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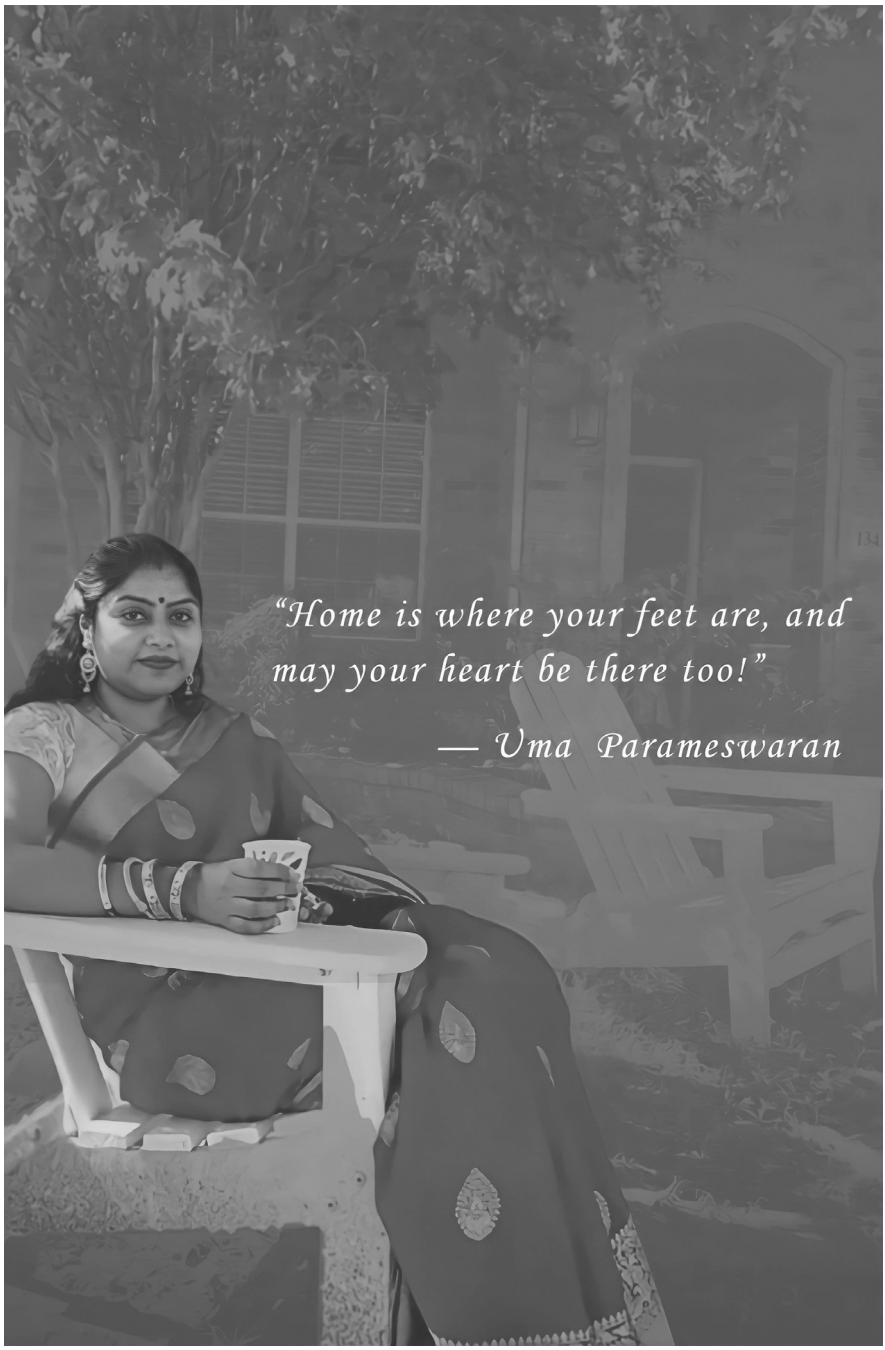
READING JHUMPA LAHIRI

WOMEN, DOMESTICITY AND THE INDIAN AMERICAN DIASPORA

Nilanjana Chatterjee


"Home is where your feet are, and
may your heart be there too!"
— Uma Parameswaran

Reading Jhumpa Lahiri

This book is an innovative and rigorous study of Jhumpa Lahiri's Indian American female characters' lived and imagined diasporic house space, using domesticity and the house as an analytical tool to explore their hidden domestic spaces.

The book explores how the house, as a spatial construct, shares a symbiotic relationship with its inhabitants, and, through their implicit and explicit response to various parts of their diasporic house space, interprets their maladies, limitations and opportunities. Indian American diasporic women, especially homemakers, have long been grappling with issues of socio-cultural invisibility as they have no other space to interact with except their houses in the host land, now more than ever, during the global COVID-19 crisis. A reading of this multi-layered relationship between houses and their women will help readers understand not only the political, intellectual, emotional and sexual dispositions of middleclass Indian women in America, but also social, cultural and economic positions they occupy within the host land. The book shows the represented domestic interstices and looks at them as signifiers of distinct individual trajectories, wherein lies embedded the woman inhabitants' oppositions beneath the acceptance of normative Indian family values in diaspora. It also offers elemental insights into ways in which migration acts as an opportunity for establishing new, often hybridized, identities, for which it is important to realize their connections with their house space.

Presenting an alternative methodology for reading real and imagined lives of women in Indian American diaspora, the book proposes an unconventional mode of understanding diasporic realities and representations in cultural studies that is not readily apparent. It will be of interest to researchers in the fields of South Asian Studies, Diaspora Studies, Migration Studies, Culture Studies, Feminist Writings, Gender Studies and Asian Literature.

Nilanjana Chatterjee is Assistant Professor of English at Durgapur Government College in India. She has published research papers on diaspora studies and culture studies, and some of her ongoing projects include work on Angami Kire's formation of digital ethnic identity, and on women and natural resource management in Naga folktales and stories. She has co-edited *Re-theorising the Indian Subcontinental Diaspora: Old and New Directions.*

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Nilanjana Chatterjee

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This book is dedicated to Dadubhai and Bulan
Who taught me to dream of other worlds

Contents

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Foreword

The question that hovers over all diasporic experience is: 'Where do I belong?' Too often this experience is represented as being a feeling of loss and absence, by thwarted memory and nostalgia. The assumption is that the diasporic person always feels that they belong somewhere else. But belonging is not a feeling, it is something people do. Belonging, like identity, is performative, which means that belonging is constructed by the very expressions that are said to be its results. When the South Asian person moves to America there is a range of ways in which belonging can be performed as the individual moves into society and employment. But there is a caveat: 'What about the wife of an Indian man, a woman who must stay at home?' The obstacles to female belonging are not universal, nor are they insurmountable. But the very great different effects of diaspora on different genders have been a feature of diaspora study for some time. Where does the South Asian American woman belong? Too often such a woman is left stranded by the insidious demand for national identification.

It is at this point that this book makes a key intervention. It starts with a proposition: forget the nation, forget culture and ethnicity (all of which are of course important), but what about the house, the house where the diasporic woman must spend most of her time? We can understand this in the same way that we understand the construction of postcolonial place in general, because the house is a place that elaborates in microcosm the way place itself emerges. Place is never simply location, nor is it static, but like culture itself, place is in a continual and dynamic state of formation, a process intimately bound up with the culture and the identity of its inhabitants. Above all place, like space, is a *result* of habitation, and nowhere is this more clearly demonstrated than by the house. For the house is not simply a building, it is a confluence of memory, culture, hope, personality and ritual. For the diasporic woman the house, that ambivalent yet luminous space between the past and the future, is a place of belonging, a place where belonging can be performed—a home.

Jhumpa Lahiri is gifted at demonstrating the various levels of ambivalence that the diasporic woman navigates. A significant feature of this is the operation of memory and particularly the opportunities for memory to be an investment in the future rather than mere nostalgia. Memory operates in

different ways for the diasporic woman, and Lahiri beautifully reveals the different trajectories, impediments and opportunities that such a woman has at her disposal. Because the house can become the site of struggle and uncertainty, but also the site at which belonging may be performed, it is a vibrant location of the multitude of ways in which place is created by habitation. This book makes the very topical point about the significance of the house during a pandemic, and by invoking the Bhadramahila construct, which 'was used by the patriarchal society to transform the vulgarized form of servitude of the Bengali woman into a more polished and subtle one', it shows that the house may be the space of liberation as well as confinement, of self-realization as well as suppression. By its attentive reading of the fiction of Jhumpa Lahiri this book establishes the house as a key site of diaspora experience.

Bill Ashcroft

1 Introduction

I

Diaspora needs to be understood as a situation of subjectivity and not as a circumstance of objective analysis alone. In underlining the issue of subjectivity, I suggest that diasporas are not merely collections of people or communities of scattered individuals enclosed by some shared history, race, language, or religion. They are marked by individual desires and despairs as diasporans go through cultural metamorphoses. Diasporans, almost every day, turn away from and return upon the markers of the self—homeland/host land, memory/forgetfulness, loss/achievement, etc. These narratives of day-to-day desires and despairs are written and rewritten on diasporic houses from the moment these houses, and their inhabitants engage in a substantial symbiotic relationship. Diasporic house space indeed is more nuanced compared to nondiasporic house space as diasporic house space accumulates linguistic, cultural, metaphorical, aesthetic, and ideological metamorphoses caused by territorial dislocation or/and relocation. It is doubly embedded and therefore requires deeper investigation. However significant diasporic house as a signifier of lived life might be, it apparently remains hidden in the humdrum of everyday life and thereby, excluded from the narratives of diaspora. The tactile domestic tools—private and liminal spaces, display of furniture, transnational letters, ordinary repetitive domestic chores, display of map, kitchen (blade, peeler, chopper, food items), dining table (common meal), transformed porch or/and garden, the burden of a well-furnished apartment, family pictures and albums, yard sale, bedcover, sofa cover, TV channels—in short anything ordinary or simple in relation to house, under-noticed in serious scholarly engagement, can prove to be elemental tool in analysing the broader transcultural negotiations and renegotiations, wherein diasporic house records fortification or/and consolidation of intercultural transactions. Curiously, Mannur, in *Culinary Fictions: Food in South Asian Diasporic Culture* (2010), uses food as a cultural signifier and explains how a culinary chronicle can become the 'most salient, and often most palatable, index of managing difference in South Asian diasporic literary and cultural production' (7). House, too, can act as one such potent signifier. It is interesting to note how Jhumpa Lahiri's writings explore several Indian American houses that become

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an organized patchwork of cultural signifiers assembled through an invisible history of simultaneous displacement and relocation of a heterogeneous cluster of middleclass Bengali American heterosexual women, for she unapologetically adumbrates the detailed contours of their cultural spaces, capturing voices (muffled and loud) from different cultural backgrounds and of diverse cultural needs. I select these women's concealed house spaces and look at them as potent signifiers of distinct individual trajectories, wherein lies embedded their oppositions beneath the acceptance of the normative Indian family values in diaspora. These subtle signifiers, studied together, might make out a collective history of middleclass Bengali American heterosexual female immigrants whose liminal and complex subject positions necessitate sufficient problematization.

Now more than ever, dwelling in a real dystopian situation during the COVID-19 crisis, we discover our intricate relationship with house space, the only world allowed to explore during the lockdown hours. Today, human beings, irrespective of gender, realize the pros and cons of being confined within their houses. However, Indian American diasporic women, especially the housewives, have long been grappling with the issue of social invisibility as they have no other space to interact with except their houses in the host land. Socially, historically, politically, academically invisible Indian American women claim a distinctively ambivalent relationship with house space, which connects the private and the public spheres, personal and political belongings, host land and homeland. In one of my articles titled 'Ashima in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*: The "Diasporic Bhadramahila" in America' (2009), I examined the influence of the bhadramahila[1] construct on Indian American family dynamics and analysed the complexities that underwent into the making of 'diasporic bhadramahila'. Diasporic bhadramahila's house space simultaneously displays and conceals her social and political inclusions and exclusions due to ethnic and racial dominance and exclusion. If we fail to decipher the diasporic house space, day-to-day lives of the diasporic women would remain neglected and undocumented. Consequently, those in power (both racial and patriarchal) would continue to make laws and support institutions that confirm their versions of Indian American women as less intelligent and competent compared to their male counterparts; easily controlled, and dependent on others for protection and sustenance. In Lahiri's 'The Third and Final Continent', the narrator considers it to be his duty to take care of his newly married wife in the host land, to welcome her and to protect her in America.

> I would have to buy her her first pair of snow boots, her first winter coat. I would have to tell her which streets to avoid, which way the traffic came, tell her to wear sari so that the free end did not drag on the footpath.
>
> (*Interpreter of Maladies* 190)

To restore narratives of diasporic house spaces, inhabited by Indian American female diasporans, we must turn to cultural representations of Indian American lived life since cultural representations of a socio-historical moment can challenge the discriminatory approaches of conventional forms of history writing.

In the present chapter, while discussing about existing scholarly engagements in female immigrants' diasporic house space with reference to Immigrant Literature in America, I intend to use house space as a probable tool to problematize real and imagined lives of Indian American middleclass women in connection to Lahiri's works, wherein brutality of racist act is almost indiscernible and therefore under-noticed. A close reading of multi-layered relationships between Indian American diasporic houses and their female inhabitants can help us understand the hidden political, intellectual, emotional, biological, and sexual satisfaction or/and dissatisfaction of the middleclass Indian heterosexual women in America, devoid of immediate trauma or terror. The study might prove valuable in appreciating Lahiri in a more productive way. I am particularly interested in the way these women negotiate interfaces between various and often contradictory demands expected from them by their homeland/host land, and their new/old diasporic subject positions in the Western world. A critical study of these characters' heterogeneous responses to house space might offer elemental insights into ways in which these women, despite various difficulties, utilize migration as an opportunity for establishing new, often hybridized, identities. For this, it is important for us to realize first, an inhabitant's relationship with house space; second, a female inhabitant's relationship with house space; and third, an immigrant woman's relationship with house space.

II

Why house?

Inhabited house space[2] records a series of meaningful interactions between architectural structures of a house and human experiences, unveiling the intracultural, intercultural and transcultural problem spaces. The system of interconnectedness between house, human beings and ideas can be understood through philosophic, anthropologic, architectural, economic, and ethnographic lenses that reveal multifaceted ways in which house reflects the socio-political world around, and, in turn, is also shaped and transformed by that world. Since the term 'house' is often coupled (or exchanged) with 'home', the difference between them needs to be understood. These terms signify separate cultural implications. Birdwell-Pheasant and Lawrence-Zuniga remark, '"home" … may take on the meaning of self, or a manifestation of family identity' (6). They quote from Robert Frost's[3] poem—'Home is the place where, when you have to go there / They have to take you in' (qtd in Birdwell-Pheasant and Lawrence-Zuniga 6)—to prove the existence of home as a caring space. They further refer to Hobsbawm's[4] observation that

home is 'not the destiny of our journeys but the place from which we set out and to which we return, at least in spirit' (qtd in Birdwell-Pheasant and Lawrence-Zuniga 6). This statement emphasizes the emotional attachment and a sense of rootedness which are connected to the notion of home. Therefore, home refers to a place of origin and retreat, or, to say in other words, it is a house that has been *preferably* planned to allow its residents to live in it and feel safe and comfortable. House, thus, is a constructed structure that, in ideal conditions, functions as home and makes dwelling possible.

Human beings are incessantly trying to *attain* dwelling by building, that is, by establishing themselves within a house—a house that separates and connects them with the outside world. All houses place four walls, a floor and a ceiling around an individual as a form of protection from the outside world. But the question that comes first to my mind is this: what makes an individual think that s/he needs to be sheltered and confined from the outside world? This is not just an issue of safety measures. This thought arises from an individual's elemental instinct to survive in this world by creating an enclosed space free from all forms of uncertainty. Heidegger states in 'Building Dwelling Thinking' (1951), 'dwelling would in any case be the end that presides over all building' (146). In this manner 'dwelling' should be the end to the means of building. We must, therefore, build a house with all intents and purposes *to dwell* since we are essentially dwellers. In the very beginning of the text, Heidegger makes it clear that, 'this thinking about building does not presume to discover architectural ideas, let alone to give rules for building' (141). This implies that Heidegger does not want to posit building as some form of art or mode of erection. What he intends to do, rather, is to study the nature of 'building' that fosters dwelling and thereby establishes the true nature of our existence on the face of the earth.

Heidegger argues that problems of building are essentially problems of dwelling. To build is to dwell and the nature of dwelling determines the way human beings exist on the earth. He explains that realization of this relationship between building and dwelling leads to the thinking which is caught between conflicting tendencies towards home, or being homed, and homelessness. The consciousness of being homed is a state of balance between the earth and the sky, between physicality and spirituality. Homelessness, on the other hand, depicts the absence of that balance—a fragmentation of body and soul engendered by human's preference for technological evolution. Heidegger refers to the farmhouse in the Black Forest,[5] which was built by peasants with the only purpose to dwell in. This house demonstrates a perfect fusion of the fourfold[6] in which the earth and the heaven, divinities and mortals enter in simple oneness to form an independent entity. According to Heidegger, the measurement of these house spaces, as determined by the fourfold of the building, is comparatively advanced than the calculations determined by geometry or mathematics. However, modern lifestyle thoroughly fails to create such spaces in a house, leading to a sense of insecurity within the minds of dwellers. Young in 'What is Dwelling? The Homelessness of Modernity and the Worlding of the World' (2000) explains that

Heidegger's concept of radical insecurity is always incompatible with dwelling. The predominance of modern technology thwarts the desire to build (both in terms of cultivating and constructing) with the principal purpose to dwell. Moreover, modern day migratory patterns have led to emergence of diasporic houses where builders and dwellers have significant cultural differences. For dwellers, therefore, both symbolic and cultural correspondences between the host lands' ways of building and the homelands' ways of thinking become even more nuanced. These are the reasons why individuals have now become alienated, homeless, drastically insecure, and incompatible with dwelling. Heidegger's notion that modern consciousness is subject to alienation and existential homelessness, leads him to conceive of a romantic attachment to home and homeland.

Gaston Bachelard has also made some significant contributions to the discourse on house space. In his *The Poetics of Space* (1969), Bachelard observes, 'A house that has been experienced is not an inert box. Inhabited space transcends geometrical space' (47). He does not intend to describe houses, or to enumerate their picturesque features and to analyse for which reasons they are comfortable. To him, house is the dwelling of human consciousness. He considers house as a built thing that preserves the phenomenology and lived experiences of human beings. For him, house is essentially a place of tranquillity, solitude, and contemplation, which allows its inhabitant to 'dream in peace' (6). His fascination towards house space can be interpreted from two different perspectives. First, house is an actual building which is made of tangible equipment such as bricks, slate and wood and whose durability or stability offers its inhabitants a sense of security wherein memories can be fostered and recovered. Second, house is an imaginary entity, wherein inhabitants experience dwelling in its intense, idyllic, ultimate essence. This oneiric house is a combination of occurrences which, on the one hand, goes beyond memory, and, on the other, can be effortlessly recollected. It invokes remote personal memories of pre-existing house space in which inhabitants were brought up since their infancy, and even before that. Thus, Bachelard's concept of house space includes imaginary house (which sustains collective as well as individual culture of its inhabitants) and real house (which allows its inhabitants to put down roots in their own 'corner of the world' (4) by providing privacy and protection, vital for human habitation). Bachelard's oneiric house not only provides a retreat from the ruthlessness of the outside climatic conditions but also from the social conditions. This becomes clear when Bachelard declares that intimate house space is a 'space that is not open to just anybody' (78). House, to Bachelard, therefore, provides a womb like shelter to its inhabitants.

Bachelard refers to constructions of brick or stone built rectangular structures which divide house into separate furnished rooms including antechambers and attics connected by stairs. Attics and cellars of the house are particularly significant wherein inhabitants classify and archive intimate memories of early childhood encounters, facilitating a dream space over time. Bachelard suggests that such classified structures of the house become repertoires of the inhabitants'

private language, affinities, and secrets. Here, memories can be clearly discriminated against each other, classified, and archived in separate floors, secret rooms and isolated nooks:

> thanks to the house, a great many of our memories are housed, and if the house is a bit elaborate, if it has a cellar and a garret, nooks and corridors, our memories have refuges that are all the more clearly delineated. (8)

Bachelard's ecstatic description of house as a maternal refuge establishes house as a potent interface between its inhabitants' lived lives and desired lives, past and present. Therefore, Bachelard resents modern architectural patterns of system-built tower blocks situated in the Parisian suburbs. He observes:

> In Paris, there are no houses, and the inhabitants of the big city live in superimposed boxes … The number of the street and the floor give the location of our 'conventional hole', but our abode has neither space around it nor verticality inside it … [The buildings] have no roots and, what is quite unthinkable for a dreamer of houses, sky-scrapers have no cellars. From the street to the roof, the rooms pile up one on top of the other, while the tent of a horizonless sky encloses the entire city. (27)

According to Bachelard, the absence of various rooms in a house (i.e. from cellars to garrets), as mentioned earlier, prevents its inhabitants from structuring and archiving their distinct memories and emotions within separate places of the house. Bachelard, therefore, criticizes modernist buildings as they do away with attics (because of their preference for flat roofs) and cellars (because of their common use of slab, pouring concrete onto the ground for a direct base). Moreover, in a high-rise, the indispensable verticality of a building is reduced to a mere visual sight in which the inhabitants can never experience its height for 'elevators do away with the heroism of stair climbing' (27). Since Bachelard's model house has 'space around it … verticality inside it' (27), the lack of this space in townhouses, according to Bachelard, forbids the sheltering and safeguarding of human dreams.

Bachelard also mentions that there are times when the mother-like sheltering nature of house space gets subverted and the intimate space turns hostile to its inhabitant. It is then when the outside and the inside of house space functionally exchange their positions. If there exists a threshold between such an inside and outside, this surface is painful for both the sides. In such case, Bachelard points out, 'intimate space loses its clarity, while exterior space loses its void, void being the raw material of possibility of being' (218). It is then when an inhabitant is banished from the realm of possibility. The house image, he mentions, appears to have become the topography of an intimate

being, and, therefore, it can become a 'tool for analysis' (xxxvii) of the human soul. However, Architects like Le Corbusier and his followers in *Towards a New Architecture* (1927) have criticized such 'cult of the house' (18) because of its 'sickening spirit' and 'conglomeration of useless and disparate objects' (22). They have argued that the problem of such conventional gable[7] house is that it gets too much involved with the past—its small rooms and jumbled interiors trap not only dust but memories, making it a kind of personal museum in which people gather 'gloomily and secretly like wretched animals' (18). As a solution to these claustrophobic house space, modernist buildings intend to provide crystal clear environments as they open up to light and space, with their undivided interiors, clean lines and floor-to-ceiling windows. Nevertheless, Heidegger's and Bachelard's philosophical discourses on house still remain valuable repositories of knowledge in regard to house space.

Amos Rapoport's voluminous and encyclopaedic writings include one of the earliest comparative discussions of domestic architecture. His theory of domestic architecture, as propounded in *House Form and Culture* (1969), emphasizes 'the form of a dwelling' and argues that what moulds such 'spaces and their relationships, is the vision that people have of the ideal life' (47). This vision is expressed through the dweller's way of life that s/he tries to negotiate with the built forms of the house. Human interactions with house space lend this space a meaning, converting it into a communicative device. The meanings encoded in houses may be ordinary ones providing instrumental signs for human activities. For example, a staircase signifies the uses of ascent and descent, or a chair indicates the possibility of relaxation. Harvey's *Spaces of Hope* (2000) goes a step further and mentions about two kinds of architects—professional and individual. He argues, while professional architects are professional engineers and designers of house, all individuals are planners and builders in some way or the other. His concept of the architect, who 'shapes and preserves long-term social memories and strives to give material form to the longings and desires of individuals and collectivities' (200), includes both the kinds of architects. While most of the custom-built constructions exclude individual and collective concerns, inhabitants as architects have some scope to subvert these structures. There is also a new field of development in the architectural studies called, the Design Psychology. Israel in *Some Place like Home: Using Design Psychology to Create Ideal Places* (2003) discusses about this concept in great details. Design Psychology can be defined as the practice of architecture, planning and interior design in which psychology is the primary means of designing. The function of Design Psychology is to create environments that reify an individual or a group of inhabitants' abstract ideas thereby promoting positive change and deeper connection with house space. While architectural works on house usually focus more on materialistic aspects of dwellings (for example, much on environmental conditions, techniques of construction, resources, technology, types of building, aesthetic values of buildings and spatial organizations), the anthropological works chiefly focus on social structures of house space and their relationships with its inhabitants.

Anthropologists are concerned with houses, but not with houses as physical structures alone. They focus on interrelationships between buildings, people, and ideas, using ethnographic case studies to analyse different ways in which house represents social groups and or the world around. For Anthropologists, house is a built, personalized, modified, or abandoned site depending on the changing contexts of its inhabitants. Lévi-Strauss analyses house as a specific unit of social organization. According to Carsten and Hugh-Jones, Lévi-Strauss's chief contribution is in 'providing a jumping-off point … towards a more holistic anthropology of architecture which might take its theoretical place alongside the anthropology of the body' (2). In their book, *About the House: Lévi-Strauss and Beyond* (1995), they seek to develop an alternative study of house, not merely based on assumed priority of kinship or economy. They, rather, try to evade the limitations of such conventional analysis of house and focus on the links between architectural, social, and symbolic connotations of house by stressing on the potential (but often neglected) significance of architecture in anthropological analysis. They argue that house and body are intimately linked. In fact, house is an extension of an individual like an additional skin, a covering or a second layer of clothes. On the one hand, house reveals and displays, and, on the other, it hides and protects. House, human body and mind are in continuous interaction with each other. The physical structures, furnishings, social conventions, and mental images of a house operate jointly to enable, mould, inform and constrain the inhabitants' activities and ideas which take place within the boundaries of house space.

British anthropologist Mary Douglas's essay 'The Idea of a Home: A Kind of Space' (1991) traces ways in which house consolidates the idea of a community. She mentions that house can function as 'an organization of space over time' (294) where behavioural patterns are not simply intangible, meaningless experiences but functional memory and anticipation. For example, memory of sunlight and darkness leads us to fit lamps, curtains, and blinds in the house. The memory of summer and winter makes us respond to doorways, air-conditioning, double-glazing, and central heating in a house. Every minute furnishing in a house is a prompt visual and material response to memory: we remember that beds are for sleeping, that chairs are for sitting, that stairs are for climbing up and down. Joëlle Bahloul, in her ethnographic study of house in *The Architecture of Memory: A Jewish-Muslim Household in Colonial Algeria, 1937–1962* (1992, trans. 1996), analyses several Jewish and Muslim families who lived in a huge multi-roomed house in Colonial Algeria between 1937 and 1962. Currently uprooted to France, Bahloul's informants use architectural patterns of the house to structure their memories, which are 'lodged in the monotonous repetition of the necessary acts of concrete experience' (29). In her study, Bahloul illustrates the importance of 'embodied memory' (113). In their memories of the day-to-day activities, time is indefinite and endless. It is, as if, their memories tend to deny the passage of time and shift by capturing the past in perpetuity and thereby, giving memory a dimension of the absolute. Domestic memory does not tally with time. These memories flow like a river that never runs dry, 're-creating