

Original Article

Home, Identity, and Survival: A Study of Pandemic Experiences in *Homebound* by Puja Changoiwala

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Abstract

The catastrophic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on global societies brought unprecedented challenges, particularly for marginalized communities. One of the most striking manifestations was the migrant crisis in India during the 2020 nationwide lockdown, which rendered millions jobless and stranded within urban centers. Puja Changoiwala's novel *Homebound* provides a powerful literary reflection on this crisis, chronicling the struggles of a young girl, Meher, and her family as they embark on a treacherous journey from Mumbai to their ancestral village in Rajasthan. This research paper seeks to critically examine the representation of home, identity, and survival in *Homebound*, situating the novel within the wider framework of pandemic literature and social testimony.

Through qualitative content analysis, the study unpacks how the idea of home is deconstructed and reconstructed under the duress of displacement, exposing the fragile claims of migrants to both city and village, and highlighting the deep emotional and psychological impact of forced migration. Furthermore, the paper explores the crisis of identity faced by the protagonists as they oscillate between visibility and erasure, aspiration and marginalization, demonstrating how the narrative technique—especially the novel's epistolary form—enables the reclamation of agency. The novel's vivid portrayal of survival incorporates not only the physical hardships endured by migrants but also their emotional resilience, solidarity, and moments of hope amid despair.

By contextualizing *Homebound* within socio-political realities and the growing corpus of pandemic literature, the research underscores the significant role of fiction in documenting lived experiences, shaping cultural memory, and humanizing statistics. The findings highlight that *Homebound* is more than a chronicle of crisis; it is a testament to the enduring human spirit and an urgent call for empathy and systemic change in times of disaster. The study aims to bridge literary analysis with social insight, demonstrating the indispensable value of such narratives in comprehending and addressing contemporary crises.

Keywords: *Homebound*, Pandemic Literature, Migrant Crisis, Displacement, Identity, Survival, Trauma, Empathy, Social Testimony, COVID-19

Introduction

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020 transformed societies worldwide, revealing the vulnerabilities and inequalities embedded in contemporary socio-economic structures. Nowhere was this more visible than in India, where a stringent nationwide lockdown, imposed with little notice, triggered one of the largest internal migrations since Partition. Millions of migrant workers, suddenly deprived of employment, shelter, and security, faced the daunting prospect of returning to their villages—often by foot and over vast distance. The scale of this humanitarian crisis, coupled with its representation in news media, evoked

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Widespread empathy as well as urgent questions around migration, marginalization, and state responsibility. In the wake of these events, literature has emerged as a crucial medium for bearing witness and archiving collective trauma. Puja Changoiwala's novel *Homebound* stands as a potent example, focusing on the journey of Meher and her family fleeing Mumbai for rural Rajasthan. Told through a series of letters from Meher to a journalist, the novel explores intimately the plight of India's "invisible" workforce, while interrogating the fundamental notions of home, identity, and survival. *Homebound* does not merely document a crisis; it reconstructs its emotional core through the eyes of a teenage girl, blending journalistic realism with literary sensitivity.

This paper examines how *Homebound* situates the migrant experience at the heart of the pandemic narrative, foregrounding the tensions between belonging and displacement, visibility and erasure, trauma and resilience. By situating the novel within the broader context of pandemic literature and drawing on qualitative content analysis, the research aims to demonstrate that Changoiwala's work is more than a fictional chronicle—it is a form of social testimony that shapes collective memory, fosters empathy, and provokes critical reflection on the treatment of society's most vulnerable members during times of crisis.

Objectives

- To critically analyze the representation of home and displacement in *Homebound*.
- To study how the novel articulates the transformation and crisis of migrant identity during the pandemic.
- To examine survival—physical, psychological, and ethical—as depicted in the narrative.
- To assess the broader social and literary significance of *Homebound* as a document of the COVID-19 migrant experience.

Family, Identity, and the Concept of Home in *Homebound*

Puja Changoiwala's *Homebound* examines the intricate relationships between family, identity, and the idea of home, particularly as they are tested and transformed during the COVID-19 lockdown in India. Set against the backdrop of Mumbai's Dharavi and the harrowing exodus of migrant workers, the novel highlights how the pandemic exposed and deepened existing social fault lines, making survival itself a question of resilience and adaptation.

At the heart of the story is Meher's family, whose bonds are both a source of consolation and a site of anxiety. The sudden, state-imposed lockdown stripped them of livelihood, forcing them to undertake an arduous 900km journey on foot to their

ancestral village. The home in Dharavi—long a place of both aspiration and deprivation—becomes redundant overnight, recalibrating the family's understanding of safety, belonging, and security. The loss of urban shelter and the necessity to move emphasize how home is not just a physical site, but deeply tied to the emotional and social infrastructure of family.

Identity in *Homebound* is profoundly shaped by crisis. Meher and her family, once "invisible" contributors to the city's growth, become hypervisible as migrants—ostracized, stigmatized, and reduced to statistics in public and media discourse. The lockdown unravels their urban identity, confronting them with both external prejudice and internal reckoning. Yet, through Meher's epistolary voice, the novel explores the agency of storytelling as a means of reclaiming dignity and individual identity amidst collective erasure.

The novel also interrogates the broader idea of home as both origin and aspiration. Amid displacement and hardship, home becomes an ideal—something to yearn for and return to, even as its stability is questioned. Changoiwala's portrayal reveals that in times of crisis, family, identity, and home are inextricably linked, each shaped by loss, resilience, and the persistent hope of belonging.

Loss of Livelihood and Sudden Unemployment in *Homebound*

In Puja Changoiwala's *Homebound*, the sudden loss of livelihood and widespread unemployment triggered by the COVID-19 lockdown is a central force that shapes the narrative and the fate of its characters. The Gopal Balhaari family, emblematic of millions of migrant workers in urban India, faces abrupt destitution when the nationwide lockdown shuts all economic activity in Mumbai's Dharavi. Meher's father, once a wage earner supporting his family in the bustling slum, finds himself without work overnight—a harsh reality that reverberated throughout India's informal sector.

This loss plunges the family into immediate insecurity, with the threat of hunger and eviction overshadowing their survival. The city—which once promised opportunity—becomes inhospitable, forcing them and countless others onto the roads, attempting treacherous journeys back to ancestral villages. The novel details how the collapse of informal employment, absence of savings, and lack of a social safety net rendered millions helpless, making daily wage laborers and the poor the primary victims of economic shutdown.

Homebound personalizes this tragedy, illuminating the grief, anxiety, and sense of betrayal experienced by those suddenly left without means to provide for their families. The work powerfully exposes the

vulnerability of urban migrants: their jobs, homes, and identities all fragile and contingent, collapsed by a single government decree. (Changoiwala 16)

Home: The Paradox of Safety, Displacement, and Longing

In *Homebound*, the concept of **home** operates as a complex and shifting locus of safety, belonging, and loss. Initially, the urban slum of Dharavi represents *home* for Meher and her family—a place of struggle yet aspiration, where despite poverty, the family seeks livelihood and community. However, the sudden COVID-19 lockdown exposes the fragility of this urban *home*; as work disappears and social stigma rises against migrant workers, Dharavi's crowded lanes become sites of precarity rather than refuge. This shifts the meaning of home from a physical shelter to an idealized point of origin and desired destination. (Changoiwala 16).

Changoiwala captures this tension poignantly through the depiction of the 900km journey back to their ancestral village in Rajasthan. The exodus is fraught with danger, hardship, and uncertainty, yet it symbolizes a return to roots, identity, and a place of potential safety—even if that safety is conditional and precarious. Migrants' inability to "stay home" during lockdown paradoxically critiques the governmental narrative commanding "stay home, stay safe," since for millions, actual home is neither a safe nor stationary place. Thus, home transforms from sanctuary to a horizon imbued with hope and loss, illustrating the spatial and emotional dislocations experienced by migrant workers¹. (Zomuansangi 70)

The novel also challenges simplistic binaries of rural and urban, showing how migrants belong to both yet are often rejected by each in times of crisis. This dynamic interrogates the socio-political constructions of home as a stable site and calls attention to the conditional, often contingent nature of belonging for marginalized communities during a pandemic.

Identity: Assertion, Erasure, and Reclamation

The theme of **identity** in *Homebound* revolves centrally around how migrant status shapes personal dignity, social recognition, and self-perception. Pre-pandemic, Meher and her family's urban identity is secured by their work and community ties in Dharavi. The lockdown disrupts this, rendering them "invisible" yet paradoxically hyper-visible as destitute migrants. The state and society's labeling of them as outsiders strips away prior markers of identity, replacing them with stigma and marginalization.

Changoiwala uses Meher's epistolary narrative as a vital tool for reclaiming agency. Writing letters to a journalist, Meher voices the injustices faced—harassment, police violence, hunger—but also her

resilience and determination not to be reduced to a statistic. This narrative mode empowers a migrant voice that is frequently muted in public discourse, symbolizing the struggle to assert individuality amid collective erasure.

Furthermore, the novel explores intersectional facets of identity: Meher's gender exposes her to specific vulnerabilities such as fear of assault and curtailed education, emphasizing how crisis deepens existing inequalities. The generational conflict between the young, aspiring Meher and a resigned parental generation underscores how pandemic conditions threaten not only survival but also dreams and self-definition.

Thus, *Homebound* compellingly portrays identity as fluid and contested, shaped by socio-economic structures yet asserted through personal narrative and community solidarity.

Psychological Trauma and Social Stigma in Homebound

The psychological toll of the COVID-19 pandemic and ensuing lockdown on India's migrant families is depicted with stark realism in Puja Changoiwala's *Homebound*. The novel illuminates how constant fear, anxiety, and humiliation—combined with pervasive social stigma—became an integral part of the migrant experience during this unprecedented crisis.

Migrant families in *Homebound* endure chronic anxiety, beginning with the abrupt loss of livelihood and shelter. Each day is marked by uncertainty about accessing food, safety, and even basic human dignity. Children and adults alike are haunted by fears of starvation, illness, and violence. The journey away from Mumbai is punctuated by exhaustion, the threat of police brutality, and harrowing accounts of fellow migrants succumbing to hardship. The erosion of hope and escalating despair leave deep psychological scars, resulting in trauma that manifests as restlessness, insomnia, and emotional numbness (Nadkarni 22)

Social stigma compounds these wounds. Migrants are frequently viewed as "virus carriers," as urban residents and authorities fear the spread of COVID-19 from crowded slums to the wider population. Throughout the novel, Meher and her family experience overt discrimination—from being denied food or transport to facing suspicion and verbal abuse at checkpoints and in rural villages. Such treatment not only undermines their sense of belonging but also deepens internalized shame and self-doubt.

Systemic marginalization—through exclusion from relief, lack of recognition, and media narratives that reduce their suffering to mere

numbers—further intensifies humiliation. The psychological trauma rooted in these experiences is not restricted to the duration of migration; it casts long shadows over the future, affecting relationships, educational aspirations, and the sense of self.

Homebound thus exposes the lasting effects of compounded trauma and stigma, offering a poignant testament to the resilience of those forced to navigate both visible and invisible burdens during the pandemic.

Survival: Physical, Emotional, and Ethical Dimensions

Survival in *Homebound* extends beyond mere physical endurance on the grueling walk home to encompass emotional resilience, ethical dilemmas, and communal solidarity. The family's 900km journey is marked by vivid descriptions of exhaustion, hunger, illness, and confrontation with hostile authorities, emphasizing the harrowing physical costs exacted by the lockdown's fallout.

However, Changoiwala importantly situates survival within a larger ethical and psychological frame: migrants endure traumatic loss—including deaths of companions along the route—and grapple with survivor's guilt, uncertainty, and the search for meaning amidst suffering. The novel highlights moments of tenderness and hope, underscoring the sustaining power of familial love and faith in return. At the same time, it does not romanticize survival; it acknowledges competition, fear, and fragmentation within migrant communities under stress.

Acts of solidarity—shared food, encouragement, acts of charity from villagers—emerge as crucial lifelines but also reveal the fragility of collective survival under scarcity. These dynamics illustrate the tension between isolation and community that defines survival in crisis.

In sum, survival in *Homebound* is a multifaceted process involving the navigation of physical hardship, psychological trauma, and ethical complexity. It interrogates how displaced subjects claim dignity and humanity when the structures that support them fail.

These three themes—Home, Identity, and Survival—interlock to provide a nuanced examination of the migrant experience in the COVID-19 pandemic as depicted in *Homebound*, offering insight into the broader human consequences of lockdown-induced displacement.

Conclusion

Puja Changoiwala's *Homebound* offers a powerful and intimate portrayal of the migrant worker crisis triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic in India. Through the intertwined themes of home, identity, and survival, the novel exposes the profound

vulnerabilities and resilience of marginalized communities thrust into unprecedented hardship. The narrative disrupts traditional notions of home as a fixed sanctuary, revealing it instead as a fragile, contested space shaped by displacement and socio-economic precarity.

Equally, *Homebound* foregrounds the erasure and reassertion of migrant identities, particularly through the compelling voice of Meher, whose epistolary storytelling reclaims agency and dignity amid widespread invisibility. The novel's depiction of survival extends beyond physical endurance to encompass emotional trauma, communal solidarity, and ethical complexity.

As a work of pandemic literature, *Homebound* serves not merely as a fictional account but as crucial social testimony, preserving the lived experiences of millions often ignored in official narratives. By humanizing statistical tragedies, it challenges readers to engage with questions of belonging, justice, and empathy in times of crisis. Ultimately, *Homebound* stands as an urgent call to recognize and address systemic inequalities, emphasizing the enduring spirit of those forced to navigate loss and hope simultaneously. The novel enriches both Indian and global pandemic literary canons by offering a nuanced, compassionate voice from the margins.

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