Research Journal in Advanced Humanities

RJAH

https://doi.org/10.58256/yr7rzk93

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RESEARCH ARTICLE **Section:** *Literature, Linguistics & Criticism*

Rewriting belonging: Postcolonial identity, diasporic memory, and power in contemporary English literature

Aayesha Sagir Khan[1], Shoeb Saleh[2]*, Rommel Mahmoud AlAli[2], Ali Abdullatif[3]

[1]Faculty of Languages and Translation, King Khalid University, Abha, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

[2]The National Research Center for Giftedness and Creativity, King Faisal University, Al-Ahsa, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

[3]Department of Arabic Language, College of Arts, King Faisal University, Al Ahsa, Saudi Arabia

*Correspondence: Sgsaleh@kfu.edu.sa

ABSTRACT

Contemporary Anglophone postcolonial fiction repeatedly returns to the language of home, migration, return, and affiliation, yet it rarely treats belonging as a stable possession. This essay argues that in Mohsin Hamid's Exit West, Kamila Shamsie's Home Fire, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Americanah, and Bernardine Evaristo's Girl, Woman, Other, belonging is rewritten as a struggle over narrative authority rather than a recovered attachment to place. These novels relocate the question of who belongs from the idioms of origin and assimilation to scenes of border control, racial legibility, familial memory, public mourning, and collective narration. Drawing on postcolonial theory, diaspora studies, and memory studies, the essay shows that diasporic memory in these texts is not private nostalgia but a mode of transmission through which states, publics, and families decide which lives appear intelligible, grievable, and proximate. Hamid's portals expose the distributed infrastructures of the global border regime; Shamsie's tragic design converts citizenship into a contest over mourning and burial; Adichie's return narrative turns racial memory into a transformed relation to home; and Evaristo's polyphony rewrites the national story from the vantage point of black British women's interlinked lives. Read together, these novels make a sharper claim than the language of mobility alone can capture: belonging is not where one finally arrives, but the unstable social relation produced when memory, power, and narration meet.

KEYWORDS: postcolonial literature, diaspora, belonging, memory, migration, contemporary Anglophone fiction, narrative power

Research Journal in Advanced Humanities

Volume 7, Issue 1, 2026

ISSN: 2708-5945 (Print)

ISSN: 2708-5953 (Online)

ARTICLE HISTORY

Submitted: 01 **January 2026**

Accepted: 09 **February 2026**

Published: 19 **March 2026**

HOW TO CITE

Khan, A. S., Saleh, S., AlAli, R. M., & Abdullatif, A. (2026). Rewriting belonging: Postcolonial identity, diasporic memory, and power in contemporary English literature. Research Journal in Advanced Humanities, 7(1). https://doi.org/10.58256/yr7rzk93

Published in Nairobi, Kenya by Royallite Global, an imprint of Royallite Publishers Limited

Introduction

Belonging has become one of the most overused and least examined terms in contemporary literary criticism. It appears everywhere in discussions of migration, diaspora, race, and postcolonial modernity, often as a self-evident good: a desired home, a repaired identity, a recovered intimacy with place. Yet many of the most compelling Anglophone novels of the twenty-first century refuse that reassuring script. They do not imagine belonging as a destination reached after displacement, nor as the simple recovery of origin. Instead, they present it as an unstable social relation shaped by border regimes, racial discourse, inherited memory, and the unequal distribution of narrative authority. What matters in these novels is not simply whether characters cross borders, return home, or sustain hybrid identities. The deeper question is who gets to appear as intelligible within the stories nations, families, and publics tell about themselves.

This essay argues that contemporary Anglophone postcolonial novels rewrite belonging by displacing it from the coordinates of homeland and assimilation and relocating it in contested acts of narration, mourning, and relation. In Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*, Kamila Shamsie's *Home Fire*, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*, and Bernardine Evaristo's *Girl, Woman, Other*, belonging emerges not as a stable identity but as a struggle over legibility: who may cross a border without becoming a threat, who may return without becoming a stranger, who may mourn a body the state refuses, and who may enter the national story without being reduced to a token or an absence. These novels differ strikingly in form. Hamid deploys magical portals and global vignettes; Shamsie rewrites tragedy through the idioms of surveillance and citizenship; Adichie organizes return through race, self-fashioning, and digital self-archiving; Evaristo builds a polyphonic counter-archive of black British life. What links them is their insistence that diasporic memory is not a private residue of elsewhere. It is a mode of transmission saturated with power, determining whose histories are recognized and whose claims to proximity are denied.

The argument proceeds from a dissatisfaction with two habits in current criticism. The first is thematic description. Contemporary novels about migration are still too often read as if their chief value were representational: they show refugee movement, expose racism, dramatize hybridity, or celebrate plural identities. All true, but insufficient. Such readings rarely ask what literary form does to the problem of belonging. The second habit is critical compartmentalization. *Exit West* is often discussed through refugees and borders; *Home Fire* through terrorism discourse, grief, or Antigone; *Americanah* through race, hair politics, or Afropolitanism; *Girl, Woman, Other* through intersectionality, black feminism, or queer temporality. These approaches have produced important insights, but the novels are less often read comparatively as formal reconfigurations of belonging across the interconnected terrains of migration, memory, and power. The result is that what should appear as a shared literary intervention is dispersed into separate topical debates.

My corpus is intentionally compact. I focus on four novels published between 2013 and 2019 because together they offer distinct formal solutions to the question of belonging in the contemporary postcolonial present. *Americanah* is a return narrative in which racial memory alters the very possibility of homecoming. *Exit West* transforms migration through magical compression, shifting attention from journey to the post-arrival violence of recognition and sorting. *Home Fire* makes citizenship precarious through a tragic structure organized around family memory, burial, and public grief. *Girl, Woman, Other* abandons the singular migrant protagonist in favor of a polyphonic network that rewrites national space from within. To read these texts together is not to flatten their differences, but to recognize that they belong to a shared literary moment in which mobility, diaspora, and memory are being reimagined through new formal pressures.

Methodologically, the essay uses close reading supported by comparative analysis and theoretically informed interpretation. I am interested less in rehearsing plot than in examining how narrative voice, temporality, geography, media, and symbolic structure convert belonging into a contested process. The essay therefore attends to portals, airports, blogs, family stories, dead bodies, theatrical publics, and shifting narrative frames as sites where literary form exposes the politics of inclusion and exclusion. The comparison matters because no single novel can fully capture how belonging is reorganized across contemporary Anglophone literature. Taken together, however, these texts show that postcolonial fiction is moving beyond the older binary of exile versus return. It is writing belonging as a struggle over who may be seen, remembered, and narrated into relation.

Reviewing the Field: Postcolonial Identity, Diaspora, and Memory in Contemporary Anglophone Criticism

Diaspora studies has long unsettled the fantasy that identity is naturally rooted in territory, but its vocabulary can harden into a cliché when repeated without attention to power. James Clifford's insistence that diasporas are defined by routes rather than simply by roots remains foundational because it resists a nationalist model of collective identity and foregrounds movement, translation, and historical contingency. Steven Vertovec's influential account of the multiple meanings of diaspora likewise refuses reduction, distinguishing between social form, consciousness, and cultural production. Rogers Brubaker later cautioned that diaspora had become so expansively used that it risked losing analytical force. Those warnings still matter. If diaspora names everything mobile, then it explains very little. What gives the concept continuing value is not its romantic association with in-betweenness but its capacity to register historically uneven movement, dispersed attachment, and the politics of recognition (Clifford; Vertovec; Brubaker).

The language of belonging both sharpens and complicates this field. Sara Ahmed's early meditation on migration and estrangement remains useful because it treats home not as a fixed location but as an affective and narrative structure produced through encounters with proximity and distance. Ien Ang extends that insight by imagining "together-in-difference" as a form of relation irreducible to both assimilation and separatism. Eva Youkhana's account of belonging as simultaneously affective and political gives these literary questions a sharper edge: belonging is not merely a feeling of home, but a social process tied to demarcation, collectivity, and power. Such work is crucial for literary criticism because it reminds us that novels do not simply depict identities; they stage the scenes through which proximity, estrangement, and collective recognition are organized (Ahmed; Ang; Youkhana).

Recent work on Afropolitanism has further complicated the language of postcolonial mobility. Susanne Gehrmann and Sarah Balakrishnan both show that Afropolitan discourse can illuminate new cosmopolitan formations while also threatening to aestheticize mobility and privilege elite circulation. That tension matters for readings of contemporary fiction, especially when novels risk being absorbed into celebratory narratives of fluid identity. The same caution applies to digital diaspora. Sandra Ponzanesi demonstrates that mediated forms of connection do not dissolve power but reconfigure it through new affective and technological infrastructures. Ann Cvetkovich's work on diasporic speech and oral archives similarly reminds us that memory is not simply inherited; it is mediated through institutions and public forms that decide what may count as testimony. In literary terms, then, mobility and connection remain inseparable from questions of platform, access, and authority (Gehrmann; Balakrishnan; Ponzanesi; Cvetkovich).

Memory studies has made some of the most important interventions into postcolonial literary criticism over the last two decades. Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory shows how transmitted histories structure subjectivity even when they are not directly lived. Astrid Erll's notion of travelling memory and Aleida Assmann's work on transnational memories draw attention to the mobility of mnemonic forms across media, borders, and communities. Michael Rothberg's formulations of multidirectional and transnational memory challenge zero-sum models of remembrance, arguing that memory travels by way of comparison, overlap, and implication rather than through neat ownership. Jenny Wüstenberg adds a spatial dimension by asking where transnational memory is located, while Emily Keightley urges memory studies to reckon with the technological and historical asymmetries of the postcolonial world. The result is a field better equipped to read literature not as a repository of national memory but as a laboratory in which memory's routes, scales, and infrastructures become visible (Hirsch; Erll; Assmann; Rothberg, "From Gaza to Warsaw"; Rothberg, "Locating Transnational Memory"; Wüstenberg; Keightley).

Postcolonial literary criticism has absorbed these developments unevenly but productively. Stef Craps and Gert Buelens's intervention on postcolonial trauma novels, Irene Visser's work on trauma theory and its decolonization, Sonya Andermahr's framing of postcolonial trauma studies, and Hamish Dalley's argument about solidarity all show that memory and trauma cannot be treated as universal psychic categories abstracted from colonial and racial histories. Avishek Parui's recent overview of memory studies and postcolonial writing marks the field's current maturity: memory is no longer a supplementary theme but a constitutive problem for postcolonial literary analysis. Rose A. Sackeyfio's "new vistas" formulation similarly captures a wider critical turn toward formal, historical, and comparative approaches within contemporary postcolonial fiction. The critical question is no longer whether postcolonial literature remembers, but how it turns memory into

a political and formal resource (Craps and Buelens; Visser, "Trauma Theory"; Visser, "Decolonizing Trauma Theory"; Andermahr; Dalley; Parui; Sackeyfio).

Criticism on *Exit West* has generally moved in two directions. One strand examines the novel through refugees, registration, and borders. Michael Perfect, Stefano Bellin, Khaled Mostafa Karam, and Charlotte Spear all read Hamid's novel as an intervention into the global border regime, although they differ over whether its formal devices intensify empathy, critique liberal humanism, or reframe the refugee novel as world-literature. A second strand emphasizes temporality and spatial form. Beatriz Pérez Zapata focuses on waiting and transience; Shazia Sadaf reads the novel through history and geography; Kanak Yadav treats the unnamed city as a poetics of dispossession; Jens Elze and Bryan Yazell approach the novel through infrastructure, assemblage, and networked world-making; Eva Rask Knudsen and Ulla Rahbek emphasize hopefulness without simple optimism. Collectively, this scholarship has illuminated the novel's formal inventiveness, but it has tended to privilege mobility and world-making over the question of how memory conditions what mobility can mean (Perfect; Bellin; Karam; Spear; Pérez Zapata; Sadaf; Yadav; Elze; Yazell; Knudsen and Rahbek).

Home Fire criticism has likewise been rich but dispersed. Debjani Banerjee, Nivedita Majumdar, Urszula Rutkowska, and Vicky Panossian read the novel through British Muslim identity, terrorism discourse, citizenship, and racialized integration. Gabriella Pishotti, Jaine Chemmachery, and Amina Yaqin foreground grief, bodily return, necropolitics, and the differential grievability of Muslim lives. Lisa Lau and Ana Cristina Mendes, along with Clara Shaw Hardy, show how the Antigone intertext shapes the novel's treatment of authority, punishment, and shared narrative memory. Sk Sagir Ali's account of "planetary belonging" and the comparative essay by Padel Muhamad Rallie Rivaldy, Manneke Budiman, and Shuri Mariasih Gietty Tambunan open the novel toward wider questions of postnationality and diasporic home. Yet the field still tends to split security politics from mnemonic form, as though terror discourse and family memory were separate rather than mutually constitutive (Banerjee; Majumdar; Rutkowska; Panossian; Pishotti; Chemmachery; Yaqin; Lau and Mendes; Hardy; Ali; Rivaldy, Budiman, and Tambunan).

Americanah scholarship has been shaped by debates over race, Afropolitanism, and return. Mindi McMann and Nonki Motahane read the novel through the transnational formation of blackness and racial identity; Cristina Cruz-Gutiérrez traces the politics of self-representation through hair and blogging; Caroline Lyle and Rónke Òké test the possibilities and limitations of Afropolitan discourse; Ava Landry places the novel in relation to immigrant acculturation and black diasporic comparison; Ángela Suárez-Rodríguez reads return as a revision of cosmopolitan estrangement; Emad Mirmotahari shows how the novel anatomizes liberal whiteness. This body of work has been especially attentive to racial discourse and self-fashioning, but less frequently to the question of how memory reorganizes the return plot itself, altering the temporality of home (McMann; Cruz-Gutiérrez; Lyle; Òké; Landry; Suárez-Rodríguez; Mirmotahari; Motahane).

Girl, Woman, Other has generated criticism that is at once formally alert and politically ambitious. Carolina Sánchez-Palencia emphasizes queer and diasporic temporality; Merve Sarıkaya-Şen reads the novel as a reconfiguration of feminism; Darja Zorc-Maver focuses on stigma and oppression; Nicola Abram restores the novel's relation to black British women's movement history. These essays make clear that Evaristo's polyphony is not merely representational abundance; it is a challenge to the nation's selective memory. At the same time, newer work beyond my primary corpus—Nadia Butt on partition as generational memory, Anindya Raychaudhuri on the material thingness of diasporic memory, and Hanna Teichler on transoceanic memory—shows how current postcolonial criticism is increasingly attentive to objects, media, water, and family histories as mnemonic carriers. What remains surprisingly underdeveloped is a comparative account of how contemporary Anglophone fiction links belonging to such mnemonic and formal mediations across different postcolonial geographies (Sánchez-Palencia; Sarıkaya-Şen; Zorc-Maver; Abram; Butt; Raychaudhuri; Teichler).

What remains insufficiently articulated across this scholarship is the relation between belonging and narrative power. Critics have been alert to migration, race, grief, feminism, and world-making, but less often to the way these categories converge in formal struggles over who gets narrated into relation. That convergence matters because belonging is never merely thematic in the contemporary postcolonial novel. It is formalized through patterns of interruption, adjacency, recursion, and withholding. Portals suspend the journey in order to reveal the violence of arrival; tragic repetition transforms state policy into a conflict over burial and voice; a blog archives racial perception while altering the temporality of return; polyphony converts the nation into a

contested listening structure. A comparative reading can therefore do more than synthesize existing criticism. It can show that these novels share a deeper preoccupation with the power to authorize stories of attachment, and with the unequal conditions under which those stories circulate.

Theoretical Framework: Belonging, Memory, and Narrative Power

The argument that follows treats belonging not as an achieved identity but as a relational effect. Ahmed's work is central here because it shows that home is produced through orientations—through habits of approach, familiarity, and estrangement—rather than through an uncontested relation to place. Youkhana's distinction between belonging and the politics of belonging further clarifies that the feeling of attachment and the social conditions that authorize it cannot be separated. In the novels considered here, belonging is always more than inward sentiment. It is staged where legal categories, racial scripts, family memory, and public recognition meet. It follows that literary form is not ornamental to belonging. Form is one of the means by which belonging becomes imaginable or impossible.

Diaspora, in this framework, is not simply the background condition of migration. Clifford, Vertovec, and Brubaker remain important precisely because they prevent diaspora from solidifying into essence. Diaspora in these novels is neither a melancholic cult of origin nor a frictionless transnational cosmopolitanism. It names dispersed attachment under unequal conditions. Ang's notion of "together-in-difference" is useful because it imagines collectivity without requiring sameness, while Gehrmann and Balakrishnan remind us that cosmopolitan vocabularies are always susceptible to class privilege and market capture. I therefore use diaspora not as a celebratory synonym for movement but as a framework for reading how attachments persist, split, and are publicly negotiated under racialized and postcolonial conditions.

Memory enters this framework as transmission rather than storage. Hirsch's postmemory is relevant not because all four novels center filial trauma in a strict sense, but because it clarifies how later subjects are formed by histories they do not directly own. Erll and Assmann help move beyond the family by showing that memory travels across media, forms, and institutions. Rothberg's multidirectional and transnational formulations are especially important for a comparative literary method, because they refuse the idea that memories are sealed within one national or ethnic container. Wüstenberg's spatial attention and Keightley's postcolonial challenge to memory technologies add two further dimensions: memories do not simply move; they move through uneven infrastructures, archives, platforms, and publics. That insight matters for novels organized around blogs, mythic intertexts, media spectacle, or polyphonic narration. In each case, memory is mediated; and mediation is one of the places where power becomes legible.

By narrative power I mean the uneven capacity of forms, institutions, and voices to determine whose stories count as socially real. This is not a merely symbolic problem. Whether a migrant is registered, whether a body may be buried, whether a returnee is recognized, whether a national past can absorb black feminist lives—these are material questions organized through narrative frames. The novel is especially apt for tracking such frames because it does not simply represent social worlds; it distributes visibility, duration, and proximity. A portal can abolish transit in order to expose the violence of arrival. A tragic structure can turn legal citizenship into a contest over mourning. A blog can archive the phenomenology of race across continents. A polyphonic novel can force a nation to hear lives it has treated as supplementary. Close reading, then, is not a retreat from politics. It is the method by which the politics of narrative form become visible.

The emphasis on narrative power also clarifies why close reading remains indispensable to postcolonial literary studies. If belonging is mediated through discourse, then form becomes one of the places where institutions and affects are translated into aesthetic experience. A border regime does not appear in fiction only as policy; it appears as pacing, interruption, repetition, opacity, and sudden shifts in scale. Likewise, memory is not merely announced in content; it shapes the ordering of scenes, the pressure of analepsis, the persistence of image, and the weight assigned to certain objects or voices. My method therefore remains deliberately literary. It asks what happens when postcolonial theory, diaspora studies, and memory studies are allowed to illuminate narrative technique without reducing novels to case studies that merely illustrate sociological claims.

Borders, Citizenship, and the Violence of Legibility

The first task these novels undertake is to strip belonging of its sentimental innocence by showing how decisively

it is governed by legibility. In both *Exit West* and *Home Fire*, to belong is not simply to feel attached or culturally hybrid; it is to survive systems that sort bodies according to nationality, race, religion, and threat perception. What distinguishes the novels is not whether they depict power, but how they formalize it. Hamid's innovation is to erase the drama of the border crossing itself; Shamsie's is to magnify the bureaucratic and discursive violence through which the state makes Muslim subjects perpetually conditional.

Exit West appears, at first glance, to offer a fantasy of frictionless movement. The black doors that suddenly connect one place to another remove the long, familiar scenes of migration narrative: the dangerous sea, the smuggler's truck, the desert route, the plane. Yet critics such as Perfect, Bellin, Spear, and Karam are right to insist that the doors do not abolish the border regime; they relocate it. By eliminating the journey, Hamid shifts attention from transit to what follows arrival: registration, encampment, policing, labor segmentation, local resentment, and the struggle to inhabit provisional space. The novel's formal compression is therefore diagnostic. It reveals that the modern border is not exhausted by the line between states. It extends into camps, neighborhoods, work, paperwork, and everyday surveillance.

The choice to leave Nadia and Saeed's city unnamed intensifies this effect. As Sadaf and Yadav suggest in different ways, the novel's geography refuses both journalistic topicality and ethnographic fixity. The city is specific enough to evoke war, checkpoints, and urban collapse, yet abstract enough to resist becoming an emblem for one region's pathology. This matters for the politics of belonging. If origin is not over-specified, then the novel denies the reader the comfort of locating displacement elsewhere. At the same time, the destinations—Mykonos, London, Marin—are not treated as settled homes but as sites where hospitality is always conditional. Pérez Zapata's emphasis on waiting is especially useful here. The migrant's problem is not merely movement; it is the time produced by being kept provisional, tolerated, and administratively unfinished.

Hamid's famous side vignettes deepen this critique. The novel repeatedly leaves Nadia and Saeed to offer brief glimpses of other migrants and other doors across the globe. These moments have often been read as signs of globality or commonwealth, and Elze and Yazell are persuasive in showing how the novel imagines an infrastructural world of unexpected adjacency. Yet those scenes are not simply expansive. They are reminders that mobility never takes place on equal terms. The network is global, but the permissions within it are stratified. Knudsen and Rahbek's argument about hopefulness captures something important: the novel does not surrender to despair. Still, its hope is austere rather than euphoric. The doors do not usher in postnational ease. They expose the fiction that national belonging can remain natural in a world already structured by mass displacement.

Home Fire approaches the same problem from the opposite direction. If Hamid removes the journey to reveal the distributed operations of the border, Shamsie saturates the novel with scenes in which mobility is slowed, interrogated, and criminalized. The airport interrogation that opens the novel is paradigmatic. Isma's trip to the United States is not blocked in any absolute sense; she is allowed to move, but only after her body, devices, and intimacies have been made available to state scrutiny. Belonging here is documentary and anticipatory. The Muslim traveler is not read according to what she has done, but according to what she might be. Banerjee's account of overlooked citizenship and Majumdar's discussion of terrorism discourse clarify the stakes: Shamsie's novel shows that British Muslim identity is rendered perpetually provisional because citizenship can be overridden by suspicion.

Parvaiz's story sharpens that condition into tragedy. His recruitment by Farooq, his travel into the terrain of ISIS, and his later desire to return are often discussed in the language of radicalization. Yet the novel is less interested in the explanatory psychology of extremism than in the structure of reversibility through which certain citizens can be expelled from the national body. Rutkowska's reading of the novel alongside the Shamima Begum case is therefore illuminating, because it shows how fiction and political reality converge around a terrifying proposition: that citizenship for racialized Muslims can be retroactively withdrawn or made effectively void. Panossian and Yaqin underscore another dimension of this problem. The novel's concern is not only exclusion from the polity; it is the necropolitical distinction between those whose lives can be redeemed through return and those whose deaths can remain ungrievable.

This is why family memory matters so much in *Home Fire*. The state reads the Pasha siblings through inherited suspicion; private attachment is always already public evidence. Yet Shamsie turns that logic against the state. Aneeka's insistence on Parvaiz's body is not simply familial devotion. As Chemmachery and Pishotti

show, it is a contest over who has the authority to define the meaning of the dead. The right to bring a body home, or even to claim it, becomes a way of refusing the state's monopoly over grievability. Hardy and Lau and Mendes help clarify why the Antigone intertext matters here. It is not a prestigious classical frame grafted onto a contemporary plot. It is a shared story about the collision between sovereign power and the claims of kinship, burial, and moral obligation. Belonging, in this novel, is tested not when a subject professes national loyalty, but when a state decides a family's mourning does not count.

Read together, *Exit West* and *Home Fire* expose two complementary truths about contemporary postcolonial belonging. The first is that mobility does not dissolve power. Whether one passes through a magical door or an airport checkpoint, one still enters a regime of reading and sorting. The second is that the nation is defended not only through borders but through narratives: stories about threat, integration, ancestry, and public grief. Hamid and Shamsie differ in tone and formal strategy, but they converge in one crucial respect. Both show that belonging is never only where one is. It is how one is made legible by the institutions that police movement and by the stories that justify that policing.

Return, Intimacy, and the Afterlife of Diasporic Memory

If the first group of texts reveals belonging as a politics of legibility, the second reveals it as a problem of temporal doubleness. Return, in these novels, does not restore an original relation to home. It exposes how migration has already altered the subject's sensorium, memory, and relation to self. What returns is not the pre-diasporic self, but a figure reshaped by racialization, mediated memory, and the difficult knowledge that home has been changing elsewhere all along. *Americanah* is exemplary in this regard, while *Home Fire* radicalizes the same problem by making return dependent on the political status of the body itself.

Americanah is often read as a novel of race consciousness, and rightly so. Ifemelu's movement from Nigeria to the United States produces a historical and experiential lesson the novel states with unusual clarity: in America, race is not an abstract category but a structuring demand that one inhabit blackness in new ways. McMann and Motahane show how Adichie stages this transnational racialization with precision, while Mirmotahari's work on the novel's portrait of liberal whiteness demonstrates that white progressivism is not outside the problem but one of its smoother idioms. Yet race in *Americanah* is not only a theme; it is a mnemonic structure. What Ifemelu learns in the United States alters how she remembers Nigeria and how she later returns to it. The novel's account of blackness is therefore also an account of diasporic memory.

The blog is central to this process. Cruz-Gutiérrez is especially persuasive in reading the blog not merely as a plot device but as a site of self-representation and safe speech. It functions as an archive of racial scenes, micro-observations, and stylized reflections through which Ifemelu renders her new environment intelligible. But the blog also changes the narrator who writes it. It externalizes experience, converts feeling into public language, and gives memory a portable form. Ponzanesi's notion of digital diaspora is useful here, even though *Americanah* is not chiefly a novel about digital media. The blog is a transnational platform where racial memory is stored, circulated, and reframed. What Ifemelu remembers of America later returns with her to Lagos, not as nostalgia, but as a changed way of reading the social.

Adichie's treatment of hair intensifies this material dimension of memory. Hair in the novel is neither a trivial lifestyle detail nor a simple symbol of authenticity. It is a site where race, labor, beauty, and self-presentation sediment. The salon scenes frame belonging as bodily negotiation; one is read before one speaks. Landry's comparative work on immigrant acculturation and Lyle's expansion of Afropolitanism help clarify how bodily performance and voice become entangled. Òké, meanwhile, shows that the novel's version of travel is never only spatial. It is illocutionary: a change in the conditions under which one can speak and be heard. Hair, blogging, romance, employment, and accent all become media through which memory is materialized. The result is that by the time Ifemelu returns, home can no longer appear innocent or immediately legible.

The return to Lagos therefore resists the fantasy of resolution. Suárez-Rodríguez's description of Ifemelu as a revised "cosmopolitan stranger" is helpful precisely because it captures the inadequacy of both familiar poles. Ifemelu is not simply alienated from home, but neither is she smoothly restored to it. Lagos is intimate yet estranging, recognizable yet oddly angled by her American years. The novel insists that return is interpretive. Home is read through the afterlife of elsewhere. This is what makes *Americanah* more than a mobility narrative. It reconfigures belonging as a mode of doubled perception, in which memory does not merely preserve the past

but alters the present.

Home Fire offers a harsher version of that same insight. In Shamsie's novel, return is no longer available as lived homecoming. It becomes a question of whether the dead may cross the threshold back into kinship and ritual. Chemmachery's essay on repatriation, Pishotti's on grief, and Yaqin's on necropolitical trauma all show that the novel turns the problem of return toward the body. Parvaiz's desire to come home is thwarted by state power, but the force of the novel lies in the fact that this power persists after his death. The question is not only whether he may return alive. It is whether he may return as someone still claimable, buryable, and grievable. In such a structure, memory is not secondary to politics; it is where politics becomes intimate.

The novel's tragic design makes that intimacy public. Hardy's reading of shared stories and Lau and Mendes's emphasis on twenty-first-century Antigone illuminate the cultural work of the classical intertext. Antigone survives here because the conflict over burial remains structurally modern. What the novel insists upon is that burial is not a private custom untouched by sovereignty. It is a test of whether the state will allow kinship to count as a valid form of claim. Family memory—of father, brother, sibling obligation, and social shame—therefore becomes inseparable from public discourse. Aneeka's attachment to Parvaiz is not a retreat from politics into the domestic. It is the point at which the domestic exposes the violence of political classification.

The broader direction of recent postcolonial memory criticism helps illuminate why these novels matter. Butt's work on partition as generational memory, Raychaudhuri's on the "thingness" of diasporic memory, and Teichler's on transoceanic remembering all suggest that contemporary literature increasingly treats memory as material, mobile, and relational. *Americanah* and *Home Fire* participate in that shift. In Adichie, memory travels through blog posts, hair practices, and the altered consciousness of return. In Shamsie, it travels through bodies, media images, intertexts, and the public scene of grief. In both cases, belonging becomes a problem of temporal and material mediation. One does not simply belong by being from somewhere. One belongs, if at all, through histories that continue to move through the present.

Polyphony and the Collective Rewriting of National Space

The final and perhaps most radical transformation of belonging in this corpus occurs when the novel abandons the single migrant consciousness as its primary unit. *Girl, Woman, Other* does not ask what it feels like for one subject to move between nations or racial scripts. It asks what happens when a nation is forced to hear a dispersed, intergenerational, internally differentiated chorus it has repeatedly treated as marginal. The novel's intervention is not only thematic. It lies in form. Belonging here is rewritten as a collective, relational, and historically stratified practice of narration.

Evaristo's polyphony is often admired for its range, but its deeper achievement is architectural. By organizing the novel through twelve interconnected lives, distributed across generations, classes, professions, sexualities, and regions, Evaristo refuses the exemplary minority subject. No single character can stand in for black British womanhood, diaspora, or feminism. Abram's essay on "being / together" captures this beautifully, because it shows how the novel reactivates the histories of black British women's movement without converting them into static heritage. The structure of adjacency matters: lives touch, diverge, reappear, and are belatedly revealed as relational. Belonging is therefore not an inner truth finally confessed. It is produced through links, overlaps, and uneven recognitions.

Sánchez-Palencia's account of queer and diasporic temporality sharpens what is at stake in this structure. *Girl, Woman, Other* does not move in a straight line from exclusion to inclusion. Its temporality is recursive. The past returns not as backdrop but as active pressure within the present. Amma's position at the National Theatre is not merely contemporary success; it is haunted by decades of feminist, artistic, and racial struggle. Hattie's story reaches back into agrarian history and racial secrecy, altering how the apparent present of the novel is read. Morgan's gender fluidity sits beside older scripts of womanhood without being reduced to a generational morality tale. The novel thus refuses official time, in which progress can be narrated as a smooth national achievement. Belonging unfolds through asynchronous histories.

Sarıkaya-Şen is right to describe this as a reconfiguration of feminism rather than a simple affirmation of it. The novel does not present a ready-made politics of sisterhood. Its women are divided by class mobility, ideology, sexuality, education, and temperament. Carole's professional ascent sits uneasily beside class shame

and maternal memory. Yazz's campus cosmopolitanism can become performative and shallow. Amma's radical past does not immunize her from blindness. Zorc-Maver's attention to stigma is useful here because it insists that oppression is not only external pressure; it is also internalized, redistributed, and occasionally transformed into agency. The novel's achievement is to hold these differences without collapsing them into a single program. Togetherness, in Evaristo, is not consensus. It is sustained relation amid asymmetry.

This has profound consequences for how the novel imagines the nation. *Girl, Woman, Other* does not seek admission into an already stable national story. It rewrites that story by demonstrating that black British women's lives have always been constitutive of Britain's social and cultural fabric. The national frame is not abandoned, but provincialized from within. This is where the novel differs sharply from celebratory versions of cosmopolitan mobility. Gehrmann and Balakrishnan both warn that postnational vocabularies can slide into elite abstraction. Evaristo avoids that trap by grounding mobility in labor, activism, precarity, institutional struggle, and ordinary intimacy. The novel's relationality is not an airy ethics of world citizenship. It is built from work, sex, care, resentment, inheritance, and artistic production.

Evaristo also pays sustained attention to institutions, and this is crucial to the novel's account of belonging. Amma's belated recognition at the National Theatre is not simply personal vindication; it dramatizes what happens when a public institution begins, however incompletely, to absorb histories it once excluded. The theatre in the novel functions as both stage and archive: a place where marginal lives can become publicly legible, but also a place that threatens to domesticate radical histories by converting them into diversity value. Abram's emphasis on movement history illuminates this doubleness. The novel remembers activism not as a closed heroic past but as something continually vulnerable to incorporation, forgetting, and renewal. Belonging in *Girl, Woman, Other* is therefore institutional as well as intimate. It depends on whether collective memory can change the spaces that authorize national culture.

Placed alongside *Exit West* and *Americanah*, Evaristo's method clarifies the diversity of contemporary literary responses to belonging. Adichie organizes the problem through return and altered self-perception. Hamid does so through global dispersion and infrastructural adjacency. Evaristo turns away from the arc of departure and return altogether. She asks instead how a collective can be narrated when official culture has treated its members as scattered, supplemental, or newly arrived. In that sense the novel offers the strongest challenge to the older grammar of belonging. There is no originary home to recover, but neither is there a postnational freedom detached from history. There is, rather, a dense web of lives that force the nation to recognize itself as already diasporic.

The novel's syntax contributes to this effect. Its flowing punctuation, refusal of conventional sentence closure, and rapid shifts in perspective create a sense of ongoingness rather than neat resolution. Stories are not sealed. They spill into one another. That formal openness matters because it prevents belonging from hardening into final identity. The novel keeps relation in motion. It also transforms reading into a practice of connection: the reader must hold disparate lives together, remember earlier scenes, and revise assumptions as hidden genealogies emerge. In this respect, *Girl, Woman, Other* is itself a technology of relation. It trains reading against the isolating tendencies of both market multiculturalism and nationalist memory.

Possible Counterargument: Has Belonging Become Too Fluid a Critical Ideal?

One possible objection to my argument is that these novels, especially *Exit West* and *Girl, Woman, Other*, ultimately endorse a postnational fluidity that makes the language of power less urgent than I have suggested. The magical doors in Hamid's novel might seem to imagine a world where borders are increasingly untenable; Evaristo's polyphony might appear to celebrate a plural Britain already beyond the anxiety of belonging; *Americanah* can be read as an Afropolitan tale of mobile self-fashioning; *Home Fire*, in Ali's planetary reading, gestures toward solidarities larger than the nation. There is truth in these approaches. Contemporary fiction often seeks forms adequate to connection rather than enclosure.

But the difficulty lies in confusing formal openness with political release. Fluidity can become a critical ideal too quickly, especially when it aligns with the language of cosmopolitan mobility. Gehrmann and Balakrishnan both warn that transnational belonging can be romanticized in ways that obscure classed and racialized asymmetries. Brubaker's skepticism about the overextension of diaspora remains relevant for the same reason. In the novels discussed here, mobility and plurality never erase structures of coercion. Hamid's

doors do not abolish camps, militias, or hostile urban majorities. Evaristo's chorus does not dissolve stigma, class injury, or historical erasure. Adichie's return does not overcome racial memory. Shamsie's tragic horizon certainly does not transcend the state's power to decide whose citizenship and grief are valid. If these novels resist nationalist closure, they do not do so by imagining a world beyond power. They do so by showing that power now operates through more dispersed and intimate forms.

There is also a limit to the corpus I have assembled. These are widely circulated novels, published within Anglophone literary markets that confer visibility unevenly. Their prominence is part of the argument—they have become key sites where contemporary English literature stages migration, race, memory, and postcoloniality—but they cannot stand for the full range of diasporic or postcolonial writing. What they do provide is a concentrated view of how literary form has shifted. The point is not to universalize them, but to take seriously their shared insistence that belonging must be read through narrative power rather than merely through identity labels.

Conclusion

Contemporary Anglophone postcolonial fiction has not abandoned belonging; it has made the term difficult again. That is the achievement of *Exit West*, *Home Fire*, *Americanah*, and *Girl, Woman, Other*. These novels refuse to treat belonging as a stable possession located either in homeland nostalgia or in multicultural incorporation. Instead, they relocate it in scenes where power and memory meet: at checkpoints, in waiting zones, through blogs and hair rituals, in public mourning, across intergenerational stories, inside experimental polyphony, and within the nation's contested archive. Belonging becomes not a settled answer to displacement but the name for a struggle over legibility, grievability, and relational narration.

The comparative argument offered here makes a specific intervention in current English literary studies. First, it brings diaspora studies and memory studies into closer contact by showing that mobility cannot be adequately read without attention to the mnemonic forms through which subjects, publics, and institutions interpret movement. Second, it insists that literary form is central to the politics of belonging. Hamid's portals, Shamsie's tragic architecture, Adichie's return plot and digital archive, and Evaristo's collective polyphony do not merely illustrate postcolonial theory; they extend it by revealing how belonging is narratively manufactured, withheld, revised, or redistributed. Third, the essay argues against celebratory accounts of fluidity. These novels are formally open, but they are not naïve about the regimes that govern movement and recognition.

That point matters beyond the novels themselves. In contemporary literary studies, belonging is often discussed as though it were either an ethical horizon—hospitality, openness, relationality—or a sociological category describing migrant experience. The texts in this essay push criticism toward a more demanding understanding. Belonging is aesthetic, political, and historical at once. It involves the stories a culture can tell about itself, the bodies it allows into public grief, the archives it maintains or destroys, and the forms through which readers are asked to inhabit relation. To read belonging in this way is not to depoliticize literature into discourse. It is to recognize that literature is one of the places where the very terms of social recognition are rehearsed, resisted, and revised.

If there is a common lesson across the corpus, it is that belonging is no longer best understood as where one comes from or where one finally arrives. It is produced in the unstable interval between history and recognition, memory and classification, intimacy and public form. Contemporary English literature, at its most searching, has understood this before criticism fully has. It has shown that to rewrite belonging is to rewrite the stories through which power decides who counts as near, who remains foreign, and whose lives may enter the future as more than an afterthought.

Funding:

1- This work was supported by the Deanship of Scientific Research, Vice Presidency for Graduate Studies and Scientific Research, King Faisal University, Saudi Arabia [Grant No. KFU261398]

2- The author extends her appreciation to the Deanship of Scientific Research at King Khalid University for funding this work through Large Research Groups under grant number (RGP.2 /422/46).

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