homes from invasion, and sometimes homes become a mode of invasion, like the building of settlements by colonizers. As per an ICAHD (Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions) report in 2021, 130,000 Palestinian homes have been destroyed between 1948 and 2021. Homes can be a very effective form of terrorizing and punishing people. The Ku Klux Klan did not just perform lynchings and other forms of killing. It used home bombings and burnings to terrorize Black communities (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2011). It was common practice for Klan members to show up at the home of a Black family to make threats, if not to kill.

Hollywood knows the potential of using homes to terrify us also. Many of the best horror films are ones that destroy the home-myth of safety and security—think *The Shining*, *Poltergeist*, *Panic Room*, and so many others. In 1990, 20th Century Fox released a movie called *Home Alone*. It became the second most popular Christmas movie of all time. According to *Forbes* (Cain, 2021), "For 27 years, the $285.7 million in domestic theatrical gross earned by family comedy hit *Home Alone* has stood as the world's biggest single-territory total for a live-action comedy." The movie is all about home. A young boy defending himself and his home against intruders. The skill of the filmmakers (writer John Hughes and director Chris Columbus) lies in the fact that we come away from the story with nothing but warm, cozy feelings about home and family. That's why it is played over and over at Christmas time, to this day, thirty-four years later. We totally dismiss the fact that this is a home where an eight-year-old, Kevin, is first punished by being put in the attic for the night, then forgotten at home while the home family leaves for vacation. Not a single family member realizes his absence till they are all onboard an airplane. And the whole movie is about how scary and dangerous being home alone can be. And yet, we watch it to reinforce our romanticized notions of "home sweet home." Were we to see the depicted home and family in their reality, we would want to keep it away from our kids and the movie might have flopped.

Home is where we learn what horror is

House arrest has been used as an alternative to incarceration for a long time. According to the U.S. Department of Justice, it may date back to St. Paul the Apostle (Lilly & Ball, 1987). This is seen as a kinder alternative to being imprisoned. However, one must consider the psychological implications of turning one's home into one's prison. It is certainly a kinder and gentler alternative with much less danger. Yet, how does it change one's relationship to one's home? Once the sentence is over, does one continue to live there or move? If one does continue to live there, how can one reclaim the home as a safe and secure refuge that represents liberty rather than imprisonment? Some individuals who have experienced house arrest with electronic surveillance describe the nightmare of being repeatedly startled by the alarm of their surveillance device losing charge. While being a lesser confinement, house arrest has

its own special psychological consequences, turning one's home into a place of traumatic hypervigilance and terrorizing associations.

Some individuals are stuck in their homes not because of house arrest, but because of being unable to leave for fear of dangers lurking outside the home. Their agoraphobia turns their home into a psychological prison. Their homes can become both heaven and hell. Others can't bear to stay in their home and must keep trying to run away, preferring to be hitchhikers and wanderers. When they leave home, they are not *going* somewhere, they are only trying to *get away* from somewhere. Both can be forms of continuing a relationship to a disturbing home. The psychological challenge for both is to become free of home as a place to regress to. It may be easy to leave home, but not so easy to get rid of home. Home has a way of persisting in our psyches. We conceive of establishing a new kind of home and we find ourselves building the same old walls on the same old foundation. We leave again, return again, and try again and again. The more traumatizing the home we start from, the harder it is to find a truly new one.

Why are we so persistent in our creation and maintenance of the home-myth?

The propagation of the fantasied home—the home-myth—is a cultural defense against the frequently traumatic reality of home. Freud observed the occurrence of what he called "the neurotic's family romance" in children (Freud, 1909c).

> At about the period I have mentioned, then, the child's imagination becomes engaged in the task of getting free from the parents of whom he now has a low opinion and of replacing them by others, who, as a rule, are of higher social standing. (Ibid., pp. 238–239)

Our insistence on preserving the fantasy of a safe, secure, and sacred home is not unlike a family romance. What we believe about home is what the culture gives us materials to believe. It is as if culture helps us to create a negative (like a photo negative) of a place of traumatic experience. Alexander contends in his theory of collective trauma (2012) that culture provides monuments and media that create the needed narratives for the transmission of historical trauma. In this case, culture provides the monuments and media for a defense against the trauma. Freud writes in his discussion of family romance, "The technique used in developing phantasies like this … depends upon the ingenuity and the material which the

child has at his disposal" (Freud, 1909c, p. 239). Our culture provides us with what is needed to preserve the fantasy of the home-myth. The reality and history of home as a traumatic space is transformed into a myth and fantasy of home as a safe and secure place, using the materials provided by cultural stories, films, phrases, and metaphors.

Home is like God—a construction to counter the unbearable realities of life

The phrase, "Home is where we start from" is famously associated with the psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott because a collection of his essays was titled that by the editors of the volume (Winnicott, 1967). The phrase is taken from T. S. Eliot's "East Coker," the second poem of his *Four Quartets*. It has come to acquire a tonality of safety and security of home as a place where psychic life begins. However, this is not the original tonality of Eliot's poem. It is worth bearing in mind that "East Coker" begins with the line, "In my beginning is my end" (Eliot, 1971). So, if home is where we start from, Eliot is also drawing attention to the darkness of that beginning. Death and life are intertwined from the start and home is not simply a place of the beginning of innocent life. He sees the elders of home (and homeland) as "bequeathing us merely a receipt for deceit." Given that his own childhood was significantly limited because of an inguinal hernia that kept him from going out of his home and playing with friends (Sencourt & Adamson, 1971), it is no wonder that for him, "serenity" is "only a deliberate hebetude." By the time he gets to the third section of the poem, he is writing, "O dark, dark, dark. They all go into the dark," and by the fourth section he claims that "Our only health is the disease … And that, to be restored, our sickness must grow worse." Is this not a contemplation of his time of being stuck in the home where he started from, with a sickness that isolated him? "Isolated, with no before and after, But a lifetime burning in every moment." "Home is where we start from" is not really a cheerful, positive phrase, and it is not really meant to represent warmth, coziness, and nurturing. Eliot's home is a place where he has to keep moving, despite his illness, "through the dark cold, and the empty desolation." Winnicott's essays are compiled into a volume with a title that deceives us about the true nature of home for many, if not most, of us. We are left thinking of it as this beautiful place where we begin.

Eliot, however, knows that he can never end up leaving that dark beginning. Home is "Adam's curse," a beginning representing an end, and a beginning he can't help but keep returning to—"In my end is my beginning."

Bill, having left his abusive home for many years, decided to build a new one for himself. And he did. A gorgeous new home, idyllic and stunning. Complete with a natural swimming pond with waterlilies, a pond house with vines draped over, a waterfall over rocks, a moon bridge over a stream, and a collection of rare species of plants and trees meant to bloom in different seasons. It was his counterpart to the persisting home inside his psyche that he had to struggle against, over and over again, every day. It is no small feat to be able to imagine a home, and construct one, that one has never had. This is the true value of imagination. To give us a chance to envision and live in a place that we have never encountered before. We cannot do that by denying the horrors of home. We cannot do it by running away from home. We cannot get to that new place by immigrating to new cultures. We cannot leave home behind even if we get ourselves to travel to new countries, or new continents, or even to new planets. We cannot avoid recreating our traumatic homes by having relationships with those who come from very different homes. The only way we can have a possibility of truly leaving home, and creating a new kind of home is if we are able to bear the pain of the old one. This is our work as psychoanalysts. In the end we are simply trying to help our patients to leave home and have the capacity to build a new one. A truly new one. For that we must help them bear the reality of the home they started from, work through the pain of the home they lived through, the home they never chose to inhabit. Then they can return home when, and because, they choose to, not because they are compelled to. Then their home can become an ancestral home, not one haunted by ghosts (to paraphrase Loewald, 1960). Then they can return to the home in reality, not the home of their fantasy. Escape from an old reality to a new reality is a real possibility. Escape from fantasy is not, unless the fantasy is dismantled, demystified, and mourned.

To create something actually new means you have actually left home. T. S. Eliot begins "East Coker" with, "In my beginning is my end," and ends the poem with, "In my end is my beginning." It is not so easy to make one's end different from one's beginning.

CHAPTER 6

Orphanages and foster homes

Milan Patel

The concept of home is both profound and fundamental, an anchor so vital that people are willing to live and die for it. When this sense of belonging is missing, individuals often go to great lengths to seek it out. Fairbairn (1952) wrote extensively about infants being biologically programmed to seek out caregiving from a specific individual and to create a mutually rewarding relationship between themselves and their mothers. These early caregiver relationships are crucial for forming positive internal objects, which lay the foundation for healthy self-esteem and relationships. Two decades later, Bowlby (1969, 1973, 1980) further expanded our understanding of the lasting effects of deprivation and trauma on child development. His work, once considered revolutionary, now forms one of the bedrocks of our comprehension of the bond between children and their caregivers. His insights reshaped how we view the critical early interactions that shape a child's emotional and psychological growth, highlighting the indispensable role of a secure and nurturing home. More recently, Henderson (2024), who spent many years in foster care, has asserted that the most significant predictor of mental health issues in this country is not familial history or genetic predisposition but the experience of being a foster child

and growing up ensnared in interpersonal turmoil. Echoing Fairbairn, Henderson succinctly captures this innate yearning: "Monotropy is a fancy way of saying that young children have an innate desire for a special bond with a parent, usually the mother" (p. 212). If people who are important to us neglect us, we wonder if there is something wrong with us. The reality of life as an orphan or foster child embodies a distinct form of psychic homelessness that is difficult to understand for much of the lay public. While we often think of orphans as children without parents, the circumstances around being an orphan can vary widely. Regardless of how a parent is lost, the effects are profound and the loss can never fully be resolved. This loss can result from a parent's death, a history of depression leading to the emotional unavailability of the primary caregiver, or the forced removal of a child from the home by an outside agency. Childhood separation from parents, especially via their death, often turns into a lifelong grief. "The pain and yearning become tempered with the passage of time but the wound never turns into a sturdy scar" (Akhtar, 2024a, p. 39).

A bit of self-disclosure

In writing this chapter, I have deeply reflected on what drew me to this work and why this topic resonates so profoundly with me. As a result, many memories from my past emerged. As a toddler and young child in the U.S., my parents (immigrants preoccupied with business and monetary success) were absorbed in their own pursuits and the eventual migration of their siblings to this new country. Between the ages of two and eight, an older cousin in her early twenties became my primary caregiver. Like a foster parent, she stepped in to care for me, offering a consistent presence and companionship. She took me to movies, on shopping trips, and on outings with her friends. After my sister was born, I regularly slept in the same room as my cousin. However, at the age of eight, she abruptly left our home without explanation. This sudden loss was never adequately processed. It remained as an "unformulated experience" (D. B. Stern, 1997) for me with many aspects not symbolized or brought into conscious awareness.

Not surprisingly then, I feel a profound camaraderie with the foster children I encounter in my work. Home is where one feels they

belong, and this sense of belonging is often missing for kids who are not placed in stable households until it is too late. Many of the foster kids I work with begin to dream about or plan to run away from home in early adolescence. They recognize the inadequacies of their current homes and fantasize about a better world beyond their reality. Their dreams and plans are a mix of safety-seeking, self-care, and idealism for a better future. By ninth grade, I too had developed a plan to effectively run away from home in a socially acceptable way by going away to college, preferably on a scholarship, to gain full independence from my parents. The topic of a home other than that of one's parents—an orphanage or a foster home—was thus close to my heart.

Brief history of orphanages

From the first orphanage in the world, the Hospital of the Innocents, that opened its doors in Florence, Italy in AD 1419, through the first orphanage in the United States founded by Ursuline nuns in Natchez, Mississippi in 1729, to the modern community based foster homes, there exists a nuanced and checkered history (McKenzie, 2009).

Ancient Brehon or Celtic laws (Evelina, 2013) declared that there is no such thing as an illegitimate child and that it is the community's role to provide for these children. In their tribal culture, kinship was considered the strongest interpersonal connection, and children without parents were given special prominence. In eighteenth-century France, as many as one in four children were abandoned, a practice generally accepted without negatively judging the birth parents. Many of these children were born to prostitutes or unwed mothers (Boswell, 1988). During the Industrial Revolution, child abandonment became more common as fathers worked far from home or participated in wars, leading to a third of families being single-parent households. This resulted in child labor as a solution to financial pressures, and by the early twentieth century, two-thirds of children in England were child laborers (Boguski, 2023, p. 4).

The Western world moved away from this practice during the Industrial Revolution to return, only recently, to this ancient wisdom. Unfortunately, modern interpretations have inadvertently led to a more detached community role in the care of these children. The Western foster care model initially started as indenture, an early means by

which communities provided for the welfare of dependent children. As indenture and slavery rapidly fell out of favor, orphanages emerged as a more specialized and humane alternative that did not require grueling child labor (Rymph, 2017, p. 18). In the nineteenth-century West, the majority of orphans lived in Catholic institutions, which primarily cared for Catholic children (ibid.).

In the early 1800s, the Industrial Revolution began to significantly impact American society, leading to increased immigration and a shift from rural to urban living. This transition resulted in widespread poverty and family disruption. In response, orphanages were established by religious and charitable organizations to care for children who had lost their parents or whose families could not support them. The New York Orphan Asylum Society, founded in 1806, was one of the earliest such institutions, aiming to provide education, shelter, and moral guidance. However, this system had its dark side, as seen in the residential schools in Canada and the U.S. during the early to mid-twentieth century. The Carlisle Indian Industrial School, founded in 1879 in Pennsylvania, became a model for these schools with the motto, "Kill the Indian, save the man." The curriculum focused on teaching English, Christianity, and vocational skills while devaluing native languages, cultures, and religions. Children who spoke their native languages faced severe corporal punishment, leading to long-term trauma from prolonged separation from their families and culture. Black children were generally excluded from existing orphanages until 1836, when the Association for the Benefit of Colored Orphans was started in New York.

By the mid-nineteenth century, institutional care expanded, increasing the number of orphanages nationwide. The Civil War, illness, abandonment, and recurring epidemics left many children fatherless. Orphanages then expanded their roles to not only house children but also educate and train them for future employment. The Orphan Trains movement, founded by Charles Loring Brace in 1853, aimed to address the hazards of children being raised in urban squalor. Between 200,000 and 250,000 children were relocated to rural areas, often in the Midwest. While some children integrated into stable and loving families, others experienced exploitation and abuse.

By the end of the nineteenth century, orphanages faced increasing criticism. Progressive reformers highlighted the spartan conditions,

inadequate care, and lack of individualized attention. Reports of abuse and neglect became increasingly common. Social activist Jane Addams advocated for alternatives to institutional care, emphasizing the importance of family environments for healthy child development. She pushed for establishing child labor laws and compulsory education, which further weakened the prior model of children's indentured servitude to orphanages.

In the mid-twentieth century, the priority shifted from institutional care to foster care and kinship placements. The Social Security Act of 1935, which included provisions for Aid to Dependent Children, aimed to support families in need, reducing the necessity for institutional care. Many orphanages closed during this period as government policies and social services began to prioritize family preservation and reunification.

The latter half of the twentieth century saw further shifts. The Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980 and the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 aimed to expedite the process of finding permanent homes for children in foster care. These laws emphasized timely adoption and family reunification, ensuring that children did not remain in temporary care for extended periods.

In Europe, the emergence of numerous orphanages was then witnessed. A few of these were truly humane institutions whereas others were more or less indifferent to the psychological needs of their wards. The orphanages in post-WWII Romania constitute a striking example of the latter type. At the time of the overthrow and execution of the brutal dictator Nicolae Ceauşescu in 1989, more than 170,000 children were being raised in financially and emotionally impoverished institutions, with one-third of these children being of Romany origin (derogatorily referred to as gypsies). There was little interpersonal engagement with the infants outside of feeding, bathing, and changing times, and these services were provided mechanically and unemotionally by the caregivers. Babies were often observed in their cribs staring at their hands, with cries and screams ever-present in the background, seeking stimulation in an otherwise emotionally deadened world. Research shows that as little as twenty seconds of touch releases oxytocin in both members of the dyad, physiologically cementing a bond and sense of connection.

The 2000 Bucharest Early Intervention Project studied 136 of these children, placing them in three groups: those who continued with the

usual level of care, those placed in foster care (with and without disruptions), and those who were never institutionalized. A twenty-year follow-up study conducted by Kathryn L. Humphreys, a professor of psychology and human development at Vanderbilt University, showed that reducing foster care placement disruptions and supporting long-term relationships led to better long-term mental health outcomes. Children placed continuously in one foster home did much better than those placed in multiple foster homes. Placement before age two allowed for the brain's plasticity and resilience to adapt when eventually placed in a stable and permanent setting. Many of the Romanian toddlers were diagnosed with reactive attachment disorder, where they would embrace strangers as warmly as a parent. While this is viewed as a disorder in strict clinical DSM terminology, it can also be seen through the lens of resilience, where the child actively seeks missing and essential relationships. Early placement can build on this resilience and neuroplasticity, avoiding many negative consequences. Other orphans remained cold and detached. An *Atlantic* article titled "30 years ago Romania deprived thousands of babies of human contact" by Greene (2020, pp. 12–17) followed up with some of these youth decades later. Until the Bucharest project, Dr. Charles Zeanah said he hadn't realized that seeking comfort for distress is a learned behavior. "These children had no idea that an adult could make them feel better." "Imagine how that must feel—to be miserable and not even know that another human being could help." The chronic neglect led to indifference appearing as apathy, as they showed profoundly less brain activity. Charles Nelson said, "If you think of the brain as a light bulb, it's as though there was a dimmer that had reduced them from a 100-watt bulb to 30 watts" (ibid.).

Finally, mention must be made of the development of orphanages in Africa and Asia. Rampant poverty, malnutrition, and lethal epidemics often contributed to parents' deaths in these regions, flooding them with a large number of orphaned children. As a result, a huge number of dormitory style orphanages evolved in Africa (especially Egypt, Nigeria, Rwanda, South Africa, Uganda, and Zambia) and Asia (especially Bangladesh, Cambodia, China, India, and Vietnam). Some of these institutions were and have been supported by local ethnoreligious communities (e.g., Hindus, Muslims) with or without financial assistance from their socialist leaning governments. Most others (except those in China)

have been founded by and continue to operate under the aegis of Christian missionaries who made childcare an important strategic component of their proselytizing operations (Holt, 2001; Xiaoyuan & Fisher, 2013).

Coming back to the current-day Western world, we note that large-scale orphanages are becoming fewer, and deserted, abandoned, and orphaned children are increasingly being taken care of in their specific communities at large. This brings up the topic of foster homes.

Foster homes

Gradually evolving understanding of child development and increasing concern for children's welfare have drastically altered the model of care for young and helpless children. From early charitable organizations to institutional care and finally to the modern child welfare system focused on family-based care, the evolution reflects a change in how society views child development. Psychiatry and social work have undoubtedly helped an understanding of traumatic separation, finding that other models can give the child the best chance at healthy development. While traditional orphanages are largely a thing of the past, their legacy continues to inform current practices and policies aimed at protecting and nurturing vulnerable children.

While reunification with kinship providers or birth parents has been emphasized in recent years, the transition took place over many decades. Many authors have noted that the move toward rapid placement in foster homes often overlooked or ruled out kinship care resources in minority and disadvantaged families to facilitate faster placements to caregivers outside the home, far away from kin, even in other states. Placements in stable white homes were often preferred for abandoned children, without considering the extreme geographical and cultural shifts these children would have to navigate.

To be sure, foster placement at any age in early childhood has certain psychosocial advantages. However, these benefits are generally lost if a child is not placed in a stable permanent home before adolescence. Bowlby (1969) wrote that by age thirteen, foster children have a high likelihood of failure in subsequent foster placements. According to the Department of Health and Human Services, one in five foster kids

are placed in five or more homes throughout their time in the system. Three-quarters of foster children spend at least two years in care, while one-third stay in foster care for five or more years. One pervasive strategy to prevent children from getting too attached to a caregiver was to move them frequently to avoid attachment, aiming to make transitions back to parents or kinship caregivers easier. Unfortunately, kinship placement was often unrealistic for many children from severely damaged family systems, resulting in a chaotic style of uprooting children before they could become attached to a caregiver. This also failed to provide stable caregivers in the interim, leaving children in a state of limbo throughout their childhood.

Abuse was commonly reported, not only from parents but also from foster parents. Physical abuse often came from foster parents or, more disturbingly, their biological children acting as proxies to dole out punishment at the foster parents' direction. Additionally, there was significant sexual abuse or premature exposure to inappropriate sexual activity, affecting both boys and girls. In cases of abuse, drugs and alcohol often played a significant role. The abusers were typically older male step-siblings, stepfathers, or foster siblings. Another common risk factor was a mother with multiple partners, increasing the likelihood of sexual abuse. Stone (2009) stated that many parents are kinder to their "own" children than to adopted or foster children. It is sadly common to hear of foster homes where only the foster parents and their biological children had keys to the locked refrigerator, depriving foster children of access to food. Numerous more horrific examples of sadistic behavior exist but there is little point in recounting them here.

While I work under a Catholic institution, the majority of our youth in the Bronx are not Catholic and are most often of African American or of Hispanic origin, predominantly Dominican and Puerto Rican. We also frequently see children of Caribbean and Guyanese origin, with occasional Caucasian and Asian American youth. The population predominantly consists of individuals from poor to lower-middle class backgrounds.

It is crucial to consider demographics to understand each child's unique background and the cultural similarities they share. Group home staff and clinical workers often have a detailed understanding of these circumstances, but there is a risk they may overidentify with the

youth due to their own personal histories. In contrast, administrators and senior officials, who are more detached, often have less understanding of the cultural factors influencing the lives of these youth compared to the in-home caregivers.

Kinship care has historically been, and still remains the most preferred placement for these children. In situations where this has not been the case, nefarious and capitalistic forces have played an especially cruel role in undermining this model. Current examples in the U.S. and Canada point toward institutionally racist motivations to sidestep kinship care, even when capable and loving family members are eager to care for these children. In a deeply painful chapter of Canada's history, the Indigenous communities as constituted by the First Nations, Métis (mixed populations), and the Inuit of the Far and Arctic North were forcibly disrupted by the government. As mentioned earlier, the motto, "Kill the Indian, save the man" reflected the paternalism and perceived moral superiority of those in power in Western nations. The nineteenth century saw the emergence of residential schools for these peoples. It was a compulsory and usually abrupt removal of children from their families, communities, and the beliefs that have guided their way of life for centuries. These children were effectively kidnapped to be trained to assimilate into Western culture or as was commonly said at the time, to be "civilized." They would be sent to the schools where their hair would be shaved, similar to the biblical figure Samson, effectively severing the symbolic and spiritual strength from their body as part of a larger initiative to eradicate their culture, language, and identity. In these communities, centuries-old stories were passed down in the oral tradition of "white men in black robes," who entered their communities centuries ago as frightening and punitive forces. The roles of missionaries in the separation of children from families seemingly provided a well-practiced model to the modern Canadian government of how to thoroughly neuter and dismantle these communities (Rawlence, 2022).

In this writer's visit to the Indigenous Arctic community of Inuvik in Canada approximately twenty years ago, the most prominent architecture noted was a large Catholic church designed to look like an igloo. After an Inuit family had arrived late for an appointment and was turned away, the nun providing the tour of the church derisively

commented on how the indigenous people were never punctual. The white community in this town would also speak often about the alcoholism, incest, and abuse that occurred in these communities as a collective rationalization for white and religious disruption of these communities. These types of dismissive insults were among many repeated by Canadians throughout my visit to the region, inferring that these were savages that needed to be indoctrinated into modern Western ideals. Little attention was paid to the Western intervention that led to the decimation of esteem, loss of meaning, and forced separation from their ancestral culture. The connection to the land is of utmost importance in these tribes, and forced removal meant that these children would not be able to fully understand, inhabit, and survive in the often harsh conditions of their ancestral lands. Prior Indigenous generations were taught that in nature, "the answers are all there waiting to reveal themselves" (ibid.). This knowledge was wiped out within one generation of forced residential schooling. These children were subjected to well-documented physical and sexual abuse at these homes. Since they were separated from their family at the time of the abuse, they had no one to tell. Many of these now elders of the community have worked through and formulated their childhood trauma. Only now have they been able to surmount the decades of shame surrounding their abuse to speak openly about their treatment in these schools.

In the United States, a similar dynamic of placing children outside of kinship care has affected Black, Hispanic, and Native communities. As in Canada, the privileged American class has historically decided what is best for these minority families without seeking their input. This often resulted in a preference for foster care placements with external caregivers, even when willing and capable family members were available. These foster placements were frequently with "more desirable" foster parents of different racial backgrounds than the child. Making matters worse, siblings were often separated indiscriminately to "make the numbers work," with little regard for the trauma caused by separating them from their closest family members. These children experienced two traumatic losses: first, their parents, and then their siblings. There has been a strong societal resistance to understanding the unique cultures of these families and working within them to keep children with their extended families.

For example, new sentencing laws in the United States in the 1990s led to the criminalization and mass incarceration of minority men. When these previously incarcerated fathers with felony records returned home, their arrest history often prevented their children in foster care from being allowed to return home. Additionally, welfare reform in the same decade introduced roadblocks to assistance (Asgarian, 2023, p. 52). In many cases, the governmental bureaucracy not only neglected the children's needs but also obstructed their search for attachment, care, and a real sense of home.

My work with group homes

My work in the Bronx focuses on addressing the needs of these youth. In New York, provisions are made for residential care, including QRTP (Qualified Residential Treatment Program) or "Hard-to-place" boys and girls group homes. These group homes, along with Residential Treatment Centers (RTCs), serve as the modern equivalent of orphanages. RTCs are typically used for children with externalizing conduct behaviors that cannot be managed in a less restrictive setting. This model can be viewed as bureaucratic parenting, where caregivers act as surrogate parents or caregiving by committee. The group home environment forces fearful and unloved children to navigate yet another milieu of new peers and caregivers. Early developmental arrest from neglect and abuse often leads to splitting and triangulation behaviors, which are used in the group home setting and can lead to ruptures in relationships between the child, clinicians, and staff. Often, attorneys provided by the Administration for Children's Services (ACS) are seen by some youth as their only true advocate. Such idealized clinging can enhance their sense of entitlement and paradoxically lead to further difficulties within the system they live in.

Asgarian (2023) envisions the modern model of home as a place of safety. For example, there are YPPP (Youth Permanency and Placement Programs) homes for young women who are pregnant or have young children. These homes teach young mothers basic parenting skills, with staff modeling maternal behavior. Many of these young mothers have suffered significant neglect due to parental drug use, mental illness, and the lack of basic maternal skills from their own childhoods. Notably,

many of these children's own biological mothers lived in either the exact same group home or a similar type of mother–child group home themselves when they were in foster care. Once the child is born and mothering skills are learned, the young mothers often end up in the homes of their grandmothers rather than one of their biological parents. One can see how these grandmothers may have failed their own children, but find great meaning and purpose in trying to remedy this with the next generation. This type of generation-skipping care is commonly seen in the families we work with.

Beebe et al.'s (2016) work on the moment-to-moment interactions in the maternal–child dyad has radically updated our understanding of these infant interactions in developing secure attachment. These early experiences are then ingrained and utilized effectively with the next generation. Without this key developmental stage, young mothers cannot provide the needed responsiveness and maternal actions they did not receive. "Each of us shapes our relationships according to the patterns internalized from our earliest significant relationships" (Mitchell & Black, 1995, p. 121). Basic tasks of the staff involve teaching young mothers how to respond to their baby's stress in the moment. Young parents often feel newly motivated to learn and integrate emotional regulation skills for the well-being of their children. Overall, none of the group homes can fully replicate the realities of a true home. In girls' and mother–child group homes, the staff are all female, while male group homes have a more mixed staff. The idea of home has multiple dimensions and is "not just one place" (Massey, 1994, p. 171). Home is not merely a physical space with a roof, bed, and food, but a feeling of attachment and rootedness in a family and community.

The circumstances leading to foster care significantly impact a child's concept of home. Was the initial home nurturing or unsafe? What was their home like before placement in foster care compared to now? By definition, these hard-to-place youth have experienced many homes without ever truly feeling at home. While their basic needs for food and shelter may be met, they often lack the love every child needs. This absence of love manifests in inward and outward expressions of anger and aggression, rooted in the missing parent–child relationship. Even when children are with their birth parents, the lack of safety in chaotic households can lead to chronic autonomic hyperactivity,

a constant underlying agitation, and fear that never fully subsides. The amygdala, which is the main part of the brain that deals with fear and emotion, is often flooded with stress hormones such as cortisol and adrenaline. The brains of institutionalized children "seemingly worked overtime" (Greene, 2020). This situation is further complicated by "learned helplessness" resulting from chronic neglect. Reaching out to caregivers has led to so many cumulative disappointments that these children no longer feel able to advocate for themselves. As Henderson (2024) observes from his own life experience,

> Kids who learn that their environments are unstable and that their relationships with adults are unreliable become more likely to act out and do things that harm themselves or others. Marital discord, missing parents, frequent relocations, and unreliable caregiving create an "insecure or mistrustful internal working model" of the self, others, and relationships. In these circumstances, kids often have difficulty believing anyone truly cares about them. Sadly, this internal model often freezes in childhood and requires a lot of work in adulthood to undo. (p. 292)

Living in the Bronx presents particular challenges, as the community-based group homes are often in dangerous neighborhoods close to public housing. The kids arrive at the group home with whatever belongings they were able to quickly gather and place into a garbage bag. Luggage is a luxury few can afford or need if they never leave the city. The group homes are typically in food deserts where alcohol and cannabis are more readily available than fresh fruits and vegetables. The local bodega will sell these kids individual cigarettes or "loosies," since they cannot afford a full pack. The older males dictate the culture of the community and present an ongoing threat to the boys in the home. In the male group home, gang recruitment and violence between factions are a part of daily life. For the girls, there is engagement in drug use and sexual exploitation. Older males will first form relationships with these usually underage teenagers, and proceed to groom them for eventual sex work. Many of the girls in the group home will then assist their male abusers and recruit the younger girls into what is called "the lifestyle." This is such a common occurrence that groups such as Girls Educational and Mentoring Services (GEMS) specifically bring in older women who were

previously in the lifestyle, to guide and advise the younger youth that become involved in sex trafficking. Invariably, the most vulnerable girls have been sexually victimized prior to placement in the group home. In this environment, we have witnessed our male and female residents being shot, stabbed, and injured in the immediate vicinity of the group home. Sadly, this is not an uncommon experience as most of our youth in these homes report having witnessed a serious violent injury or murder in their life. The witnessing of domestic violence in early life is even more common, and we see rates of anxiety and depression increase four- to five-fold for any youth who have witnessed domestic violence in their lifetime, even those that have no history of foster care placement.

Many children we treat say the neglect they experienced in their life stings worse than any abuse they endured. We have seen this dynamic play out with affluent patients, who often live in grand and beautiful homes completely devoid of warmth. The term "affluenza" is popular shorthand for the entitlement and conduct issues that result from this pattern of learned entitlement and developmental neglect.

Some illustrations

My foregoing survey of the complex historical, sociopolitical, and psychosocial features of orphanages and foster homes serves as a suitable background for our empathy and psychodynamic understanding of the following reports from my clinical work.

Clinical vignette: 1

Nadia is a seventeen-year-old Russian American girl born to an opiate-addicted mother and raised in a Russian orphanage shortly after birth. Nadia is exceptionally intelligent and adept at navigating systems independently. When I first introduced myself, she was cold and dismissive. However, she quickly realized that the evaluation might help her secure independent housing, and her demeanor shifted to being engaging and ingratiating. Witnessing this volitional and almost sociopathic change in demeanor was chilling. Nadia reported having seen seven different psychiatrists in the U.S. due to her adoptive parents' concerns about her lack of physical or emotional affection. She described her parents as

intrusive and smothering. Nadia had been diagnosed with reactive attachment disorder, a common diagnosis for children raised in Eastern European orphanages from her time period, similar to the Romanian orphanages described earlier.

During the evaluation, Nadia admitted that she could not remember many details from her years in the Russian orphanage. She described the home as physically abusive. When potential adoptive parents visited, the orphanage would present a facade of warmth and love, only to resume abusive behavior once they left. Nadia recalled being a bully to avoid being bullied herself. Her clearer memories began at age seven, primarily involving summer placements with foster families outside the orphanage. She likened these foster parents to people who "rented you for two months in the summer and two months in the winter." She was sexually assaulted by a foster brother before age ten but did not receive counseling afterward. Despite this traumatic incident, she generally had good memories of these foster placements.

Nadia was adopted and raised in the U.S. from age ten, living with six siblings who were the biological children of her adoptive parents. She was placed in congregate care after her adoptive father called the NYPD following two assaults on him. Nadia believed the root cause of the conflict was her differential treatment compared to her siblings. She regretted not being adopted by an Italian family she had stayed with the previous two summers. At age ten, she was persuaded to accept her current placement with promises of immediate adoption, candy, and gifts.

In the group home, Nadia said, "I just keep to myself here." Despite this, she had been involved in numerous fights with co-residents since her evaluation. When asked if she was seriously hurt after the first attack, she laughed and said, "Yeah, I got beat up pretty bad," even though she was taken to the hospital for evaluation and treatment of concussive symptoms.

Shortly after her evaluation, Nadia was arrested for stealing from her parents' home. She had also stolen from a friend's house two weeks prior to keep her cell phone service active. Her school principal informed her before the interview that the NYPD planned to meet her at school. Nadia expressed little remorse,

claiming she intended to return the money and was puzzled by the severity of others' reactions. Her greatest concern was that her teachers found out about the incidents, as their approval mattered to her. Tragically, she was involved as a passenger in a motor vehicle accident two years later that left her paraplegic. She was last known to be advocating for herself and participating in sports leagues for those who are wheelchair users.

Some children seem to be born with greater innate resilience than others, for reasons that are not always clear or predictable. Bowlby noted that children of lower intelligence often had more difficulty adapting to new situations or foster homes, but we have conversely seen children with lower IQs often function at a higher level in the world than those with higher IQs. For Nadia, an increasingly maladaptive resilience was formed through profound caregiver neglect and functional adaptation. The following vignette describes a youth, Aliyah, who had a loving mother in a chaotic home, but who nonetheless provided some foundation for a positive internalized parental object. Both Nadia and Aliyah were psychologically tested to be well above average intelligence, and were able to flexibly adapt to new and extreme situations, but with observably different outcomes.

Clinical vignette: 2

Aliyah is a highly intelligent thirteen-year-old African American girl who resided at the mother–child group home with her three-month-old son who was born when she was twelve years old and in seventh grade. She is no longer in a relationship with the baby's father. Aliyah was placed here after her mother was arrested for stabbing a local youth who reportedly raped Aliyah. A rape kit examination was conducted after the youth assaulted the patient in her home. Aliyah witnessed the stabbing, and felt her thirty-five-year-old mother was trying to be protective of her.

She was eventually incarcerated for the stabbing, leading to Aliyah's eventual placement in ACS care. Prior to placement, a trial placement was made with her maternal aunt. In another foster placement, she had been residing and getting along well with a male foster parent, and would like to return there for now.

She would eventually like to reunify with her mother after she is released from prison.

Staff reports that she is observed to be an involved and responsible mother in the group home. She has a long history of conduct and behavioral disturbances, yet has managed to maintain reasonably good academic standing, considering her difficult life circumstances.

It is unusual in this population that she denies a history of physical or sexual abuse. It appears that Aliyah had a rather chaotic upbringing. Her mother previously worked as an exotic dancer, and most recently waitressed at the same club. This left Aliyah and her siblings to manage themselves in the evenings. She has a fifteen-year-old sister who also has a baby, as well as two younger brothers. All four of them live with her maternal aunt.

Aliyah last completed sixth grade. Despite her academic gifts, she had been in special education classes due to behavioral disturbances. She admits that she has a long history of fighting and "anger issues" that interfered with her school functioning. She reports that her son has been good for her because "he helps calm me." She has not been involved in any physical altercations since learning she was pregnant. She plans to graduate high school and is considering pursuing culinary arts.

Aliyah denies post-traumatic symptoms due to the sexual assault, but does acknowledge post-traumatic symptoms due to having witnessed multiple deaths and violent acts, including the stabbing of her rapist described above. She also witnessed her boyfriend's brother killed in front of her. She reports "feeling sad for a few days at a time," but otherwise feels generally in a good and upbeat mood.

She was eleven years old when she started staying out late against the wishes of her mother. She has no history of arrests or detention. She has been sexually active since age eleven. She denied postpartum depressive symptoms after the birth of her daughter. At the time of the delivery, she was admitted to New York University and subsequently stayed for three weeks. She was agitated when she was brought into the ER, and eventually got into a fight while on the unit. She was then transferred to

the psychiatric unit for depression and repeatedly running away from home.

Her history of chronic developmental stressors and possible neglect could suggest long-standing personality disturbance that would warrant regular, ongoing therapy. There could be a high degree of dissociation as a way of defending against repeated trauma. In addition, there is a pattern of insecure and anxious attachment surrounding parental figures, which likely play a role in her current relationships with boyfriends and her peers.

In this example, we see a disturbed child who received unconditional love and care from her poorly functioning mother. Aliyah went from being a parentified child to one who managed being an effective and caring mother at the age of thirteen. The capacity to provide appropriate and connecting maternal/paternal responses to a child is greatly influenced by having received that same type of care in their own early development.

The next example, Jasmin, also discusses a young mother in the group home setting. The primary difference here is that Aliyah grew up with one parent throughout her childhood who provided some basis for a positive internalized object. The next vignette illustrates an outcome from growing up with no stable parent, and going in and out of institutional settings during key developmental stages. This type of history typically leads to negative internalized object relations, which often result in commonly seen outcomes such as low self-worth, self-sabotage, reenactment of harmful behaviors and relationships throughout the lifespan, and the chronic expectation of being rejected or betrayed by others.

Clinical vignette: 3

Jasmin is a seemingly slight and unthreatening eighteen-year-old Hispanic American woman with a history of PTSD, ADHD, ODD, and in-utero drug exposure, and presents an example of a child who primarily grew up in institutions and displayed an institutional mindset unlike most of our youth. Her mother delivered her while incarcerated. She spent many of her early formative years institutionalized in a psychiatric hospital for

severely disturbed children. When frustrated or confronted by authority figures, she has been known to immediately take off her clothes while arguing angrily. What seems like an outwardly bizarre behavior was actually rather adaptive. She described that this was the only way to get male staff not to restrain her at the various institutions she has been placed in.

Her chief complaint at evaluation was, "I don't like talking to people, I have trust issues … I get tired of staff bothering me." She had been placed in a detention facility prior to the CGS (Catholic Guardian Services) Hard to Place Girls' Home for an assault charge. While at the group home, she became pregnant and was moved to the mother–child home. Staff reports part of the difficulty has been Jasmin's reluctance to have the baby attend daycare daily, and thus wakes up earlier to get him ready for drop off. Some days she refuses to take him to daycare, but does not provide rational reasons why she does this.

She displays depression, irritability, reactive mood, and poor frustration tolerance secondary to PTSD. Jasmin displays heightened irritability and frustration, and also has a history of repeated explosive outbursts. She carried a past diagnosis of bipolar disorder, primarily due to reactive mood and verbal aggression, but she does not meet criteria for Bipolar I Disorder. She can be very talkative, but her demeanor can turn aggressive when she is frustrated or does not feel heard.

She has extensive history of psychiatric treatment with a variety of mood stabilizers and chemical restraints. There was a history of parasuicidal behavior when she was younger. Numerous hospitalizations were a result of self-harm and injury. When not in the hospital, she was in residential treatment facilities from ages eleven to sixteen. She was prescribed an atypical antipsychotic while hospitalized that led to her weight doubling, She later lost the weight after the medication was discontinued. She has had mistrust of any psychiatric treatment since this time and refuses all current treatment recommendations.

She reports a history of disruptive behaviors in the past including: history of cutting a police officer in the face with a blade, stealing a school bus, breaking car mirrors, and conflict

with authority figures. Jasmin states that "I grew up in an abusive home." Her mother was arrested and "on the run" from the police when she was born. Jasmin was delivered initially by home birth, but soon had to go to the hospital due to risk with breech birth. She ended up returning to her birth mother from ages four to seven. She described it as a very violent home with firearms present. There was also witnessed domestic violence starting at a young age. She described her mother as jealous, selfish, manipulative, and immature. Her birth father was deported to the Dominican Republic and Jasmin did not have a relationship with him. It appears he died in 2013.

She was then placed in foster care. She reports, "I had a mouth from age eight on … I never listened to my foster mother." She then essentially was living in various institutions. Past caregivers were overwhelmed by her frequent nights spent outside of the home in unknown locations, lack of school attendance, and taking to the culture of older individuals in the community. In addition to being a frequent witness to domestic violence in the house, she adds, "My parents used to abuse me, physical and mental." The other significant trauma Jasmin experienced was being sexually abused by her stepbrother during this time. She reports history of PTSD symptoms: nightmares, avoidance, uncontrollable rage/anger, and hypervigilance.

She appears to have lived through several years of absolute chaos after being born at home to a criminal mother. She was frequently bullied in school, which has led to more aggressive behavior on her part as a defense. She ended up bullying others as a way of empowering herself at a very young age. She continues to report significant social anxiety, which appears related to her early school and peer experiences.

In the group home now, the supervisor notes that Jasmin will be loud and verbally aggressive when frustrated, and then will become almost childlike, breaking down in tears. Staff reports that she can be cooperative and talkative, but her mood can shift suddenly and become very reactive. Staff reports that while she has many problem behaviors, she is bright and mentally engaged. When intelligence testing is performed on our youth, an average

> score such as Jasmin attained, is usually seen as a sign of a bright and gifted child. Most IQ tests do not account for years of inferior, missed, or completely absent schooling.

It should be noted that these girls' internalized objects influenced their later attachment styles. They often display attachment styles to their caregivers, and even in their psychiatric treatment, based on attachment styles developed during their early years. Dismissive and anxious styles, in particular, play out with current caregivers, therapists, and prescribers and medications (Mintz, 2011, pp. 22–23). In "The antisocial tendency," Winnicott (1956a) paradoxically viewed outrageous behaviors in these youth as a sign of hope. Acts like stealing or defiance are not simply delinquent behaviors; they express a deep need for containment and response from the external world. Recovery from such traumatic and neglectful backgrounds should focus on placing the child in a "good enough" environment, providing an opportunity to reexperience the trust and emotional holding they did not receive the first pass through.

Summary and conclusions

In this contribution, I have provided a detailed and nuanced history of the ways in which our civilization has taken care of orphaned, abandoned, and otherwise lonely and deprived children. I have traced the emergence of orphanages and foster homes in the Western world and also briefly commented upon such developments in Africa, the Indian subcontinent, and the Far Eastern nations, underscoring the last's frequent association with Christian missionary operations in the erstwhile "colonies." Following this, I have provided details of the organizational, structural, and interpersonal elements of childcare, noting both the mishaps and maleficence as well as the benevolent support these systems can and do provide to the wards. I have also included illustrations from my own clinical work in the Bronx, the poor and often unduly maligned borough of New York City. Through this all, I have sought to highlight the ego-replenishing power of auxiliary ego support by kind and caring caretakers as well as children's own inner resilience and striving to grow and make something of themselves.

Two final points remain. The first pertains to the fact that foster children often regress to more infantile behavior once they are placed in a stable and accepting care setting. This may be an unconscious process meant to work through this psychic deficit with a newly engaged caregiver. Bowlby adds that "clinging babyish behavior" is the most hopeful sign for a good outcome, as the child has not fallen into a more dire state of learned helplessness. The hostile child has the next best chances of success if their externalizing behavior can be managed. There is still some fight and resolve, as well as attempts to communicate how they feel, which allows some level of engagement with caregivers, even if it is less than ideal. The remote child who refuses to engage has the least chance of success in placement. In hard-to-place group home populations, the remote child is most often encountered and most difficult to treat. They have learned the hard way to defend themselves. Henderson (2024) describes this experience:

> For much of my youth, I felt mentally anesthetized. There were great floods of pain very early on, like when I cried uncontrollably as a toddler when I was taken from my mother and when I was again taken from my first foster home. But by age four or five, my emotions had gone underground. It took a lot of effort to fully unearth how terrible I'd felt as a kid … I honestly couldn't tell you. It's like my habit of shutting off the bad feelings dulled my ability to feel the good ones, too. (p. 296)

The second point pertains to the depiction of orphanages, foster homes, and their residents in fiction, theater, and movies. Singh (2019) declared that "The quickest way to an audience's heart is to kill off one or both of your character's parents" (p. 1). Nearly two hundred years before this wise quip, Dickens was aware of the immense appeal tragedy has in itself. His *Oliver Twist* (1838) portrayed the cruel treatment and abject poverty of orphans in Victorian England. The list of subsequent artistic works pertaining to orphans and foster kids or set in orphanages is too long to include here. Suffice to say that it ranges from that nineteenth–century British classic through the 1924 American comic strip *Little Orphan Annie* through the Bollywood tearjerker *Boot Polish* (1958) and the pedophilia-infested Canadian television series, *The Boys of St. Vincent* (1992) to the 1976 Broadway musical, *Annie,* and the very

recent British movie, *The Orphans* (2024). Even though many, if not most, real-life orphans do not find a Cinderella-like ending, fictional protagonists often achieve success through hard work, grit, and perseverance. The ensuing optimism can dull the pain we all feel at encountering such tragic situations, to be sure. However, the hope and faith engendered by these narratives can also kindle our inner goodness and humane callings!

CHAPTER 7

Monasteries

Salman Akhtar

The psychoanalytic cacophony of object-seeking, dual unity, attachment, relationalism, two-person psychology, and intersubjectivity has inadvertently caused inattention to man's need for privacy, non-communication, and solitude. With some exceptions (e.g., Dimitrijevic & Bucholz, 2022; Storr, 1968; Winnicott, 1960), analytic investigators have either ignored or pathologized the human longing for aloneness and silence. History, however, bears testimony to the fact that, from times immemorial man has sought retreat from company, intimacy, and dialogue in favor of calming aloofness. An organized embodiment of this need is the creation of specialized dwellings called "monasteries." Such structures and the psychosocial functions served by them are the topic of my discourse.

I will begin with a survey of the geocultural terrain of monasteries from which I will distill the elements that seem common to all of them, regardless of their religious-spiritual affiliation and geographic locations. I will elucidate the psychological foundation and aims of these shared characteristics. Following this, I will take the bold step of deconstructing the spiritual search that undergirds all monasteries and the monastic lifestyle along the lines of psychoanalytic metapsychology.

My discourse shall thus proceed in deepening concentric circles of geography, history, sociology, psychology, and metapsychology. My aim is to grasp the essence of monastic jouissance. I shall begin with structures of brick and mortar but before doing so, I wish to note a few reservations and pitfalls.

Some caveats

First and foremost, it should be acknowledged that a discourse on monasteries (hence of monastic life) can hardly avoid the realms of religion and spirituality, both of which are a source of chronic unease to our "mother discipline," psychoanalysis (see especially, Freud, 1927c). A modicum of solace might be provided by the fact that I will distinguish between religion and spirituality (Akhtar, 2024a), focus more upon the latter, and anchor those comments in psychoanalytic metapsychology.

Second, my essay carries the risk of being viewed as an endorsement of monastic beliefs or lifestyle. Worse, it can be seen as supporting one particular set of monastic guidelines over another. Neither of these "conclusions" form a component of my intent's trajectory.

Third, it cannot be denied that secluded sites proffered for "religious" and "spiritual" purposes have at times become corrupted by narcissistic megalomania, cult-like mentality, monetary shenanigans, and perverse sexuality. However, such instinctual infusion into places intended to be psychically serene is not the concern of this discourse. Its attention is directed to the nature, aims, and ontogenetic origins of the search for such serenity.

Fourth, objection might be made to applying the psychoanalytic viewpoint to inanimate structures. After all, chairs, trees, cars, or a high-rise building do not form a legitimate subject of psychoanalytic speculation; human feelings and fantasies about them do. This objection has merit. However, all institutions and structures created by human beings embody, at both conscious and unconscious levels, their psychological needs and wishes. Numerous applied psychoanalytic texts dealing with civilization, religion, poetry, fiction, painting, and sculpture can be cited to support this argument (e.g., Akhtar & Twemlow, 2018; Freud, 1927c, 1930a; Gedo, 1985; Kris, 1952) but since the topic under consideration here involves a form of human dwelling, namely monasteries, the recent

volumes on psychoanalysis and architecture (Schinaia, 2016; Winer & Anderson, 2006) are perhaps our best allies here. And, of course, the seminal *The Poetics of Space* by Gaston Bachelard (1958) remains a beacon of light for thinking about such matters as well.

Fifth, themes of gender and sexuality would be conspicuous by their absence in this discourse. The requirement of celibacy on the part of monks and nuns constitutes the simplest reason for such "omission." Another contributor is my active avoidance of psychoanalytic reductionism; this would be evident here by the absence of phrases like "aim-inhibited eroticism," "repressed sexuality," the monks' "negative oedipal submission to the powerful father-figure of God," and the nuns' "desexualized phallic awe." I do not think anything new is added to our knowledge by such reflexive pathologization and have therefore resisted it throughout this essay.

Finally, a question might be raised about my qualifications for writing this essay since I have never spent any part of my life in a monastery. I am also not an architect or a theologian, the two experts most suited to ponder the nuances of monasteries. Such "lack" ought to disqualify me from undertaking the writing of this essay. In my defense, I plead a long-term interest and scholarship in the psychoanalysis of religion and spirituality (Akhtar, 2009a, 2011a, pp. 103–137; 2024a; Akhtar & Parens, 2001a, 2001b).

With such caveats and provisos in place, I now turn to the "facts on the ground" and take a look at some of the actual monasteries that have operated (and/or continue to operate) under the aegis of various religions across the globe.

Geocultural terrain

The English word "monastery" is derived from the Greek *monasterion*, which means a place to live alone; its synonyms include abbey, friary, cloister, and priory. By itself, the word "monastery" has little religious or spiritual significance but more than a thousand years of customary usage has reserved the designation "monastery" for a residence for monks, nuns, ascetics, hermits, and seekers of spiritual enlightenment. The reflexive tendency to link monasteries with Christianity and Western Europe is both right and wrong. To be sure, among the world's

religions, Christianity vastly exceeds in the sheer number of monasteries (with the combined Hindu and Buddhist traditions being in close second), and the advent of such structures in the Western world was indeed in continental Europe (especially Germany, England, France, Italy). However, the fact is that monasteries exist globally (including a not inconsiderable number in the United States) and embody the principles and teachings of almost all religions in the world.

Here it must be acknowledged that monasteries and monastic lifestyle do not constitute a significant part of two major religions of the world, namely Judaism and Islam. While the old time *Essenes* of the Qumran community (circa the second century BC) and the more recent *Beta Israel* group of Ethiopia (mostly relocated to Israel around the 1980s) did reflect a monastic trend by practicing asceticism, voluntary poverty, and daily immersion in Mikvah, the ecclesiastic center of Judaism was not sympathetic to monasticism. To adopt a socially marginal life and that too of deliberately chosen poverty seemed hardly desirable for an oft-despised minority. The weak eschatology (the doctrine of the last things) and the demanding, if not punishing, God of the Old Testament also discouraged individual salvational expectations and alienated monastic trends from Rabbinic Jewish theology.

Islam, too, is not favorably predisposed toward monasticism. In fact, the strict *Wahhabi* version of Islam forbids such inclinations. Islam's prophet, Mohammad (AD 570–632) disapproved of celibacy, regarding sexual satisfaction as a gift from God. However, with Islam's spread outside of Arabic confines, mystical trends began to be incorporated into the religion. Subsumed under the general rubric of Sufism these trends did generate monastic orders. Three prominent examples of this development are the *Bektashis* of Turkey, the *Sanusiyyah* of Libya, and the *Naqshbandis* of southwestern Central Asia and the Indian subcontinent. The first originated in thirteenth-century Anatolia, became widespread in the Ottoman Empire (fourteenth to twentieth century), and is currently headquartered in Albania; its followers also exist in Turkey, Greece, Bulgaria, and North Macedonia. The second is a Muslim mystic fraternity that was founded in Libya and then spread to Egypt and Central Africa. The third originated in Turkic-speaking areas of southwestern Central Asia, spread eastwards to India, and then returned to the western reaches of the Ottoman Empire. Three outstanding features

of all these offshoots of Islam are (i) their exclusivity for males, (ii) their preference for one-to-one instruction by a *Pir* or *Murshid* (teacher) to a *Mureed* (disciple), and (iii) their inclusion of poetry, singing, and dancing (and allegedly using non-alcoholic intoxicants) in order to lose the self in devotion to the divine. While colorful and occasionally attractive to Western followers, the monastic tradition in Islam remains marginal to the religion's central tenets and practices.

While not given to constructing monasteries of their own religion, many Muslim rulers of the medieval Middle East supported and even cherished Christian monasteries in their respective regions. Starting from Baghdad and extending into the mountains of southeastern Anatolia to Palestine, Syria, and Egypt, an atmosphere of cordiality, that led to great poetry and philosophical dialogue, prevailed between these spiritual centers and their de-facto Muslim landowners. The literary anthologist, al-Shabushti (circa AD 998) collected poems, literary anecdotes, and historical reports of each such site in a massive volume (recently translated and edited by Kilpatrick, 2023). He painstakingly documented the splendor of the Abbasid empire (AD 750–1258) and the ethical and moral lessons regarding transience, forbearance, and generosity derived from its interactions with the Christian monasteries. Fascinatingly, such exchange at an individual level was often far from ascetic or even austere. A truly moving description of relaxed congeniality at the Qusayar Monastery (circa AD 723) follows:

> This monastery stands high on the mountain, on a terrace at the summit. It is well and solidly built and has a pleasant setting. There are monks living there, and it has a well hewn in the rock from which they draw water. In the altar stands an icon of Mary with the image of Christ, peace be upon Him, on her lap, and people visit the place to look at it. Above it is a hall built by Abn-I-Jaysh Khumarawayh ibn Ahmad ibn Tulun, with four arches on the four sides. He used to visit this monastery often because he loved this icon, and he would sit drinking and looking at it. (al-Shubushti, cited in Kilpatrick, 2023, p. 391)

The mention of Mary and Christ brings us face to face with Christianity and, in the context of our discourse, to the prolific and indefatigable scholar of theo-sociology, Markus Huttstein, who, in a recent book

(2012), has traced the history of Christian monasteries. He opens his handsomely presented text with the following passage:

> Christianity's earliest monks were hermits who withdrew to the desert to devote their lives to prayer. Choosing as their abodes rock caves or tombs, they often had themselves immured within, and relied on supporters to provide them with food. Over time, hermits' retreats, in close proximity to one another, developed into the first monastic communities. These consisted of a group of simple buildings enclosed by walls. The ascetic life of these highly disciplined communities, which were governed by an abbot, placed an emphasis upon equality and lack of possessions. In general, the monks or nuns came together only for meals and communal prayers in the monastery church, spending the rest of their time in individual cells—such as the stone "beehive" huts of the Hiberno-Scottish monks, numbers of which still exist. (pp. 7–8)

Huttstein goes on to note that as time passed, monastic fathers drew up more and more austere codes for daily life. The first such "rule" was that of the Egyptian monk, Pachomius (AD 292–346). It formed the basis for all later codes for Western monasteries, starting from the Rule of Columbanus of Luxeuil (AD 540–615). It was, however, St. Benedict of Nursia (AD 480–547), who played a decisive role in Christian monastic tradition. His "rule," based upon the motto *ora et labora* (prayer and work) chiseled the ideal of communal life through shared prayer and manual labor. With his exhortation, monasteries began to crop up all across Western Europe. Feudal lords offered them support but by the eleventh century, monasteries acquired relative freedom from the sovereign. Huttstein (2012) declares:

> From an architectural point of view, the most glorious period of church and monastery building occurred during the Romanesque and Gothic eras. The sturdy-looking structures of the Romanesque age were succeeded by the slender, graceful, and soaring forms (the "reading heavenward") of the Gothic age, during which filigree decoration, in the form of buttresses, doors, and the tradition of pointed arches reached the apex. (pp. 8–9)

A checkered history followed. The monastic tradition thrived in the Orthodox Christian Churches of Egypt and Ethiopia as well as of

Bulgaria, Serbia, and Romania. Twelfth-century Cistercians simplified the monastic architecture, sixteenth-century Protestants dissolved monasteries, the Counter-Reformation Catholics (especially Jesuits) revived and refurbished monasteries in Baroque style (also typical of the Russian and Ukrainian monasteries of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries). Functionality of architecture was given a premium as well as contact with nature and facilitation of communality. Covered corridors with archways open to large, central courtyards coupled with threadbare, small rooms for individual occupation characterized these "new" monasteries.

Not restricted to the Christian religious enclave in Europe and Central Asia, the monastic tradition evolved in Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism, and Daoism in India, Tibet, Japan, and China, respectively. Referred to as *malthas*—long, if not permanent, residences for mendicants (cloisters), as opposed to *ashrams* (short stay or even day-long group meditation centers) in the Hindu lexicon—these premises institutionalized asceticism into monastic practices. *Gurus* (spiritual teachers) now engaged with influential public figures whom the local chieftains and even the *rajahs* (kings) consulted to solve their ethical dilemmas. A complex relationship where religion, politics, and architecture combined thus evolved. The evocatively titled book, *Worldly Gurus and Spiritual Kings*, by Tamera Sears (2014) provides a detailed political, historical, as well as architectural account of Hindu monasteries and states:

> By the turn of the First Millennium AD, the guru's identity as both a divinized spiritual teacher and a focus for ritualized worship led to the development of elaborate monasteries (mattas) throughout the Indian subcontinent … But unlike in the medieval Western world, or even in the case of the famous and more frequently studied Buddhist rock-cut monasteries (viharas) at places like Ajanta and Saanchi, very few Hindu monasteries still survive today. (pp. 4–5)

Sears notes that Hindu monasteries in various degrees still exist at Kodal, Raneh, Chumeri, and Indore (Madhya Pradesh), Hutel (Gujarat), Meael (Rajasthan), and Narannag (Jammu and Kashmir), to name but a few sites. Although geographically diverse, all these monasteries:

> date primarily between the eighth and twelfth centuries—the period most frequently referred to as the "early medieval" by historians of post-modern India. More specifically, the early medieval period has been frequently seen as one that gave rise to complex political formations, driven by the regionalization of the royal authority and reinforced through neutrals of localized feudatory kingdoms. These newly emerged rulers have been understood as routinely participating in the patronage of new religious orders, and particularly in those that positioned themselves as alternates to older, orthodox forms of brahmanical Hinduism and that emphasized the efficacy of temple ritual. The historiography of periodization of pre modern India is admittedly quite vexed, as it is in many parts of the post-colonial world. (p. 5)

Despite the great variation of their precise locations (e.g., lush valleys, mountains, shores of a lake, cliffside), architecture (e.g., Gothic, Baroque, Romanesque), and extent of decoration (ostentatious to utterly simple), all monasteries listed in this survey share certain features. Presumably it is these shared features that facilitate deep introspection and redirect the flow of thought from the material world to the spirituality embedded in the human soul.

Four common features

This bird's eye view of some of the major religious retreats and monasteries across the globe is greatly enriched by looking at their awe-inspiring and strangely alluring pictures (which ideally should have been included here). Combined, the literary description and the photographic images lead to the conclusion that all such places have four psychophysical elements in common: (i) isolation, (ii) quietude, (iii) abstinence, and (iv) communality. The specific manner, the nuance, and the quantitative extent of each feature might vary from one to the other monastery but that all four exist at all places remains unquestioned. Such centrality not only accords them a defining status, it also suggests that these geo-social components facilitate the emergence of the deep psychological currents a monastic individual is seeking to unchain from within himself. Brief comments on each of these features follow.

Isolation

The first characteristic that strikes one about most monasteries is their locations. With a few exceptions (e.g., the Exarchic Greek Monastery of Santa Maria di Grotta Ferrata located just outside Rome, the Carmelite Monastery on 66th Street in Philadelphia, PA), most such structures are located in remote areas. Many of them exist atop difficult-to-climb mountains (e.g., St. Catherine's Monastery on Mount Sinai, the Holy Monastery of St. Stephen in Greece, the Sümela Monastery in Trabzon, Turkey, and the Thiksey Monastery in Ladakh, Tibet), in a heavily-wooded area (e.g., Jetvana Temple Forest Buddhist Monastery in New Hampshire, USA, Monasterio y Museo de la Recoleta in Arequipa, Peru), or on the quiet and relatively uninhabited banks of a lake or a river (e.g., Sanctuary Basilica of the Madonna Della Corona on Lake Garda, not far from Verona, Italy, and a group of nineteen monasteries near Lake Tana in Ethiopia). None, however, beats others in the degree of remoteness more profoundly than the sixteenth-century Kozheozersky Russian Orthodox Monastery, located in Lake Kozhero in the northwest region of Arkhangelsk Oblast, Russia. There are no roads leading to it. The only way to get there is by walking some twenty miles on foot.

Having established that remoteness characterizes most monasteries, we are prepared to ask: why? On the surface, the answer to this question is threefold: (i) being away from the humdrum of daily life and its materialistic concerns helps focus the mind upon the less tangible but existential issues such as the meaning of life in general and the purpose of one's existence in particular, (ii) taking the trouble to reach such remote locations often involves physical hardship which, in turn, tests the veracity and the resolve of the seeker, and (iii) the remoteness of location discourages temptations to return when the inevitable disillusionment (consequent upon the breakdown of the overt or covert idealization of such retreat) sets in.

These are, however, considerations at a macroscopic level. At a deeper level that is of greater psychoanalytic interest exists the remote location's enforced creation of aloneness. Living far away from people and having undisturbed time for contemplation tilts the balance of "man's eternal struggle against both fusion and isolation" (Mahler, 1972, p. 130) in one direction; it avoids fusion and enhances isolation. This, in turn,

facilitates the process of self-discovery. The monastic individual is "held" by the monotony of simple rituals and by the consistently present but marginally interactive fellow mendicants. An ontogenetic parallel is provided here by Winnicott (1958):

> It is only when alone (that is to say, in the presence of someone) that the infant can discover his own personal life. The pathological alternative is a false life built on reactions to external stimuli. When alone in the sense that I am using the term, and only when alone, the infant is able to do what in an adult world would be called relaxing. The infant is able to become unintegrated, to flounder, to be in a state in which there is no orientation, to be able to exist for a time without being either a reactor to an external impingement or an active person with a direction of interest or movement …. It is only under these conditions that the infant can have an experience which feels real. A large number of such experiences form the basis for a life that has reality in it instead of futility. (p. 34)

It is precisely such "reality" of subjective existence that life in a monastery seeks to create. The isolated location it chooses for itself is a means to diminish id-driven impulses and enhance what Winnicott (ibid.) has termed "ego-relatedness" both to the self and the surrounding object world.

Isolation, by reducing the frequency and intensity of interpersonal contact, also loosens the grip that habitual ways of relating have on an individual. Relational patterns begin to weaken and aspects of self that were taken for granted cease to be important. A process of "self-decreation" (Corradi Fiumara, 2009) sets in and paves the way to authenticity and spontaneity.

> Our well-formed selves may be regarded as the superb results of our struggles for psychic survival. And yet, once the masterwork has been accomplished, it may go on functioning indefinitely by means of the same relational policies, even to the point at which it can debilitate our personality. But then, the question is whether it would be possible to let go of it, or of parts of it. It is not a matter of giving up something "false," however, but of giving up something that has been quite useful for psychic survival. (p. 113)

Corradi Fiumara underscores that "self-decreation" is not enforced from outside but spontaneously self-generated for the sake of a more intense, more genuine, and more spontaneous inner life. Her proposal of "letting go of the self" (p. 117) and her reminder that only a falsely compliant life can avoid suffering bring her to the threshold of Buddhism.

Quietude

A second prominent feature of all monasteries is the silence that inhabits them. Far from being oppressive or suffocating, such silence hums softly along with the rhythms and rhymes of nature; it does not exclude the sound of birds chirping, a stream flowing nearby, the limbs and branches of trees merrily undulating with wind, even a train or ship passing by in the distance. It does restrict talking between the mendicants to a formal minimum and often requires designated periods of complete silence on the part of its residents. In the Benedictine priestess, Joan Chittister's (2011) words, such "regulated periods of silence comfort, heal, and restore us to ourselves—fresh and new and quieted" (p. 28). The implication is that "the noise outside of us is not the enemy. It is the noise within—our desires that plague us, our worries that deplete us, our thoughts that agitate us—that we must calm" (ibid.).

Stated much earlier, the words of the widely revered fifteenth-century ecclesiastical priest, Thomas Kempis (AD 1380–1471) opine that true solace is to be found in "interior silence," and by strenuously avoiding the "perils of loquaciousness." In his view, silence serves as a "guardian of piety" (all three phrases cited in Nixon, 2023, pp. 8, 33, 29) though it must not be adopted rigidly or excessively.

Away from the Christian tradition, Buddhism also emphasizes the transcendent powers of silence. It declares that

> True inner silence puts you in touch with the deeper dimensions of being and knowing—gnostic awareness and inner wisdom. Because it is impossible to express the inexpressible, the spiritual sound or song of silence is beyond words or concepts. Mere words are weak translations of what we really want to say. Inner silence and emptiness can help provide easier access to universal

> mystery and primordial being … Inner solitude and noble silence is a way to empty, cleanse, heal, and renew the heart and mind. (Das, 1997, pp. 223, 226)

Shorn of their religious tonality, these Christian and Buddhist notions cast their shadow upon the psychoanalytic concepts of "contemplative" and "regenerative" silences (Akhtar, 2013, pp. 32–36). A slowing down of perceptual and cognitive traffic, as well as a certain "low-keyedness" (Mahler, Pine, & Bergman, 1975, p. 42) of emotional life is essential for fresh insights to emerge from within and for new information from outside to be metabolized. The individual in such "contemplative silence" is involved in a private and subliminal dialogue with his inner objects or turning attention inwards to comprehend and catalog what he has just heard or seen. The pensive calm that follows reading a poem, looking at a striking painting, or even upon receiving serious national news is an illustration of such contemplative silence. In the context of our clinical work, such silence appears spontaneously at times and is followed by a meaningful revelation. Or, it appears in response to the analyst's intervention. Greenson (1961) talks of some patients needing "some 'silent time' to mull over, to contend with, and to digest a new insight. This will be followed by confirmatory material if the interpretation was correct" (p. 82).

A second kind of silence implicit in the religious material cited above is what I have termed "regenerative silence" (Akhtar, 2013, p. 34), acknowledging that the notion of an ego-replenishing mental stillness was introduced by Winnicott (1963). According to him, genuine communication only arises when objects change over from being subjectively to being objectively perceived. It is at this point that two opposites of communication also appear. One is active (or reactive) not-communicating and the other is "simple not-communicating" (ibid., p. 183). The latter

> is like resting. It is a state in its own right, and it passes over into communicating, and reappears as naturally …. One should be able to make a positive statement of the healthy use of non-communication in the establishment of the feeling of real. (pp. 183–184)

Such not-communicating is seen by Winnicott to restore the vitality of the true self which by its very nature is incommunicado (Winnicott, 1960). His notions in this realm have been further developed by Khan (1983). In describing the state of "lying fallow," Khan emphasized that it is "not one of inertia, listless vacancy or idle quietism of soul [but one of] alerted quietude and receptive wakeful lambent consciousness" (p. 183). Khan regarded the experience of "lying fallow" to be an important "nutrient of the ego" (p. 185), a replica of the infantile calm after a good feeding, and a conduit for genuine personalization of the individual.

A confluence of "contemplative" and "regenerative" silences is evident in the phonetic stillness and calm typical of the monasteries and occasionally in the "mutual silences" (Akhtar, 2013, pp. 52–54) between the analyst and his analysand. The spiritual and the psychoanalytic coexist congenially in such overlap.

Abstinence

All monasteries require some sort of abstinence on the part of their residents. The precise nature of such temperance, however, varies. Hindu monasteries do not permit eating meat and insist upon strict vegetarianism. The same is true of Buddhist monasteries. The diet in Benedictine monasteries is usually restricted to one meal a day and although red meat is prohibited, fish and fowl are allowed. A limited amount of wine is also permitted (Chittister, 2011). Monastic orders of Catholic and Cistercian faiths allow fish and a small amount of beer or wine. Carmelites maintain a vegetarian diet but permit the sick and elderly to eat red meat.

Food is not the only realm of abstinence. Sexual relations are prohibited by the monasteries of all faiths, be they Christian, Hindu, or Buddhist. A unique exception is the Japanese Buddhist sect, *Jodo Shinshu*, founded by Shinran (AD 1173–1262), which permits monks to marry, have sex, and bear children (Osawa, 2013). Interestingly, the Christian Church at large regards monks' celibacy as a matter not of religious doctrine but of required discipline. Doctrines pertain to immutable truths whereas disciplines are era and culture specific applications of those truths. The former cannot be modified, the latter can be changed upon the Church's discretion.

Outside of food and sex, nearly all monasteries discourage a "variety of earthly pleasures" (Thomas Kempis, cited in Nixon, 2023, p. 25). Living quarters are simple; usually a narrow bed, a desk, a chair and a lamp are all the monk's room contains. Bringing personal items (e.g., family photographs, favorite knick-knacks) is not allowed. The use of perfumes is prohibited. Superficial banter between the various mendicants residing in the monastery is discouraged; a humble and soft-spoken "hello" and a nod of the head is deemed sufficient.

The idea behind all such restrictions is to denude lived life of its materialistic trappings and redirect the forces demanding the pleasures of the flesh into keen self-awareness, thinking, and reflecting upon the mind and its surroundings. Needless to add that a close parallel to such injunctions is to be found in clinical psychoanalysis. Freud's (1915a) stern warning that the treatment must be "carried out in abstinence" (p. 165) readily comes to mind here. Explicating this remark and building further upon it, I have elsewhere (Akhtar, 2009b) written the following:

> While initially restricted to libidinal pressures in the transference, the rule of abstinence applies to negative transference also. The analyst must not be tempted to disprove that he or she is not as "bad" as the patient thinks. All in all, the principle of transference requires that we neither attempt to modify the transference by indulging the patient nor by changing our behavior. (p. 1)

Moving closer to the abstinence in monasteries, I had added that "abstinence, in its remote derivatives, triggered by events in the interpersonal matrix of analysis, might also involve not eating, drinking, or smoking (cigars!) during the session by both parties" (p. 2). Psychoanalytic abstinence renders them subject to elaboration of fantasy. Monastic abstinence redirects corporal desires toward spiritual quests. Both serve the purpose of what Freud termed "self-preservative instincts" (1916–17) or "ego-instincts" (1910i).

Communality

The final feature of monastic life is its emphasis upon communality. Religious and spiritual practices are to be followed but not in an

excessive way that makes one stand out in the group. Thomas Kempis (AD 1380–1417) emphasized that it is "better to observe all the common rules and observances of one's religious house perfectly and without fault than to invent new and singular observances as an individual" (cited in Nixon, 2023, p. 37). The principle of uniformity is also evident in the attires of monks and nuns. In Christian monastic orders, the dress (known as the "habit") includes a tunic, cowl, and scapular; at times, a hood for monks and a veil for nuns is also included. Long sleeve shirts and closed-toe shoes too are recommended. The habits of Carthusian and Hieronymite monks and nuns are white whereas the Benedictines prefer black. Hindu monasteries also have a uniform dress code. Their robes are invariably saffron-colored. Buddhist monasteries, in contrast, permit a variety of colors for robes: oranges, saffron, black, and maroon. Black robes are common in Japan, whereas maroon or burgundy red is prevalent in the monasteries of Tibet, Nepal, and Bhutan.

Besides vestmental uniformity, monastic life demands shared timings for meals, meditation, and nature walks. This "pursuit of ascetic uniformity" (Brooke, 2003, p. 8) is far from Gandhi's moral narcissism which made him declare: "I must reduce myself to zero" (1940, p. 504). It does contain a forceful imperative to "dissolve" the self into the group, but such an "anti-singularity" (Thomas Kempis, cited in Nixon, 2023, p. 36) tilt is aimed to enhance union with fellow human beings and increase compassion for them.

This discourse on the essential components (isolation, quietude, abstinence, and communality) of monastic life must not lead to the impression that existence in a monastery is idyllic, restful, or worse, indolent. The fact is that most monasteries require their residents to do physical labor. Bee-keeping, making wax candles, farming, growing their own vegetables, gardening, and fixing this or that broken stuff in the residential quarters is expected of all monks and nuns.

> The Benedictine heart knows that attending to the mechanical functions of what it means to get through a day—running the vacuum, washing the dishes, peeling the vegetables, making the bed—keeps us all, men and women, aware of the struggles embedded in every dimension of life …. It makes us aware of the burdens carried by those around us … whose full lives we would otherwise never know. (Chittister, 2011, p. 68)

An important feature of such labor is to reproduce and preserve all scriptures and manuscripts. Brooke (2003) gives the historical context of such practices.

> Books indeed were of great importance to all the new orders and it is in their copying and reading that the most characteristic influence of the monasteries on the Renaissance of the twelfth century can be discussed. It was because the books that were studied most frequently were found in monastic libraries and the largest network of active scholars lay in the cloisters that the early stages of the intellectual revival were predominantly monastic in inspiration. There were always secular schools as well; they came to flourish alongside the monastic. (p. 140)

With different hues and colors, psychoanalysis too contains such ideas: its reverence for scholarship, the uniform tripartite (à la Eitingon) track for aspiring analysts, and the consistent requirement of four–five weekly sessions and recumbent posture from all candidates in training bring psychoanalytic institutes closer to the monastic model. Hartmann's (1939) concept of *zusammenpassen* (customarily translated into English as "fitting together"), while enunciated in the context of intrapsychic harmony between competing psychic agendas, can readily be extended to the attitude of civic conventionality that often results from underlying "classical" analysis. To be fair, it must be acknowledged that unlike Freud and Hartmann, Winnicott (1960) with his premium on authentic selfhood, does part company with the "antisingularity" bent of the monastic ideal.

Religious or spiritual or metapsychological?

Since the words "religion" and "spirituality" have made frequent and somewhat loose appearances in my discourse so far, I wish to emphasize that I do not consider them interchangeable; in fact, I believe that the two differ in important ways. In a recent book of mine (Akhtar, 2024a), I have noted the following six differences between religion and spirituality.

> (i) religion insists upon God's existence, spirituality does not,
> (ii) religion proposes life after death, spirituality makes no such

> promise, (iii) religion divides people into groups, spirituality unites the entire humanity, (iv) religion prescribes rituals and prohibits certain actions, spirituality does not, (v) religion puts animals and inanimate objects beneath human beings, spirituality sees the dignity in everything and denounces such stratification, and (vi) religion relies upon texts and scriptures, spirituality on compassion and learned wisdom. (p. 28)

Three additional points are pertinent here. *One*, the placing of animals beneath humans is more characteristic of Judeo-Christian and Islamic traditions than of Hinduism, Buddhism, and the religious philosophies of the Far East. *Two*, applying a metapsychological perspective to the issues of religion and spirituality reveals something very interesting. Religion, with its increasingly baroque elaboration of rituals, places of worship, division into branches, evolution of doctrines and disciplines, and tendency toward fine distinctions, nuance, and classification seems to be a product of the Freudian "life instinct" (Freud, 1920g). Religion also creates divisions and conflict between people of different faith; such paranoid and destructive dimensions seem to contain a tributary of the negative aspect of Freud's (ibid.) "death instinct." In contrast, spirituality stresses simplification, pruning of life's trappings, merger with the living and non-living universe. It therefore seems to be a product of the "good" component of Freud's "death instinct." However, elements of "life instinct" can also be discerned in spirituality. This is especially applicable to the "self-preservative" (1916–17) or "ego-instincts" (1910i) component of the life instinct. Now, Freud's grim declaration that "the aim of all life is death" (1920g, p. 38) has received the rather superficial understanding of self destructiveness being inherent in human existence. What such an interpretation overlooks is that the "Nirvana seeking" element of the death instinct is actually the greatest form of self-actualization possible. After all, nothing can assure greater preservation then becoming one with matter that, at its base, is everlasting and immutable.

Finally, life in monasteries, as deconstructed in this contribution, seems to be psychically and behaviorally located at a midpoint between religion and spirituality. In metapsychological terms, it embodies "various proportions of the two groups of instincts" (1926d, p. 125).

Coda

I began this discourse with a broad-based survey of monasteries that exist all over the world and reflect its various religious and spiritual traditions. Underscoring their common features (isolation, quietude, abstinence, and communality) led me to explore the psychological nature of monastic life itself. Taking a step further in this pursuit, I delineated the psychoanalytic metapsychology of spirituality indicating, from time to time, the clinical implications of my proposals.

An exercise of such sort can hardly avoid the tension between "wild" and "applied" incarnation of psychoanalysis. To begin with, one can raise the legitimate question whether brick-and-mortar structures, physical enclosures, and swathes of geographical terrain can yield any information that is of psychoanalytic value. Reflecting upon this (and the implicit link between land, nature, and spirituality embedded in it) brings to mind an exchange between the two main characters in Louis Malle's 1981 movie, *My Dinner with André*. For those who are unfamiliar with this cinematic gem, it might suffice to know that the entire movie revolves around a single, evening-long conversation between two friends from the New York theater world. One, named Wally, is a decent, logical, and straightforward person. The other, named André, is cynical, opinionated, and mysterious. At one point in their dialogue, Wally exasperatedly blurts out: "Why do we need to go to India, Nepal, or Tibet to see God? Is there no God right here? In Manhattan?" To this Andre responds, "Yes, Wally, God *is* in Manhattan, but we are too busy to see him." The "poetic truth" (Akhtar, 2023) of Andre's declaration is a blissful twin of my psychoanalytic portrayal of monasteries in this essay. Both seek to forge links between the earthbound and the otherworldly. Both rely heavily upon metaphor and hammer that linguistic nail deep into the timber of our psychosomatic selves. Both challenge and enhance psychoanalytic thinking. Don't they?

CHAPTER 8

Retirement homes, nursing homes, and hospices

Murad Khan

"Will I die alone?"

I begin with this question not only because of the frequency with which it has crossed my own mind, but also because I imagine it has crossed yours too.

I grew up with certain values as part of a middle-class, conservative, Muslim family in Pakistan. I was one of four siblings and the only assigned male at birth. As such, I understood my primary responsibility was to earn a living to support myself, future wife and kids, and parents in their old age. Nursing homes existed in my imagination only as a symbol for how far the West had diverged from traditional family values. Even at a young age, I had vague ethical concerns about expecting my future wife to take on the labor of caring for my parents—the way my mother had for her in-laws. Realizing I was queer, however, threw my vision for meeting these expectations into crisis. If my parents disowned me on account of my sexuality, would they die alone?

I start with this personal vignette to ground three aims for this chapter. The first is to build on the work that has put pressure on conceptualizing human development as neatly divisible into discrete, linear, and progressive stages. The second is to contextualize the dominant imagination of

such stages in their material contexts. The third is to argue for serious attention to the margins of human experience, in hopes of unlocking material and psychic potentials for healing, community, and fulfillment.

Conceptualizing retirement homes, nursing homes, and hospices as material representations of psychic drives, anxieties, and conflicts is not sufficient for such aims. It is with this understanding that I include how the ideas of such homes have been constructed in the first place. I interweave these histories with psychoanalytic theorization, cinematic examples, and insights from other disciplines to illustrate the lattice of linkages between the human psyche and the material grounds in which it lives and dies.

(Re)tirement

The English word "retirement" has etymological roots in French. While used in the sixteenth century in the context of armies ("retreating") as well as privacy ("withdrawing into seclusion"), it evolved to connote "leaving one's business or occupation" in the seventeenth century. Retirement, as it is understood today, has even more recent origins. In 1881, German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck instated a pension law in order to satisfy socialist pressures for greater state financial support of older adults (Tofield, 2018). In his memoirs, Bismarck wrote, "My plan was to win over the working classes, or should I say, bribe them into seeing the State as a social institution that exists purely because of them and that has their well-being at heart." Class is central in retirement's conception and remains a major determinant for how it might be experienced differently (if at all) based on one's social location.

Coincidentally, Freud set up his clinical practice in Vienna in 1886, just five years after this pension law was instated in Germany and twenty years after Austria separated from it. I note these spatial and temporal connections as I situate psychoanalysis' relationship with retirement in the context of its ambivalent relationship with aging (Plotkin, 2017). Freud, for instance, was skeptical about psychoanalysis for older patients. He stated:

> when near or above the age of fifty, the elasticity of mental processes on which treatment depends is, as a rule, lacking; old

> people are no longer educable; … the mass of material to be dealt with would prolong the duration of the treatment indefinitely. (Freud, 1905a, p. 264)

Abraham, on the other hand, advocated for the suitability of psychoanalytic treatment for older patients, stating "to my surprise a considerable number of them reacted very favorably to the treatment. I might add that I count some of these cures among my most successful cases" (Abraham, 1919). Although several have contributed to the psychoanalytic literature on aging and adult development since its inception (Akhtar, 2022; Cath & Miller, 1986; Erikson, 1959; Hoffman, 1979; Nemiroff & Colarusso, 1985; Quinodoz & Alcorn, 2014), such contributions have stalled since the 1990s. While Wagner (2005) explores countertransferential anxieties that contribute to this bias, Plotkin (2014) situates it in historical and ongoing ageism. I take this argument further by proposing that ageism has not only limited the number of contributions, but also the nature of such contributions by positioning age as the predominant mediator of how aging is experienced.

It is with this context that I tackle retirement homes—spaces for living that are distinct from those in previous stages in life. I start the exploration of such homes with a close look at a popular Bollywood movie, *Baghban* (Chopra, 2003). It tells the story of Raj and Pooja's journey into and through the first six months of Raj's retirement. It begins with the careful illustration of an idyllic upper-middle class Indian family that is faithful to traditional family values, not too unlike the ones I referenced at the start of this chapter. Raj, the patriarch, has generously made sacrifices for his now adult children. As he enters retirement, he expresses a desire to move from living in his own home to living in theirs. The adult children experience this request as a burden and threat to their independence. They suggest that their parents separate, purportedly to maximize individual time with each of them. The underlying motive, as made clear to viewers in the discussion between the adult children, is to discourage their parents from moving in with them in the first place. To their dismay, the parents reluctantly accept the proposal.

The conflict in these familial dynamics can be contextualized by the idea of the "familial self" proposed by Roland (1987). He uses his experience working clinically in India to distinguish understanding of the

individualized self from a collective one. On the basis of adaptation, Roland argues that psychic structures develop differently to accommodate varying cultural contexts. Raj and Pooja's dilemma, therefore, emerges from threats to their familial selves regardless of which option they choose. Their eventual decision to separate to spend time with their children can be understood as a compromise between their personal and familial wishes. Such a compromise relies on their adult children having similar psychic adaptations. The subsequent narrative reveals this not to be the case. Raj and Pooja's suffering emerges directly from the discrepancy between their hopes for retirement and the reality they experience. It quickly becomes clear that Raj's desire to live with his children stems from more than sharing physical space with them. His pain reveals wishes, hopes, and expectations from the relationships themselves.

Raj's observation of his son's working late on his laptop one night is met with his son's minimizing the work Raj has done his entire life. Later, Raj is excitedly working on his typewriter, only to be silenced by his son on account of making too much noise. Raj's son denies his request for repair of his reading glasses, depriving Raj of the comfort he gets from reading Pooja's letters. He eagerly comes home to celebrate a religious ritual with his wife over the phone, only to find there is no food prepared for him upon his arrival. Each of these examples operates through material objects: the outdated and noisy typewriter, the broken reading glasses, the utensils that clink in the absence of food. On one level, they illustrate the material anxieties all of us may have about loss of function, utility, and self-care. On another, they portray the disappointments we fear from love objects: betrayal, abandonment, and neglect.

However, a closer look at Pooja's experience complicates aging as the central struggle of retirement. Raj endures suffering mostly as a direct consequence of his inability to care for himself. Pooja is not only self-sufficient, but also provides care to her children and granddaughter. As an upper-middle class Indian woman, Pooja does not retire because she was never expected (possibly allowed) to engage in work "outside the home." Her gendered labor is not compensated and, therefore, does not qualify for retirement. Furthermore, while Pooja's inhabiting the gendered role of a woman renders her financially dependent, she has had to care for herself and others in a way that Raj presumably never has. A motif of intimacy between the two is Raj's inability (or refusal)

to tie his own tie so that Pooja can do it for him. Being characterized as happily engaging and deriving fulfillment from such labor is crucial in conceptualizing the pain that she does endure.

Pooja suffers in the realm of power dynamics with her daughter-in-law and granddaughter. Her entry into her adult children's home is met by her granddaughter's refusal to share her room with her, citing a need for privacy. Pooja goes on to observe her granddaughter dating a boy who is taking advantage of her. She shares her concerns with her son and daughter-in-law only to be dismissed and asked to stay in her lane as a guest. Pooja laments coming to this home assuming it was her own. Pooja eventually rescues her granddaughter while being sexually assaulted by the same boy she expressed concerns about. Applying a white feminist lens (Zakaria, 2021) to these dynamics might simplify this conflict between women as a product of internalized misogyny. An intersectional lens that includes attention to race, culture, and age reveals more (Collins & Bilge, 2020). South Asian women are often implicitly promised authority in their later years for the sacrifices they make. Pooja's story reflects how the westernization of younger generations leaves this promise unfulfilled. While Pooja's granddaughter's refusal to share her room with her operates around physical space, the object that Pooja loses in the relational dynamics may be less clear to the white, Western gaze. The object here is the top that her granddaughter wears, representing the family's *izzat*. Takhar (2005) translates *izzat* as "honor," "self-respect," and "prestige." When Pooja's granddaughter's top is torn by her assaulter, it is Pooja who is disgraced. It is in this moment that Pooja's agency becomes most dramatically expressed, as she firmly commands the assaulter to "get out." Having cited the etymological roots of retirement at the start of this section, I revive aged and alternate meanings of the term while imbuing it with new meaning. Tirement has also historically meant "articles of clothing" (as in "attire"). Indeed, Pooja reclaims her agency through an act of *(re)tirement*.

While not explicitly stated, the conflict between the parents and their children is racialized. In post-colonial India and under the ongoing influence of Western imperialism, the children are depicted as being heavily influenced by white and Western values. This leaves Raj and Pooja having lived their lives making investments (emotional and financial) with expectations that their adult children are reluctant to fulfill.

My choice of exploring retirement homes using a movie set in the Global South is a deliberate one. First, I hope to subvert the long history and ongoing exclusion of people of color, be they in the United States or the world over. Second, I argue that both the material and emotional objects that define aging are necessarily contingent on cultural, historical, and sociopolitical context. Third, I believe expanding the possible meanings that an individual may attach to retirement, retirement homes, and the objects that represent them allows for individual difference, even within a given cultural context.

As this story demonstrates, the experience of a retirement home is contingent upon the wishes one has for retirement. Such wishes are threatened by the potential loss of objects that can occur as we and our established support systems age. With this in mind, I move to exploring object loss in aging as another central aspect of the homes in which it unfolds. Additionally, I also hope to contextualize such loss as partially influenced by the loss inherent in attaching to these objects. This context allows for a richer understanding of how loss might be experienced in later years, while also attending to the particularities of such loss being a function of how societies' homes are organized rather than a function of aging itself.

Object(ing) loss

Freud explored loss as central to human experience, regardless of age. In "Mourning and melancholia," Freud (1917e) theorizes mourning as the painful process of withdrawing libidinal investment from the lost object. This withdrawal eventually results in the ego becoming free to attach to living objects. Klein (1940), on the other hand, conceptualized mourning as a process of "reparation," in which destructive fantasies unleashed by the loss are contained, and a positive internal relationship with the lost object is reestablished. Further exploration on the process of mourning has since conceived of the persistence of attachment with lost objects, focusing more on mourning as a process of transformation of the internal relationship (Baker, 2001).

One of the most influential TV shows in the United States that centers on death is *Six Feet Under* (Ball, 2001). Set in early 2000s Los Angeles, the show explores the lives (and deaths) of a family that runs a funeral

home business, notably within their own home. We are introduced to the family members in the wake of Nathaniel Fisher's unexpected death on account of a car accident. While each character's journey is poignant and instructive, I focus this section on the matriarch of the family, Ruth Fisher. Ruth is the first to hear of her husband's death, upon which she throws her phone on the floor. When she shares this news with her son, she says, "Your father is dead. Your father is dead and my pot roast is ruined." It is through these opening scenes that Ruth's role as the homemaker of the family is established. As the episode unfolds, however, it becomes clear that there is more to Ruth than this depiction initially suggests. In her grief, Ruth confesses to her sons that she has been having an affair with a hairdresser with whom she went camping. We are introduced to parts of Ruth that are less often associated with the "aging housewife": the outdoors, adventure, and sexuality. It also becomes clear that Ruth's grief is complicated by the events that have occurred prior to her husband's death. She refers to her husband as "the great love of my life" against the backdrop of a life with much to be desired. We learn that her childhood comprised of her caring for her disabled grandmother. We also learn that Ruth married Nathaniel in the context of an unplanned pregnancy at the age of nineteen. In a poignant scene, Ruth's eldest son shares photos of her that he finds among Nathaniel's possessions. Ruth recalls these photos as taken before Nathaniel went to Vietnam, the night they "made love like maniacs, like it was the last time." The scene is heartbreaking not just in the context of her husband's recent death, but the loss of this excitement in subsequent years of their marriage. It is with this memory that we see Ruth go to her lover's home to share a passionate kiss. Ruth's story, in these scenes and beyond, subverts our expectations of how a bereft widow might grieve the loss of her object. Despite grief, her husband's death also offers the possibility of recreating the desire, excitement, and pleasure that she has longed for her entire life.

While Ruth is depicted as desirous of romantic and sexual partners, she is also constrained by them. The show frequently engages characters in vivid fantasy. One of the most satisfying fantasies is one Ruth has toward the end of the show's run (2001–2005). Ruth has since engaged in several relationships with men, all with their unique frustrations. Ruth is out camping and decides to leave one of her lovers in the middle of her trip. As she traverses through the forest, we see Ruth

encountering all her former male lovers. One by one, she proceeds to shoot them. She pauses when she encounters Nathaniel, acknowledging his presence with warmth. With a dramatic shift from warmth to aggression, she shoots Nathaniel as well. This fantasy complicates both Freud's decathexis and Klein's reparation. Even conceptualizing this journey of mourning as transformation leaves important sociopolitical realities out. Ruth's continued engagement of romantic and sexual life after her husband's death is not simply a journey of replacing a lost male object. In the context of patriarchy, it becomes a journey that facilitates coming to terms with what she lost in the process of attaching to male objects in the first place.

Ruth's loneliness in the wake of Nathaniel's death intersects with the loss she experiences from the relationships with her adult children. In episode 205, "The invisible woman," the sudden death of a woman named Emily Previn is explored. This woman is shown alone in her home, choking on food, and subsequently dying because of it. Emily's body decays on the floor of her home until a co-habitant of the property detects the smell. The Fishers all remark on the absence of any family or friends to arrange or attend her funeral. Emily had already filed a "preneed," documenting her desires for her funeral. Ruth takes a special interest in the case, volunteering to go to Emily's house to look for clothes that she can be buried in. As it becomes evident that nobody will be attending the funeral, Ruth has her own family members attend. Shortly after, Ruth expresses dismay at the other family members' disinterest, realizing the case deeply impacted her because of her own fears of ending up alone. She poignantly exclaims to her children, "I want some intimacy. Give me intimacy. Won't any of you have intimacy with me?" A dismissive response from her children culminates in a poignant scene at the end of the episode, where Ruth is seen sitting in front of portraits of her children, eventually breaking down in tears as the scene fades out.

The death of loved ones is a significant rather than exclusive contributor to loneliness in aging. This loneliness is inherent in the way societies, particularly Western societies, have only recently been organized. Ruth, Raj, and Pooja, while living in different cultural contexts, share the grief of losing idealized versions of relationships with their children. This loss occurs even while living under the same roof. While Raj and Pooja

decide to leave these homes, Ruth takes a different approach. Inspired by Emily, whose preneed represents agency even in her death, Ruth makes her needs for intimacy known to her children. It might be tempting to conceptualize Ruth's actions simply as displacement, denial, and sublimation representative of her developmental stage or recent loss. Instead, I propose we understand Ruth's actions as her courageously and agentically objecting to loss, especially while she still can.

Living death

Psychoanalytic theorizing about death, as all its theorizing, is informed by the culture that conceives it (Akhtar, 2011b). The death instinct's centrality in Freud's structural theory reflects his deep preoccupation with it (Freud, 1940). Akhtar highlights various tensions, including those between death denial and acceptance as they manifest between and within cultures, psychoanalysis, and the human mind. I build on this analysis by focusing my attention on how such tensions are tied up with tensions around the homes in which some of us die: nursing homes and hospices.

Understanding nursing homes as they exist today necessitates retracing their origin in the idea of poorhouses. Poorhouses (also referred to as almshouses) originated in medieval England, housing the poor, orphans, older people, as well as people with mental illness and disabilities (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2022). Watson (2009) notes that in colonial and nineteenth-century America, most care was still home care. Institutions were for the "deserving poor" and rooted in the Elizabethan Poor Laws. Poverty, disability, and illness were seen as moral failings and poorhouses were meant to reform inhabitants through order and structure. Notably, they were also intended to protect society from the corrupting influence of the "poor and feeble." This system became overwhelmed during the Great Depression, eventually resulting in the Social Security Act of 1935. By 1965, the Kerr–Mills Act and Medicaid had fueled the growth of nursing homes. The tracing of hospice history is less clear, given the way its history overlaps with that of hospitals, insofar as they were both places where people died. The term hospice today, however, has particular connotations given its roots in the modern hospice movement, most heavily influenced by the work

of Cicely Saunders. The principles of her philosophy began to be applied in a variety of settings, including inpatient units, in-home care, and day-care services (Richmond, 2005). Siebold (1992), however, challenges too close a connection between this form of hospice care with those that are often cited, as older forms of hospices had more in common with the poorhouses discussed earlier—long-term shelter for a variety of medically and socially afflicted groups. Instead, modern hospice care focuses on short-term care for those for whom death is imminent.

It is with this context that I explore a nonfictional narrative of dying. *Gen Silent* is a documentary that follows six LGBTQ seniors in the Boston area (Maddox, 2010). One of them, Krys Anne, is a trans woman who lives alone. Krys Anne describes the transformative impact of her transition by saying, "disheveled hair, no teeth, and I just beam ear to ear because I'm so thrilled to be who I am." She juxtaposes this with her life pre-transition, which included two suicide attempts: "I lived fifty-plus years of my life as a male. He was a sad, miserable person. Angry at himself and the world. And just received no joy or happiness." Her newfound joy, however, is not shared by her family. We learn that Krys Anne is estranged from them post-transition. Additionally, she has been diagnosed with lung cancer, with a prognosis of eighteen months left to live. She has been assigned a hospice worker with experience in caring for older LGBTQ adults, including doing so through the AIDS crisis.

While the impact of transphobia on Krys Anne and her relationships is evident, its implications for receiving care in her final months are further developed. She emphasizes not wanting to be cared for by anyone who does not accept her as trans. Even as some family members do make contact upon news of her imminent death, questions of their affirming her gender are central. "Are they coming here because they accept me as Krys Anne or because there's a person dying." A clip of her son holding her hand is shown, where he is offering to help. She responds, "I need acceptance." Her son only ends up visiting her four or five times, stating himself that it is difficult for him to accept her gender. The impact of transphobia mediates her relationship with receiving care not just from family members, but from institutions as well. At one point, the documentary cuts to a phone call in the context of decompensation that results in an ambulance being called to take

Krys Anne to the emergency room. One of the first questions asked is whether Krys Anne is "fully male." This instance is explored as an example of the kind of transphobia that pervades society as a whole, but medical facilities in particular. It forms the basis of her desire to die in her home rather than in a facility.

This request proves challenging to honor, given that she does not have people in her life to provide round-the-clock support. Jennifer rallies her own networks of LGBTQ people to offer this support. While challenging, she is able to come up with a rotating schedule of caregivers to allow Krys Anne to go back to her own home and gives it to her as her sixtieth birthday present. While this plan works for a few weeks, Jennifer describes Krys Anne's frustration with the constant care, alluding to the "love-hate relationship" many older adults have with being cared for. This schedule is discontinued and Krys Anne does well on her own for a while before decompensating again. She is shown on the floor of her bedroom, gasping for air, while saying, "I went through all kinds of shit in my life. I was in Vietnam. Transition was hard. Losing my family was hard. But this is terrifying. Just don't let it happen to anyone you know."

Krys Anne's story disrupts dominant understandings of life and death. There is the clear sense that she did not consider the fifty years of life prior to transition as worth living. It is interesting to consider that many trans people often designate their given name with the term "deadname," suggesting that new life emerges from their agentic choice of a name that affirms their gender. Krys Anne's death is more heartbreaking with this context, given the life she has managed to create well into her fifties. She also understands her diagnosis of lung cancer as a consequence of smoking too many cigars, something she did to cope with the "miserable" life she was living prior to transition. Such a formulation calls to question the idea that aging, in and of itself, is inherently a process of involution. While all developmental stages involve loss, advanced age may also be the culmination of the self-understanding needed to live an authentic life. And yet, it is this possibility that makes her death even more tragic, bringing unrealized potentials into clearer focus.

Even as transphobia is at the heart of Krys Anne's story, she reveals herself to be more than just a victim of it. Krys Anne never lives in a nursing home, though the prospect of one is ever-present.

She experiences the idea of being placed in a facility as one that would rob her of her agency. Krys Anne, unfortunately, is fortunate to experience the death that she does. Access to an LGBTQ support system by virtue of being assigned an affirming hospice worker is a privilege many in her situation would not have. It is through this support that she is able to exercise her agency even at the end of her life. At the same time, conceptualizing Krys Anne's access as only a function of privilege misses the psychic work that is essential in creating it. Krys Anne exercises agency through acts of refusal. Whether through conditioning contact with her son by a need for acceptance of her gender or through the determined rejection of support from transphobic caregivers, Krys Anne creates room for a kind of care she has craved her entire life. While the room created for such care is more overt with her newfound support system, she risks further estrangement from her son to create such possibilities within existing relationships as well. Her son's presence at her funeral and participation in the documentary suggests that Krys Anne's moving toward conflict, even as she ages, allows for new levels of intimacy. This intimacy is contingent both on the conditions created by her terminal illness as well as the relational choices she makes as she lives and dies through it.

Queerness has always created home and relational arrangements that exist outside of dominant imagination through *families of choice*, just as it does for Krys Anne (Weston, 1997). We can understand the opportunities created for Krys Anne in her final months as a result of "promiscuous care." *The Care Manifesto* (Chatzidakis et al., 2020) proposes this form of care drawing inspiration from Douglas Crimp's essay, "How to have promiscuity in an epidemic" (Crimp, 1987). He writes that some "insist that our promiscuity will destroy us when in fact it is our promiscuity that will save us." He subverts a stereotype of queer men as the very source of care arrangements that provided much-needed relief in the wake of the AIDS crisis. Krys Anne experiences a new kind of belonging with LGBTQ people that do not even know her. I use this story to argue for viewing dying, regardless of the age at which one dies, as holding potential for joy, excitement, and adventure. As such, I propose that the queering of age can enliven our imagination for what the experience of aging and dying might offer. Lack of such imagination forecloses the possibility of life within us that has yet to emerge, even in our death.

(Age)ncy depends

The history of retirement homes, nursing homes, and hospices reveals their construction to be as much social as material, with implications for the psychic. Understanding the ideas of these homes as socially constructed allows for their conceptual deconstruction, revealing the sociocultural assumptions implicit in their blueprints: aging, in and of itself, as comprising global disability and loss of utility. I will demonstrate the reverberations of this logic in the psychoanalytic theorizing of dependency. I hope to challenge essentialist assumptions that may limit our curiosity for how the subjective experience of aging and disability inevitably vary. I illustrate how such associations function not only to split off undesirable individuals from normative society, but also undesirable aspects of human experience by pushing them to the edges of an imagined linear path.

Psychoanalysis has historically conceptualized dependency as a form of regression, whether in the transference or in human development (Blum, 1994). Dependency and agency (other terms utilized for agency include will, autonomy, and self-determination) have come to be understood as a dialectic. Analysts have viewed regressive dependency as taking on both "pathological" and "non-pathological" forms. Indeed, regressive dependency has even been encouraged in the context of treatment and healthy development, provided it serves a progressive purpose (Balint, 1968; Ferenczi, 1933; Khan, 1963; Kohut, 1977; Winnicott, 1965a). However, the linear developmental implications of regression remain embedded in its use, implicitly holding *independence* as the ideal. Balint's (1968) assertion of "regression in service of progression," maintains the imagery of moving backwards and forwards along a linear path to independence. Aging, therefore, has implicitly come to represent the inevitable decline from the peak of independence to dependency, mediated by the level of disability that it confers on its subjects in the process.

I use the stories in this chapter to dislodge us from such linearity. Pooja, Raj, Ruth, and Krys Anne all reveal desires to depend on others, be it their adult children, romantic and sexual partners, or wider communities. Developmental logic might tempt us to understand such dependency as either regression to infancy or progression to the inevitable dependency of aging. Either formulation devalues

the agentic expressions of each subject's needs and wants, while also missing the psychic complexity that underpins them. Raj and Pooja resist dismissal from their adult children, ultimately sowing the seeds for closer relationships with each other and their grandchildren. Pooja earns the respect of her granddaughter through her persistence, while Raj publishes a successful novel based on his experience. Ruth mourns her husband's death not just in tandem with dating other men, but through new romantic and sexual pursuits. Her relationship with her adult children eventually deepens through her assertion of desiring more intimacy with them. Krys Anne's desire to live alone in her own home is contingent upon her depending on others to support her through it. She obtains this by holding standards, refusing to be cared for by others who are transphobic. Rather than a dialectic, agency and dependence become mutually constitutive, expanding room for life even as one approaches death.

Layton (2009) contextualizes the repudiation of dependency as a result of hegemonic neoliberal discourse under capitalism. Tummala-Narra (2022) demonstrates such devaluing of dependency as being shaped through white, Euro-American colonization. Both draw on economic and racial justice frameworks to illuminate unquestioned assumptions in dominant narratives, including those in psychoanalytic theory. I build on these critiques by drawing on the related organizing of older and disabled people. Incidentally, activists in both movements have highlighted *interdependence* as central. Around the same time that Butler (1969) coined the term ageism, Maggie Kuhn formed the Gray Panthers in 1972 after being forced to retire at the age of sixty-five (Estes & Portacolone, 2009). Characterizing herself as the "wrinkled radical," she disrupts stereotypes of aging by mobilizing, organizing, and advocating for justice. As Estes and Portacolone note,

> a core element of Maggie Kuhn's thinking on intersectionality was her claim of the strong interdependence of generations upon one another. She insisted that the fate of young and old are intertwined and united; that every generation needs those before them and those after them, not only to survive but also to thrive; and that a just society cannot exist without fairness and justice for all generations. (2009, p. 15)

Kuhn's experience and work also illustrate the relationship between ageism and ableism. "Disability justice" is a term that was coined in 2005 by Sins Invalid, a collective of disabled queer women of color (Berne et al., 2018). A disability justice framework understands that interdependence was a central feature of communities prior to Western European expansion, citing it as one of its ten core principles. Interdependence is further developed by Jina Kim (2017) through the lens of crip-of-color critique as critical methodology. Kim writes:

> Rather than reading for evidence of self-ownership or resistance, then, it reads for relations of social, material, and prosthetic support—that is, the various means through which lives are enriched, enabled, and made possible. In so doing, it honors vulnerability, disability, and inter/dependency, instead of viewing such conditions as evidence of political failure or weakness. (2017, p. 72)

Interdependence is not only the source of much-needed material and emotional support in these stories, but also drives the moments of joy, connection, and excitement. Raj and Pooja, after months of being separated, reunite to create new heights of intimacy and adventure. Their experience facilitates the deepening of connections not just with old friends, but with new ones as well. Krys Anne's surprise at the number of people present for her sixtieth birthday and the schedule of rotating caregivers that allows her to go home speaks to an experience of belonging she has never had. Ruth lives out her later years in the company of friends while opening a daycare for dogs, a symbolic connection with her deceased son who had worked in one as well, dying in the presence of her remaining family members. Crip-of-color critique offers a shift away from the kind of independence that can never be sustainable. Interdependence, on the other hand, creates room for both connection and agency—at any age and in any home.

Dy(e)ing life

I began work on this chapter with trepidation, skeptical of my authority to write about retirement homes, nursing homes, and hospices. What would a thirty-six-year-old first-year psychoanalytic candidate be able to offer on this subject? It was important for me to move through this question and the several questions that spun out of it for possibilities to emerge.

I introduced this chapter with personal anxieties relating to care for my parents as they age. My aforementioned deliberate use of *Baghban* as a way to explore retirement homes was also rooted in something more personal. This movie embedded itself in my imagination ever since watching it at age fifteen. While moved by Raj and Pooja's experience, I was more affected by my identification with their adult children. By the end of the film, I felt intense guilt and shame for realizing that I did not want my parents' aging to infringe upon my own imagined independence. I watched *Six Feet Under* at age twenty-three, in between coming out to my mother and my father. It reinforced for me that the reality of death makes the time we have alive all the more precious, regardless of the number of years we have lived. If anything, our increasing proximity to death only makes approaching the fears that pervade our desires more urgent. Watching Krys Anne's story at age thirty-six, I am more convinced that independence is a myth. My parents and I have shared dependence on others at the various stages of our lives. I now see the question less as "what to offer" and more as "how to offer." I have always depended on those who have come before me to create more room for life. This included imagining that my parents would not disown me if I chose to share my queerness with them. Such imagination required hope that their love would win out over other forces. While this work is ongoing and far from linear, it has taught me appreciation for the responsibility we all might assume to contend with such forces. As Krys Anne's story demonstrates, access to maintaining historical dependencies is not universal. It also demonstrates the possibilities that new dependencies can offer. I now see it as my responsibility to contend with my own participation in ageism and ableism to explore such possibilities for myself and those around me.

To argue for interdependence necessitates acknowledgment that I am depending on those who have already argued for it as well as others to join us. Interdependence's offerings extend beyond its potential for individuals, cultures, and societies. It offers potential for our theories and praxis. Psychoanalysis, like us, is not independent. It depends on others as a treatment, a community, and a way of thinking. Its survival and utility are also contingent upon its interdependence on the sociopolitical realities within which it lives. While our material and theoretical homes

may offer some protection, they also serve to conceal possibilities from view. *Dyeing* psychoanalysis with colored, queer, and crip critique holds promise for unleashing vibrant hues and shades beyond our imagination. While deconstructing our current homes to construct new ones might seem ambitious, opening our doors is a start. We may look back on such a risk at the end of our lives and realize—the risk was well worth it.

CHAPTER 9

Dwellings and absences thereof, within and without

M. Nasir Ilahi

At the outset it is pertinent to clarify one central issue that pertains to my overall psychoanalytical perspective. I take it for granted that the various chapters in this book bear the hallmark of psychoanalysis as understood and practiced in North America given that all the contributors have been, or are being, trained here. To my mind all North American schools of psychoanalysis, whether ego psychology, self psychology, relational psychoanalysis, or the interpersonal school, despite their many differences, at a deeper level carry the imprint of ego psychology which was the sole official theory of the institutes of the American Psychoanalytic Association for a number of decades.

This orientation is in sharp contrast with my own background and training in the U.K. which was radically different as it followed a trajectory from Freud to Melanie Klein and then a number of prominent others including Winnicott and Bion. While this is not the place to enter into a deeper discussion of the differences between psychoanalysis practiced in the U.S. on the one hand and the U.K. on the other, some of these will hopefully become more apparent below.

Diverging considerations—not only on development but on the nature of psychoanalysis itself

Most analysts in North America subscribe to a theory of ego development that essentially derives from ego psychology but can be said to be in common with all other North American schools such as self psychology, relational psychoanalysis, etc. It is concerned with development over the lifespan in sharp contrast to the British object relations theories where the primary focus is on the first few months of life and their setting the foundation for what transpires in subsequent stages.

This theory includes an "ecological dimension" framework that suggests that psychological development isn't primarily shaped by human interactions but also by our engagement with the broader environment—objects, spaces, and also nonhuman entities. To understand this North American approach one needs to go back to the ideas of Heinz Hartmann, the main founder of American ego psychology back in the 1930s. Despite shifts in psychoanalytic thinking, Hartmann's emphasis on "adaptation, ego autonomy, and environmental stability" remains basic, implicitly or explicitly, for all North American schools.

North American ego psychology, rooted in Freud's structural model and later turbocharged by Hartmann, leans hard into the "outward world." Hartmann's big idea was the "conflict-free ego sphere"—parts of the ego that develop independently of instinctual drives, like perception, memory, and motor skills. For him, the ego isn't just a punching bag for the id and superego and the external world (or as Freud put it, "a poor creature owing service to three masters and consequently menaced by three dangers: from the external world, from the libido of the id, and from the severity of the super-ego" (Freud 1923b, p. 56)); it's got its own autonomous groove, adapting to reality and mastering the environment. Development, in this view, is about building that ego strength through stages—such as Erik Erikson's psychosocial ladder, where relational stuff matters (e.g., trust vs. mistrust), but it's more about how the ego navigates the external world than what's bubbling up inside. Can one say it's the ego designed to navigate the New World, freed from its ancient world/European shackles?

The early, preverbal phase in the first few months of life which was mined extensively by Klein, Winnicott, and Bion, is seen as a bizarre fiction or nonexistent, at best, or voodoo at worst, by the American

schools, given the overriding emphasis on outer reality and "rationality" in North America (this is why Otto Kernberg describes Klein, and the psychoanalysis inspired by her, as "Un-American").

For them, this early period is a kind of blank slate—primary narcissism rules, and the baby's just a bundle of self-absorbed drives, not yet registering much beyond his or her own needs. Effectively this means that once you reject the idea of the preverbal mind and the unconscious phantasies, anxieties, and defenses against them so richly described by the British analysts, both clinically and theoretically, then essentially none of Klein, Winnicott, or Bion has any relevance for North American psychoanalysis, so extensive is the divide between the two traditions. Rycroft (1968) makes a similar observation.

For the purposes of comparison with, broadly, North American psychoanalysis I am lumping significantly divergent British analysts such as particularly Klein, Bion, and Winnicott under the rubric of the British object relations schools as they share enough in common that distinguishes them sharply from psychoanalysis in North America. The British schools concentrate on the depth and centrality of relational dynamics in development and the focus on interiority and phantasy and their constant relationship with reality, rather than, as in the American case, a focus on the ego's relationship in its own autonomous right with external reality. Implied in the North American view is that the ego perceives reality without any interference with unconscious phantasy or drives and thus there is certainty to external reality and the focus shifts to the developmental task of adapting to it. In other words, this can be described as the "doctrine of immaculate perception" (a phrase often used humorously by Joe Sandler), something totally alien to the British object relations tradition where there is constant interaction between reality and phantasy and no such thing as "immaculate perception." For Klein all mental processes are influenced by unconscious phantasy, which interacts dynamically with external reality. Phantasy shapes the infant's early experiences and mental development, progressively integrating external realities into the young child's structure. Further, as previously indicated, ego psychology (Hartmann) emphasized "autonomous ego functions" and adaptation to the environment, often downplaying, not to say even recognizing their existence especially for the primitive ego, deep relational dependencies.

Over time in the U.S., "relational psychoanalysis" emerged, integrating interpersonal relationships into development. Today, American psychoanalysis acknowledges relational aspects, but often sees relationships as "important facilitators" rather than "foundational necessities" for mind formation—the child benefits from relationships but may still develop ego functions independently, following the external world and autonomous focus of Hartmann. Further, crucially, American psychoanalysis sees relational development as emerging late, once the child has cognitive and verbal abilities.

By sharp contrast, for Klein, Bion, and Winnicott—although there are important differences between them—the mind is fundamentally object-related from the outset. For Klein, the infant's psyche is shaped by internalized object relations—early experiences with caregivers, in interaction with phantasies, form the core structure of the mind. Bion took this further, stating that a mind cannot develop without another mind. He introduced the containing function, where the caregiver absorbs and processes the infant's raw emotions, preventing psychological fragmentation.

Donald Winnicott emphasized the holding environment, where the caregiver's physical and psychological presence enables the infant to develop a coherent self. Without this, the infant may develop "false self adaptations" rather than authentic identity. It's important to note that Winnicott's "good enough mother" isn't just a passive backdrop—she's actively shaping the baby's psyche by psychically holding the infant and surviving the child's chaos. Bion provides another perspective: with containment the caretaker metabolizes the baby's raw, unformed emotions (what he calls "beta elements") into something thinkable ("alpha elements") by using her "alpha function." This relational interplay isn't a side dish—it's the main course through which one mind is integral to the development of the other's mind. Without relational containment, according to Bion, the infant cannot develop a capacity to think but only a mind that acts like a muscle for tension discharge.

Further, the preverbal mind isn't dormant; it's a cauldron of protofeelings/phantasies (initially at the sensory level but not without meaning) and object connections, introjections, and projections, way before words or autonomy kick in. There's, as it were, a whole continent here which one observer humorously dubbed "Melanesia" (after Melanie!)

that remains totally undiscovered and thus nonexistent in the geography of North American psychoanalysis. The key differences are that American psychoanalysis sees relationships as important but not necessarily foundational. The child "benefits" from relationships but may still develop ego functions independently. For Bion and Winnicott on the other hand, rooted in Klein, without relational containment, the mind itself cannot form without another mind.

To describe this in a different language, the Americans are out there measuring ego milestones against the external world—Hartmann's legacy of adaptation and mastery. Meanwhile, the British analysts are zooming in on the infant and the early preverbal mind and looking into the microscopic, molecular dynamics that go into the formation of a coherent ego from its primitive origins in the context of the intimate relationship with the caretaker/parental couple. Relational issues are foundational, as previously stated, for object relations, not just a layer on top of some preprogrammed ego engine. It's like the U.S. crew is building a skyscraper from the ground up, while the British are digging into the psychic basement, tracing the pipes.

Returning to the subject matter of this book, it should be clear from the various chapters that the authors have in mind the stages of life beginning with the older verbal and cognitively advanced child, consistent with North American psychoanalysis. Congruent with this tradition there is a tremendous stress on the tangible nature of external reality, the sheer physicality of the external house, its smells and sounds, etc., even though there is a recognition that "a home" in contrast to a house has psychological and emotional construct but the "construct" here is, necessarily, the higher-level American one—at most it's the verbal, cognitively developed, and psychology at the intact-child level (as opposed to the pre-integrated level), in interaction with real external experiences that are "immaculately perceived" rather than the dialogue between internal phantasy in constant interplay with external reality as delineated by the British authors.

While North American writers sometimes provide extensive quotes from Winnicott, it seems to me that this is Winnicott co-opted for American purposes, adapted to the higher level of their concern and taking his ideas away from their underlying roots and soil. He's also necessarily decoupled from his underlying dialogue with Klein. In fact

this type of misunderstanding of Winnicott, who has achieved a great deal of popularity among certain North American writers, is very prevalent as I've demonstrated elsewhere (Ilahi, 2005, 2024). For instance, a concept such as "going-on being" will be used but there is no indication that we are being taken by Winnicott into the preverbal mind where the mother's psychological holding facilitates this process in the first few months of life. As previously stated, the phantasies of the preverbal mind are notable by their absence, quite understandably, as they contradict every tenet of the American schools. Thus at times we encounter in North America a perplexing admixture of attempts by different authors, when Hartmann's "average expectable environment" is unknowingly put in the same basket as Winnicott's "holding" function that he postulated was necessary for the coming into being through the early stages of integration of the primitive ego, at a time when for Hartmann there is absolutely nothing going on, given primary narcissism.

Some clinical illustrations on negative and positive aspects of nostalgia for the past and home illusions

In talking about home, at times the issues of nostalgia and homesickness come up. North American analysts, consistent with their theories, tend to talk both about the "past" (for which there might be nostalgia, for instance) or the "present" necessarily as if both can be, by and large, objectively or "immaculately perceived." From a different perspective, instead of such objectivity, it can be said that we're always dealing with a mixture of reality and phantasy and, in health, we are able to dynamically psychically rework and reconnect with our past, in our living efforts to distinguish between phantasy and reality. This is an ongoing task involving mourning and reparation and through this having a renewed and revitalized relationship with our internal world past and present. Here are some illustrations about the negative and positive aspects of nostalgia.

Clinical vignette: 1

A patient in analysis, Mr. W, highly successful in his professional career but capable of considerable self-destructive activities, treasures nostalgically valuable items gifted to him by his parents, notably his father. These are carefully preserved in storage. Yet the

> same father is internally ruthlessly attacked and there is a highly sadomasochistic relationship internally between different parts of himself that also plays into the dynamic with the internal parents. The nostalgia is a disconnected and dead surface entity, with dead objects functioning like mausoleums, underneath which there are the roots of chaos, precariousness, and murderous life-destroying rage. The analytic task for him is considerable—it's whether he can manage to establish a more living and reality-based connection with his internal objects and allow them, as well as the split off parts of himself identified with these objects, to come to life from their interred state. This would require internally recognizing the different parts of himself that are kept segregated and repairing the damage he feels he's (unconsciously) caused to his internal objects and to his mind through attacks on linking (Bion, 1959).

Another dramatic example of the negative side of nostalgia is the character of Miss Havisham from the novel *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens (1861). Miss Havisham exemplifies an inability to mourn. After being jilted by her fiancé, Compeyson, she stops all the clocks in her mansion at the moment she receives his letter, wears her wedding dress perpetually, and leaves the wedding feast to decay. This fixation on the past and refusal to move forward traps her in a state of perpetual mourning and regret, preventing her from engaging with the present or future. Her life becomes a "living mausoleum," illustrating the destructive nature of unresolved grief and nostalgia. One can say that she's preserved (though in a dead form) her external concrete objects but destroyed her internal world/objects, as a result of which she carries an internal mausoleum.

Here the destructive aspects of nostalgia are well illustrated. Not just the past but the one that could potentially live inside her in the present is killed and frozen. Bion would say that beta elements are not transformed by alpha function into living thoughts and emotion. But there can be nostalgia in the constructive sense too, visiting the past with a capacity to repair lost objects felt to be damaged (in the Kleinian sense through damaging attacks in phantasy) and thereby restoring them to life inside us to help us revive and reconstruct our internal world and move on in a vitalized way.

Hanna Segal regards the French novelist Proust, the author of the monumental masterpiece *In Search of Lost Time* (1913) to be an example of such reparation. She does not explicitly define nostalgia in the context of Proust's work in the way North Americans might as indicated earlier. Instead, Segal from her Kleinian perspective (and using the concepts of the depressive position and reparation), views Proust's creative process as a reconstruction of a fragmented internal world, addressing themes of loss and psychic recovery. This perspective aligns with her psychoanalytic approach, where nostalgia involves not just yearning for the past (which is the ego psychological understanding) but a complex interplay of loss, memory, and artistic recreation in the present (Segal, 1952, 1981). I introduced Segal's thinking here, as well as my example of Miss Havisham and the case of Mr. W, to illustrate how the same terms, in this case nostalgia, can be understood so differently in psychoanalysis based on the theories that form part of our thinking.

Moving on to a related yet different topic, it is not too far-fetched to imagine someone questioning even the very need of having a home because, for such a person, it's a defensive illusion and home experience is considered often a very negative one. This I cannot go along with even at its most rudimentary level. Isn't the place where we start from an indispensable concept? Something that gives us a context and basic orientation?

The philosopher Thomas Nagel explores the concept of "the view from nowhere" (that presumably those who wish to dispense with the home construct would like us to take) in his book, *The View from Nowhere* (1986). He uses the phrase "the view from nowhere" to describe an objective perspective that transcends individual subjectivity. Nagel contrasts this with the inherently subjective viewpoints that each person holds, emphasizing the tension between these two perspectives. There's no view from nowhere, only from somewhere. As I see it, it's an issue of how we orient ourselves and not just a naive idealization of home. Neither, by definition, can we be anti-home because paradoxically the no-home itself becomes an orientation, a bad home—a paraphrase of Bion's idea of the instances where the no-breast becomes not an absent breast that will return but a bad breast present. The idea that we don't need a starting place where we are given birth within a parental couple (the place where we begin), or a reorienting place inside us, is a myth

that anti-homers can construct—a myth of self creation and omnipotence that can only, in more entrenched cases, lead to psychosis.

Clinical vignette: 2

Patient Y, a composite of a few cases of a similar type, unconsciously desires to have been born out of a union between a male and female part of herself rather than anyone else. Depending on anyone outside for deeper connection, such as the analyst or parents or significant other, is a total catastrophe that could lead to her self-constructed, grandiose but fragile identity and sense of self being wiped out. Neither can she connect with the split-off parts of her own self internally as that would put her in touch with deeper feelings of need, dependence, and rage that would shatter her feelings of omnipotence and full control. In a dream reflecting this, she was trying to connect, in a flirtatious manner, with a man while another man who was also present greatly resented this gesture of hers and tried to interrupt it. Some type of explosion like a bomb in the background could be heard. Based on the work done, the man with whom there was the intended flirtation was the male analyst to which the man inside her greatly objected and he attempted to blow up the entire situation. It's an indication that the best she could do was "flirt" with the analysis as the male inside her (it's more than simply just a part of her, it's an actual entity) will not let her weak needy female/patient seek any external help to get treatment. In other words, the male in her wanted to be the only one to treat the devalued/damaged female patient also in her, otherwise there will be massive envy of the parental couple which can create life, and his threatened destruction will make this male throw a bomb. In other words, there can be no venture outside this totally enclosed and rigid narcissistic structure where she possesses, concretely, both the phallus and the breast inside her and can create herself without the need of the generative parental couple (the origin of home). The explosion situation is, it seems to me, overdetermined, as it could well also be from the terrorist in me—a projection of her own explosive rage—as well as the threatened envious male inside her.

This is a situation where there can be no dependency on the other, or reliance on the productive intercourse of parents that can give an authentic birth to her—a home where she can genuinely start from—as such a primal scene is deeply envied and felt to exclude her and wipe her out. She therefore hangs on desperately to her own phantasy of being her own creator, stealing the potency of parents, making an omnipotent home of her own creation. It's a delusion with a psychotic valence as ultimately it's deeply known that it's false and based on a theft—a stolen home—and has no real foundation.

This case can also be looked at as an example of destructive narcissistic organization (Rosenfeld, 1971) where the needy patient part of her is under the capture of an omnipresent phallic organization, like the mafia gang Rosenfeld described. There is thus an idealization of the destructive phallus that offers protection to the needy, ill female/helpless child part of her and prevents her from getting genuine help from the analyst who represents the ultimate threat to the narcissistic organization. In addition to what Rosenfeld described, in my experience the needy part does not trust the mafia gang either, in this case indicated by the omnipotent but dangerous phallus who starts an explosion, but is still unable to get away from it (ibid.). Ultimately there is no safe place for such patients to be, as discussed below following Rey (1979).

Homes, false and real, damaged and repaired

While the chapters in this book take their inspiration from the external architecture of types of homes we reside in and then connect them from various perspectives to North American oriented psychoanalytic scrutiny, important as this ecological dimension is, ultimately for me it's the psychic architecture at the deepest level inside us of these various descriptions that keeps coming to mind.

Having worked in psychoanalytic depth with quite a few patients, especially in the non-neurotic spectrum, I am prompted not just by Melanie Klein but also by Henri Rey (1979) and Donald Meltzer (2020) and Winnicott (1975), always struggling to find out where these patients "live" in the psychological sense. In fact, often one of the hallmarks of such patients is that there is no safe place for them to

be as every option brings with it its own absolute terrors from which they need to flee (Rey, 1979).

> **Clinical vignette: 3**
> I was fortunate to be taught these issues early on in my career by Dr. X, an academic nuclear scientist, who I saw in five-times-a-week analysis for a number of years. He alerted me one day that he only lived above his eyes (pointing to them) and all other parts of his body were no-go areas for him. Unconsciously this was done to fend off anxieties about being both bodily and mentally invaded (including by me in the transference), hence he retreated into a split-off intellect which he connected concretely with his head. The price to pay for this was confusion, as he did not know, for instance, where his genitalia were located or was afraid that the body was without feelings. Much to my surprise he was able to make good enough use of the treatment, developing a reasonable degree of symbolic functioning, a relief from his otherwise debilitating and arid concreteness.

In these matters I am also often reminded of the animal in Kafka's harrowing unfinished short story, *The Burrow* (1931), which is narrated by a creature who interestingly doesn't even have a name, who has painstakingly constructed an elaborate underground burrow to protect itself from potential threats in the outside world. The creature takes great pride in its creation and feels a sense of safety within it. However, it soon becomes increasingly terrified and anxious about potential underground intruders that can be heard in the burrow and the possibility of flaws in the burrow's design begins to concern him. So what started off as a refuge and escape from outside dangers soon becomes a place of terrors from the inside as well. Thus there is no safe place for this creature to abide in as terrors exist both inside the cavity and outside, a classic and poignant literary depiction of what Rey described as the claustrophobic–agoraphobic dilemma. In the end, with no solution in sight, the creature decides to make a place for itself at the mouth of the burrow, neither inside nor outside, a problem that we encounter in its many different variations with our borderline patients, including very much in the transference, if we venture to take them into deeper work.

As a side note, my hypothesis is that this claustro–agoraphobic dilemma is something that unconsciously deeply affected Kafka himself, and which he could not address, which is why this story, one of his last, remained unfinished. The problem appears elsewhere in many of his stories but nowhere possibly so vividly as here. We note that the creature is attempting a concrete external architectural solution—his external ecology—to a problem which is essentially internal, namely that there is no safety for him, in phantasy, inside his mother's body and mind. In other words, a matter of a terrifying internal ecology with the burrow representing a desired cavity inside his mother's body that becomes dangerous in its own right. One can say that the burrow, like the defensive shelter of Dr. X in his head abandoning the rest of his body and indeed his mind, or the destructive narcissistic organization of Ms. Y, is also a false home, a psychic retreat, built as a precarious attempt to protect against internal terrors but it fails to provide safety as there is no real reprieve. Similarly there is only a dead home inhabited by Miss Havisham where the clock stoppage and her other actions represent the killing of time and life—presumably the murderous rage turned inwards.

The "home" in British object relations thought is implicitly present metaphorically though hardly ever explicitly talked about. It is all about the place where the fragmented parts of the self can reside through psychic integration with its internal objects in a tolerable balance of love, hate, and reparation, as Klein put it. For her the journey toward this internal home involves navigating the anxieties of the paranoid–schizoid position, mourning and repairing in the depressive position. Bion emphasized the finding of containment while Winnicott's model stipulates the need for psychic holding. Emerging from psychic retreats (Steiner, 1993) or the claustrophobic–agoraphobic dilemma (Rey) or destructive narcissistic organization (Rosenfeld) are other more sophisticated ways of conceptualizing the problems encountered with the pathological versions of the paranoid–schizoid position. Further, unlike ego psychology thinking, Kleinian writers in particular have emphasized that this metaphorical internal home is not a static place but a dynamic process of repairing and rebalancing relationships with internalized objects.

By contrast to these false or mausoleum home examples that have mostly been taken from the individual-centered Western tradition

(though they are universal phenomena in psychopathology), the Persian Sufi mystic coming from a family-centered Eastern tradition (like the authors in this book), Jalaluddin Rumi, presents a vivid example of a living psychological home in his poem "The guest house." He states (translation by R. A. Nicholson):

> *This body, O youth, is a guest-house: every morning a new guest comes running (into it).*
>
> *Beware, do not say, "This (guest) is a burden to me," for presently he will fly back into non-existence.*
>
> *Whatsoever comes into thy heart from the invisible world is thy guest: entertain it well!*
>
> *Every day, too, at every moment a (different) thought comes, like an honoured guest, into thy bosom.*
>
> *O soul, regard every thought as a person, since every person's value is in the thought they hold.*
>
> *If a sorrowful thought stands in the way, it is also preparing the way for joy.*
>
> *It violently sweeps thy house clear of (all) else, in order that new joy from the source of good may enter in.*
>
> *It scatters the yellow leaves from the bough of the heart, in order that incessant green leaves may grow.*
>
> *It uproots the old joy, in order that new delight may march in from the Beyond.*

For reasons of time and space I will not be able to draw out the very rich observations of the poet and connect them, for our purposes, with the insights of Klein, Bion, and Winnicott. Instead, I will confine myself to brief comments. This poem by Rumi can also be seen as a metaphorical exploration of the internal world, a psychic home, focusing on psychological and emotional states. It can be interpreted as reflections of inner struggles and responses to existential or emotional turmoil. To contrast it with Kafka's *The Burrow*, which represents a borderline-type situation, the creature is consumed by an obsessive need for security and control. The burrow itself—a labyrinthine, self-constructed refuge—symbolizes an attempt to manage overwhelming anxieties, such as claustrophobia

and agoraphobia and the burrow represents a retreat into isolation and hypervigilance. The endless tinkering and paranoia suggest a mind unable to find peace, trapped in a cycle of seeking solutions that only deepen its distress. The internal world here is one of fragmentation, where safety is pursued but never attained, reflecting a futile struggle against existential dread.

By contrast, Rumi's "The guest house" offers a radically different perspective on the internal world which is much more resilient, internally contained (Bion), held (Winnicott), or capable of a depressive position state of mind (Klein). It's informed by a Sufi mystic non-Western tradition and includes an element of lightheartedness totally absent from the beleaguered creature of *The Burrow*. The poem likens the human experience to a guest house where every emotion—joy, sorrow, anger, fear—is a transient visitor. Rather than resisting or controlling these "guests," Rumi urges acceptance and hospitality. This perspective reframes the internal chaos as something not to be solved or escaped but embraced, even though painful, as part of being human. The guest house doesn't promise resolution in the form of a fortified burrow; instead, it suggests that peace comes from surrendering to the flow of experience, trusting that no feeling is permanent.

Of course the burrow type of retreat is chosen out of desperation; ultimately the retreat into the burrow is designed to attack thought which is unbearable (like the common saying about burying one's head in the sand in the manner of an ostrich), as the psychological stance in "The guest house," which seems to resemble Bion's reverie and alpha functions, cannot be tolerated. The guest house approach is one of transcendence and open heartedness reflecting a willingness to live with the very fears that the creature in *The Burrow* is trying to desperately escape. Rumi's vision invites a release of control, proposing that the internal world thrives not through resistance but through radical acceptance. If both works are ultimately concerned with the internal world, *The Burrow* depicts a reactive, defensive, desperate stance—an attempt of the non-neurotic to barricade oneself against psychological threats—while "The guest house" offers a transcendent, open-hearted approach sadly beyond the reach of someone with psychotic or borderline anxieties without analytic intervention.

This collection of papers by analysts of South Asian origin practicing in the United States on topics that are in many ways unaddressed in psychoanalytic literature is a testament to the creative achievements of this vibrant group. While in my contribution I've highlighted some major, and perhaps unbridgeable, differences from my colleagues in psychoanalytic approaches, it is my hope that the reader will find the passion and depth of thought that each author brings to his or her subject matter enriching and informative.

Concluding commentary

CHAPTER 10

Finally, a turn to poets

Salman Akhtar

At the very end of his paper on femininity, Freud (1933a) told his readers to "turn to the poets" (p. 135) in order to deepen their knowledge of the topic at hand. Respectfully emulating him, I write this brief commentary by exploring what poetry can offer in terms of our understanding man's relationship to his dwellings. However, before delving into the insight such creativity can provide, I would like to say a few words about our book's contents and a few of its omissions. To be sure, the book would have been richer had it contained individual chapters on (i) the impact of frequently changing houses in childhood upon character formation, (ii) the imaginative imbuing by the child of the nooks and crannies of his house with fear, sexuality, anxiety, sadness, and sundry other affects, (iii) the correlation between rural and urban upbringing, (iv) the manner in which smells, sounds, and the "pictorial past" (Lewin, 1968) of one's childhood home and its neighborhood appears in adulthood dreams and the experience of one's analyst's office, and (v) the psychic devastation caused by the sudden loss of home via natural disasters, and so on. Acknowledging these omissions and, by implication, accepting that the book in your hands is hardly perfect by no means overlooks or diminishes its strengths. The fact is that it contains highly informative and deep discussions of the lifelong importance of

the childhood home, the emergent transformations of one's residence with the unfolding lifespan, the homes that are suffused not with love but fear and hate, orphanages, foster homes, retirement homes, hospices, and even the posthumous dwellings of human beings. The book also covers nostalgia and homesickness, actual or felt homelessness, and withdrawal from conventional trajectories and life in monasteries. The contributors to the book see the material at hand through the varying lenses of developmental psychology, anthropology, classical metapsychology, North American conflict theory, and the British traditions of Klein and Winnicott. The result is a grand symphony of illumination and insight. However, instead of getting smugly enraptured or, worse, gloating in what our book has succeeded in accomplishing, it seems wiser to move on to a fresh perspective on homes altogether. This, as mentioned at the very outset here, is that of the poets.

What is poetry and how does it work?

The essays contained in this book on homes insistently evoke themes of object loss, identity transformation, nostalgia, and reunion fantasies. That there is a close link between these matters and artistic creativity has drawn considerable attention from psychoanalysts. While music, painting, and fiction do figure in the dynamics of dislocation, poetry seems to occupy a special place in the ego's efforts to modulate, mourn, and master mental pain consequent upon it. Poetry is a blend of music and prose, nonverbal and verbal, primary process and secondary process, literal and prosodic, reality and metaphor, maternal and paternal substrates of the psyche, and right and left brain functions (Akhtar, 2000, 2012, 2024b). It seeks to diminish mental pain by utilizing psychic retreat, manic defense, and sublimation. Its formal components exert a libidinally gratifying and thus psychically nourishing effect. I have elsewhere (Akhtar, 2000) listed these components as being meter, rhyme, alliteration, simile, allusion, metaphor, and onomatopoeia, and then explained how they work in the following simple terms:

> *Meter* refers to the rhythm achieved by using a fixed count of syllables in a given utterance. By thus creating a near musical tone, a line (meter's basic unit) produces the effect of a pulsating perceptual input. Closely related is *rhyme* or the repetitive

> occurrence of phonetically similar words at the end of each line. The resulting nodal sounds are both distinct (different consonants) and similar (same vowels). This evokes "a dualism on the one hand and magically overcomes that very dualism on the other" (Faber, 1988, p. 377). Thus separation is both acknowledged and denied with its developmental prototype in maternal lullabies and nursery rhymes. Such phonetic recurrence exerts a reassuring effect upon the mind. *Alliteration*, the clustering of words beginning with the same consonant, is the mirror image of rhyme and performs a similar psychic function. *Simile* and *allusion* link two sets of images and ideas. More covertly, *metaphor* performs the same function. It presents "one thing in the semblance of another and operates at the depth where deep but opposite truths are paradoxically valid and are reconciled" (Gorelick, 1989, pp. 151–152). *Onomatopoeia*, the naming of a thing or action by using the sound associated with it, fuses the inner and external form of words in language. (p. 237)

Common to all these literary devices is the aim of fusion, linkage, and bringing things together. The lexical peek-a-boo these elements play induces an increase in the libidinal cathexis of links, bonds, and self-object ties. In turn, the symbolic values of this (the dual unity of mother and child) serves to bridge the milk-less abyss of separation from primary objects residing both outside and inside the psychic world.

Urdu poetry and the home metaphor

In writing what is to come now, I have stayed loyal to three facts: (i) that the contributors to this volume are all immigrants (or immigrants' children) and have loss of their original home and cultural anchors in their background, (ii) that their origins are from India and Pakistan, and (iii) that the samples of poetry from the languages of that region I choose to illustrate my points must reflect the deepest core of my authenticity and hence be in my mother tongue Urdu. Even with such restrictions, it is hardly possible to be comprehensive. There is a large body of well-crafted verse in Urdu pertaining to home, departure from it, and gnawing wishes to return to it for refueling. My limited offering below must therefore be regarded as incomplete in coverage and inevitably arbitrary in choice, but also replete with fumbling tenderness and reflecting a modest amount of literary expertise.

That having been said, allow me to begin with two couplets from the great Mirza Asadullah Khan Ghalib (1797–1869). For those readers who are unfamiliar with Ghalib, a brief introduction might be worthwhile. Born in Agra, the city of the Taj Mahal, Ghalib was a classical Urdu and Persian poet who saw the demise of the great Mughal Empire and the takeover of India by the British colonizers. According to the Oxford university scholar, Ralph Russell, Ghalib is "one the greatest poets South Asia ever produced" (2000, p. 8) whose poetry transcended the customary romanticism and earthly preoccupations of the literature of his time. Back to the topic of home, I begin with Ghalib's couplets:

> *Koi viraani si viraani hai.*
> *Dusht ko dekh ke ghar yaad aaya.*
>
> (What stark loneliness and utter silence
> A step into the forest and the memory of my home pierces my heart)

In this couplet, Ghalib deploys the quiet and unpopulated jungle as a metaphor for the ravaged nature of his home (and, behind that, his heart, his internal world of internal objects). For those of us who have come to live in the United States from the bustling and "overcrowded" New Delhi, Mumbai, Karachi, and Lahore, the dagger of irony is driven deep into their immigrant hearts. The civilized silence of affluent suburbs where most of them live and the predictable order of daily life seems like a wordless forest which makes us long for the noisy streets back home while simultaneously reminding us of the silent anguish at the center of our geo-cultural dislocation. However, Ghalib is not all doom and gloom. Reflecting a glimmer of hope and the indestructibility of core human optimism, he states:

> *Ghar mein that kya jo tira ghum usay ghaarat karta.*
> *Who jo hum rakhte thay ik hasrate-e-taamee, so hai.*
>
> (My home had little that sorrow could destroy
> The wish for betterment that it did possess, still lives on)

Here Ghalib speaks of the resilience of the human soul and the victory of life over the death instinct (Freud, 1920g). Home is a mere emblem and it is the struggle between pessimism and optimism and between narcissistic injury (and the resultant unleashing of inner destructive forces) and the "survival of the subject" (via grit and clinging to remnant internal

goodness). The "sorrow" he speaks of pertains to the beloved's indifference on the surface but at its depth stands for the weakening of internal good objects at the hands of early neglect. In the context of immigration, it can readily be extrapolated to the increased fragility of links with the internalized culture of origin owing to infrequent refueling.

Moving on from Ghalib (1841) to the Urdu poets of modern times, I offer the reader the following couplets written by some of the finest contemporary Indian and Pakistani poets. Each is likely to ring a bell of resonance and aching familiarity in the immigrant from the subcontinent. Each touches upon a different facet of immigration. The first couplet is by the Pakistani poet Iftikhar Aarif (1984):

> *Tamaam khaanaabadoshon mein mushtarak hai yeh baat.*
> *Sub apne apne gharon ko palat ke dekhte hain.*
>
> (Common it is among all the exiles and immigrants
> Each looks back to catch a glimpse of the home left behind)

This couplet evokes the role of vision as a vehicle for "emotional refueling" (Furer, cited in Mahler, Pine, & Bergman, 1975, p. 69) in the context of immigration, exile, and nomadic lives at large. It reminds one of Greenacre's (1953) observation that the shift from tactile to the visual modality of contact originates in the experience of separation. She goes on to say that children who are not sufficiently held and cuddled by their mothers display "an uncanny reaching out with eyes" (p. 90) to her. The couplet cited above transports the ontogenetic reality to the realm of metaphor, deftly enlisting the latter to depict the refueling need of all immigrants. Novey's (1968) short but profound monograph about the reconstruction, revision, and reinterpretation of personal history via visiting childhood homes readily comes to mind in this context. To wit, it is titled "The second look."

The experience of being psychically torn between the original and the adapted home is captured eloquently in the following couplet by the Pakistani poet Shahpar Rasool who also tips his hat to the vision as the modality of "distant contact" (Wright, 1991).

> *Mujhe bhi lamha-e-hijrat ne kar diya taqseem*
> *Nigaah ghar ki taraf hai, qadam safar ki taraf.*
>
> (Bifurcated, I stand bleeding at the moment of departure
> my eyes turned toward home, my feet moving away from it)

The couplet simultaneously captures the "ambitendency" (Mahler, Pine, & Bergman, 1975) of the practicing subphase toddler who is learning to walk (away from mother) and the immigrant (leaving his country). The vague sense that the coming sojourn shall change him forever is deeply embedded in this moment's subjectivity. One of my own couplets speaks of such consequences of separation, be it from mother, home, or one's own erstwhile self.

> *Ek naye roop, naye rung main dhal jaate hain*
> *Log jub ghar se nikalte hain, badal jaate hain.*
>
> (A new color suffuses them, a new face evolves
> Leaving home changes people forever)

Under fortunate circumstances, leaving home (*ghar*, in Urdu) results in enhanced autonomy, individuation, and newfound ego freedoms. A healthy identity transformation takes place (Akhtar, 1999b, 2011a). Under unfortunate circumstances, the child fails to thrive, and the immigrant remains internally riddled with the very distress that might have been the impetus for his leaving home. Abdul Mujahid Zahid, a young Pakistani poet, says it all in the following words.

> *Mila na ghar se nikal kar bhi chayn ai Zahid.*
> *Khuli hava mein wohi zehr that jo ghar mein tha.*
>
> (Leaving home did not turn out to be a solution for my restlessness
> the air outside was as poisoned as the water inside)

At times the immigrant becomes aware that the damage to the good internal object might have been so profound that it is hardly possible to draw psychic sustenance from it. Deploying his ravaged ancestral home (burnt down during inter-ethnic riots) as a metaphor, the renowned Indian poet and Bollywood lyricist, Jan Nisar Akhtar (1972), says the following.

> *Main sochta that vatan ja ke pad rahoonga kabhi.*
> *Magar fasaad mein woh ghar bhi jul gaya hai, miaan.*
>
> (I envisioned that someday I will retire and seek refuge in my old home
> But that house has been burnt to the ground during the communal riots)

The ancestral home referred to in this couplet surely stands for the internal dominance of good objects. What is more interesting is that the communal riot that allegedly razed the house to the ground might be an externalization of his own hostile and destructive attack on his libidinally luxurious roots. Realizing this, on the immigrant's part, causes the painful but salutary shift from a "tragic man" to a "guilty man" mentality, to use Kohut's (1977) terminology. One becomes aware that one was not forced out of one's motherland by external circumstance and that one voluntarily chose to leave it. Once the transformation of self-pity into remorse happens, gratitude toward the motherland (mother) dawns afresh and avenues of reparation, à la Klein (1935), open up. If this step is not undertaken, the idea of revisiting home remains infiltrated with aggression which coupled with object hunger and by projections causes dread of return. The following couplet that I wrote during the early years of my coming to the United States, speaks to this subterranean anxiety.

> *Jaane kis khauf ne ta-umer musafir rakha.*
> *Go koi hurj na tha lautke ghar Jaane main.*
>
> (What vague dread, tell me, kept me moving away forever
> Though no actual danger lurked in my returning to home)

And yet the longing to return never leaves the immigrant (Akhtar, 2011a). The immigrant refuses to acknowledge that what awaits him is a "wound of return" (Torres, cited by Grinberg & Grinberg, 1984) whereby a transformed self will encounter a changed home ecology instead of the expected encounter with the familiar home of one's past. He continues to insist that the lost mirror of original home (behind that, one's mother, and still behind that, one's retrospectively idealized innocence) can be found. The Indian poet Kafeel Aazar Amrohvi puts it this way:

> *Us ki aankhon mein utar jaane ko ji chaahta hai.*
> *Shaam hoti hai to ghar jaane ko ji chaahta hai.*
>
> (To drown in the lake of her eyes is what I yearn for
> The firm hand of evening pulls me back to my home)

Whose eyes? What evening? Taken literally, the answers are the lover waiting at home, and the falling of dusk after a day's labor. But we know poetic expression relies upon the fraternity of the metaphor and the reader's unconscious. Seen this way, the eyes turn into mother's eye and motherland's friendly embrace whereas the evening changes into the evening of life, the midlife of an individual. Now we see that the poet is unmasking the revivified pining for homeland that many Indo-Pakistani immigrants feel as they enter the later phases of their lifespan (Akhtar, 2025). Old age has not yet arrived and, before infirmity precludes effort, there is still time to repair the interpersonal ruptures and the fractured internal world.

Conclusion

I must leave the pages of this book now, like a child runs toward the playground, like an adolescent goes away to college, like a young man undertakes the journey to vocation and marriage, like a middle-aged individual who slips into old age, and like an elderly man preparing for the ultimate release from the relentless pursuit of an illusion that life is. All are seeking departures from an erstwhile "home" (external and internal) and all are seeking a better "home" (external and internal). Their search is both concrete and symbolic. It is simultaneously regressive (looking to recreate the infant–mother merger) and progressive (attempting to transcend the fear and denial of death). All the labor and all the effort are to find eternal rest, the entropy of nonexistence. To paraphrase Freud's (1920g) declaration that the "aim of all life is death" (p. 38), one might say that the aim of all homes (be they of brick and mortar or of internalized objects) is to find the next home, hoping that it will be the permanent one. Allow me then to conclude with a couplet of my own.

> *Woh ek ghar ki jahaan umr kaatni thi humein.*
> *Lagi hai umr whi ek ghar banaaney main.*
>
> (The home where I were to spend all my life
> In building that very home I spent all my life)

Note

With the exception of those by Ghalib, Iftikhar Aarif, and Jan Nisar Akhtar, all verses cited in this chapter have been downloaded from the celebrated and highly reliable website of Urdu poetry, namely www.Rekhta.com. It was accessed on April 13, 2025. All translations are mine.

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