

## UNMOORED HOMES AND CONTESTED BELONGING: ORIENTATION AND HOMING DESIRE IN *TALKING WITH BOYS* AND *WHAT REMAINS AFTER A FIRE*

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### **Abstract**

*This article offers a comparative reading of Tayyba Kanwal's *Talking with Boys* (2026) and Kanza Javed's *What Remains After a Fire* (2025) through Sara Ahmed's concept of orientation and Avtar Brah's concept of homing desire. It argues that in both collections, home is not a secure destination or a stable site of comfort. Instead, home emerges as a fragile and contested mode of belonging shaped by patriarchy, migration, race, class, religion, grief, and everyday survival. The article focuses on selected stories from both books, especially "The Girl Who Ran," "A Legal Alien," and "Huma and the Birds" from Kanwal and "Rani," "My Bones Hold a Stillness," "Worry Doll," "Ruby," and "The Last Days of Bilquees Begum" from Javed. Ahmed's framework clarifies how bodies seek direction, familiarity, and livable space, while Brah's formulation of homing desire explains why home in these texts cannot be reduced to homeland, return, or origin. Read together, the two collections show that Pakistani women and Pakistani diasporic subjects do not simply lose home or recover it. Rather, they are forced to negotiate partial, provisional, and often painful forms of belonging across Pakistan, the United States, and the Gulf. By bringing these collections into one comparative frame, the article identifies a clear research gap in the study of contemporary Pakistani Anglophone short fiction and shows that these stories transform home from a sentimental ideal into a difficult social relation.*

**Keywords:** *Pakistani Anglophone fiction, diaspora, home, belonging, Sara Ahmed, Avtar Brah, women's writing*

### **Introduction**

The opening decades of the twenty-first century have witnessed a remarkable expansion in Pakistani Anglophone fiction. Novelists such as Mohsin Hamid, Kamila Shamsie, and Mohammed Hanif have brought global readerships to stories rooted in the political turbulences, diasporic dislocations, and gendered structures of Pakistani society, earning both critical recognition and commercial reach. Scholars including Claire Chambers (2011) and Cara Cilano (2013) have mapped this expanding field, identifying its sustained engagement with partition memory, Islamic identity, political violence, and the psychic costs of migration. Yet within this field, one form has received disproportionately little comparative scholarly attention: the short story collection. As Charles May (1994) argued, the short story is not simply a shorter novel but a formally and philosophically distinct mode, one whose preference for 'the fragment, the moment of crisis, the inconclusive, and the unresolved' (p. 12) makes it structurally different from longer narrative and demands different critical frameworks. The short story's resistance to resolution, its tolerance for the partial and the haunted, make it particularly well suited to lives lived in interruption: lives shaped by migration, displacement, domestic suppression, and the

systematic erasure of female experience from official family and community history. It is in precisely this sense that the short story collections of Tayyba Kanwal and Kanza Javed demand to be read, not merely as individual achievements, but as a significant moment in the development of Pakistani women's literary expression in English.

Tayyba Kanwal's *Talking with Boys* (2026), published by Black Lawrence Press, is the debut short story collection of a Pakistani American writer. Spanning Houston, Lahore, Dubai, and a Punjabi village outside Lahore, its fifteen stories trace the lives of Pakistani and Pakistani American characters navigating immigration, generational conflict, honour culture, class anxiety, and the daily erosions of patriarchal domestic life. Kanwal's prose is compressed and formally precise, her narrative intelligence working through what is withheld as much as through what is stated. Kanza Javed's *What Remains After a Fire* (2025) is the debut short story collection of a Pakistani writer whose earlier novel *Arzu* (2021) established her as a significant new voice in Pakistani fiction. Javed's eight stories range across rural Punjab, Lahore, Morgantown (West Virginia), and the Pakistani diaspora in America, and they are marked by a lyrical, atmospheric intensity in which the supernatural and the quotidian are woven together without apology. Both collections were written independently and from different biographical positions; both were published as debut short story collections in the contemporary moment; and both, as this article argues, are organized by an identical structural logic that has not yet been identified or named in the critical literature. That logic is the central subject of this study.

The existing scholarship on Pakistani women's fiction, however rich and growing, has not yet adequately addressed two related dimensions of the field. First, the short story collection as a unified literary form, distinct from the individual story, has not received sustained comparative critical treatment in the South Asian Anglophone context. Muneeza Shamsie's edited anthology *And the World Changed* (2008) remains the essential reference for Pakistani women's short fiction, but its critical apparatus treats individual stories rather than the architectures of whole collections, and it does not extend to the contemporary moment. Second, and more urgently, the somatic and spectral dimensions of both collection, the specific ways in which women's bodies function as living archives of suppressed experience, and the ways in which what has been suppressed returns as haunting, have not been theorized in the existing criticism.

Previous scholarship has largely applied postcolonial frameworks to Pakistani women's fiction (Mohanty, 1988, 2003; Hussain, 2005), which has been productive in illuminating the macro-structures of colonial and national power but less attentive to the intimate, domestic, and embodied textures of female experience that Kanwal and Javed are most concerned to document. Yasmin Hussain (2005) has noted that Pakistani diasporic women writers occupy a 'doubly marginal position' (p. 47) that conventional literary frameworks struggle to capture, but the specific theoretical vocabulary adequate to that marginality, one that begins with the body and its memories rather than with the nation and its histories, remains underdeveloped. This article addresses that gap directly. The absence of a framework adequate to the somatic and spectral logic of both collections is not merely a scholarly inconvenience; it means that the most significant formal and political dimensions of two of the most important debut collections in recent Pakistani Anglophone fiction have gone unexamined. The present study exists to correct that.

Javed dedicates *What Remains After a Fire* to "the unmoored, tethered to places that refuse to claim them" (Javed, 2025, p. 3). That dedication also provides a powerful entry into the

wider world shared by Javed's collection and Tayyba Kanwal's *Talking with Boys*. In both books, women, migrants, daughters, wives, workers, widows, and socially marginal subjects inhabit homes that are unstable, conditional, or emotionally hostile. Sometimes the problem is physical distance from home. At other times, the problem is that the domestic space itself is structured through surveillance, shame, dependency, and exclusion. For this reason, these collections are best read not simply as migrant fiction or women's fiction in a narrow sense. They are stories about the struggle to inhabit a world that does not easily return recognition, safety, or dignity.

This article argues that through Ahmed's concept of orientation and Brah's concept of homing desire, *Talking with Boys* and *What Remains After a Fire* reveal that home is not a secure destination but a fragile, contested, and often unattainable mode of belonging for Pakistani women across Pakistan and the diaspora. Ahmed's framework is especially useful because it shifts attention from static identity to the ways bodies take shape through lines of movement, familiar objects, repeated gestures, and spatial habits. Ahmed writes that orientation involves "feeling at home" and "knowing where one stands" (2006, p. 1). That formulation is central to the present discussion because the selected stories repeatedly show women and migrant subjects who do not know where they stand, even when they occupy houses, marriages, neighborhoods, or nations that claim to shelter them.

Brah's concept of homing desire deepens this analysis by preventing home from collapsing into homeland. For Brah, home is both lived locality and "a mythic place of desire," and homing desire "is not the same thing as a desire for a 'homeland'" (1996, pp. 192, 197). This distinction matters greatly for both collections. The characters are not simply longing to go back to one pure point of origin. They seek recognition, breath, privacy, stability, and moral space. In other words, they seek a livable condition of being at home, but the available social structures repeatedly fail to provide it.

The comparative study of these two collections is especially productive because they echo one another across geography, class, and tone. Kanwal's linked stories move through Houston, Lahore, and Dubai, while Javed's stories move between Lahore, working-class and middle-class Pakistan, and the United States. Yet despite these different settings, the books share a deep investment in women's restricted mobility, precarious migrant life, care work, class pressure, and the emotional afterlife of damaged families. In Kanwal's "The Girl Who Ran," Amal feels the wind "blast away the last of the home she was about to escape" (2026, p. 9). In Javed's "Worry Doll," an apartment complex advertises itself as "REDEFINING HOME" (2025, p. 114), though Zara's married immigrant life grows more disorienting with each passing day. These lines capture the central contradiction of both collections: home is constantly promised, named, desired, and defended, yet rarely secured.

The selected stories also demonstrate that belonging is socially regulated. In "A Legal Alien," the Pakistani American community realizes that mortgages, passports, and suburban respectability do not erase the vulnerability of racialized bodies under immigration surveillance. The narrator's blunt statement, "we were all brown" (Kanwal, 2026, p. 46), exposes the fragility of national belonging. In "My Bones Hold a Stillness," the murder of a Pakistani exchange student in the United States becomes not only an individual tragedy but a transnational event that will affect "petrified young women back home" (Javed, 2025, p. 103). In "Ruby," a Christian mother and daughter are confronted with a notice that reads, "Only Muslims can live in these quarters" (Javed, 2025, p. 141). In "Huma and the Birds," migration to Dubai is diagnosed as "a

gilded cage” in which wings are admired only in order to be clipped (Kanwal, 2026, p. 81). These scenes reveal that home is distributed through power, not sentiment.

The article proceeds in five stages. It first surveys scholarship on diaspora, home, mobility, and belonging in order to identify a precise research gap. It then explains Ahmed’s orientation and Brah’s homing desire as a combined interpretive framework. The analysis reads selected stories through four thematic clusters: domestic disorientation, conditional belonging abroad, suspended homemaking under migration, and improvised home after loss. In conclusion, the article argues that contemporary Pakistani Anglophone short fiction imagines home not as a final destination but as a difficult and often provisional social relation.

### Literature Review

Scholarship on diaspora has moved far beyond older models that emphasized dispersal from an original homeland and the collective desire to return. Safran (1991) helped define the classical diaspora model through memory, dispersal, and return, but later theorists complicated that structure by foregrounding hybridity, translation, circulation, and unsettled identity. Hall (1990) understands cultural identity not as stable essence but as an ongoing production. Clifford (1994) resists purity and root-based thinking, while Gilroy (1993) demonstrates that mobility itself can be constitutive of identity formation. Appadurai (1996), Chambers (1994), and Kaplan (1996) similarly direct attention to migrancy, travel, and deterritorialized forms of belonging. These interventions remain essential because they challenge the idea that diaspora can be understood only through loss and origin.

Within South Asian and postcolonial studies, the idea of home has become increasingly complex. George (1996) shows that home in postcolonial writing is deeply political and cannot be separated from gender, colonial history, and relocation. Mishra (2007) and Nasta (2002) both emphasize that diasporic literature stages home as memory, desire, and reconstruction rather than simple return. Malkki (1992) also warns against treating people as naturally rooted to territory. Such work helps dislodge romantic understandings of home, but much of it still centers novels, national identity, or broad cultural location rather than the everyday, intimate, and frequently gendered forms of unbelonging visible in short fiction.

A related body of scholarship on space and place offers another foundation for this article. Lefebvre (1991) argues that space is socially produced, not neutral. Massey (1994) rejects static models of place and instead treats place as relational and open. Cresswell (2006) further clarifies that mobility is never free from power: some bodies move with legitimacy and ease, while others move through suspicion, coercion, or restricted access. These insights are especially useful for reading stories in which crossing a border, entering a marriage, moving into a neighborhood, or working in someone else’s home are all spatial actions shaped by hierarchy.

The interdisciplinary study of home has also expanded significantly. Bachelard (1994) famously imagines the house as a site of intimacy and memory, but later studies insist that home cannot be idealized. Mallett (2004) demonstrates that home is one of the most emotionally dense yet conceptually unstable terms in the social sciences. Blunt and Dowling (2006) define home as both material and imaginative, while Duyvendak (2011) examines the politics of home and nostalgia in modern societies. Boccagni (2017) and Boccagni and Baldassar (2015) further show that home is lived through ordinary practices, emotions, routines, and absences. In this scholarship, home is not simply where one lives. It is a structure of feeling, practice, and power.

Feminist and intersectional scholarship is equally important to the present study. hooks (1991) recovers homeplace as a site of resistance but also reminds readers that home is shaped by

race and gender. Butler (2004) links recognizability and livability to social norms. Braidotti (2011) unsettles fixed belonging through nomadic thought, while Anthias (1998, 2008) develops a translocational model that explains how identity and positionality emerge across multiple locations. Fortier (2000), Probyn (1996), and Yuval-Davis (2006) show that belonging is affective, relational, and political rather than guaranteed. These perspectives are useful because the women in Kanwal and Javed do not merely inhabit homes; they are measured, disciplined, and sometimes erased within them.

Ahmed's work on orientation provides a particularly productive way to think about these questions because it focuses on how bodies inhabit or fail to inhabit space. Orientation, for Ahmed (2006), is not merely direction in a physical sense. It is the lived alignment between body, object, room, habit, and world. Her work helps explain how a person can occupy a house yet remain disoriented within it. Brah's account of diaspora and homing desire adds another crucial layer by showing that home is never only geographical. Rather, it is lived through memory, regulation, locality, and desire (Brah, 1996). Together, Ahmed and Brah allow one to read domestic and transnational spaces within the same conceptual field.

However, an important gap remains. Existing work on diaspora and home often privileges the novel over the short-story collection, treats South Asian women's texts within broad postcolonial or migration categories, or isolates Pakistan-based domestic narratives from diasporic narratives abroad. Scholarship on Pakistani Anglophone fiction has certainly discussed migration, gender, and identity, but it has not yet fully brought contemporary short-story collections by Pakistani women writers into a sustained comparative frame that reads domestic unbelonging in Pakistan together with racialized and gendered disorientation in the United States and the Gulf. Nor has it adequately mobilized Ahmed's orientation alongside Brah's homing desire to explain how home in such fiction functions less as a stable destination than as an uneven social relation.

This article addresses that gap by reading *Talking with Boys* and *What Remains After a Fire* together as a shared archive of fragile belonging. It argues that the two books should not be separated into national and diasporic compartments. Instead, they reveal a continuum in which the same structures of patriarchy, class hierarchy, care labor, religious exclusion, and racial precarity shape women's relationship to home across multiple locations. By doing so, the article contributes to the study of Pakistani Anglophone short fiction, women's writing, and diaspora studies in a way that is both textually specific and conceptually integrated.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This article employs Sara Ahmed's concept of orientation and Avtar Brah's concept of homing desire as a combined theoretical framework. Ahmed is useful because she asks how bodies come to face some objects, rooms, relationships, and futures rather than others. Orientation concerns lines of familiarity, repeated gestures, and the ways a body learns what is near, reachable, or habitable. Her formulation that orientation involves "feeling at home" and "knowing where one stands" (Ahmed, 2006, p. 1) is especially powerful for these collections because the selected characters repeatedly lose that sense of standing. They dwell in houses, marriages, and nations without fully inhabiting them as secure spaces.

Brah's concept of homing desire complements this approach by refusing any reduction of home to homeland. Brah (1996) argues that home is both a lived locality and "a mythic place of desire" (p. 192). Crucially, she adds that homing desire "is not the same thing as a desire for a 'homeland'" (p. 197). This distinction prevents a simplistic reading of Pakistani women's fiction

as nostalgic return literature. The women in these stories do not merely long for national origin. They seek a social arrangement in which they can live without humiliation, abandonment, coercion, or fear. Home, then, is less a place than a condition of recognizability and stability that remains difficult to secure.

Taken together, Ahmed and Brah make it possible to connect spaces that are often studied separately: the patriarchal family house in Pakistan, the immigrant suburb in the United States, the graduate apartment, the workers' quarters in Dubai, and the rented neighborhood shaped by religious exclusion. The framework rests on four propositions. First, home in these texts is directional rather than fixed; characters move toward what they imagine will be livable. Second, home is regulated through gender, class, race, religion, and legality. Third, domestic unbelonging within Pakistan and diasporic unbelonging abroad are structurally linked. Fourth, homing desire persists even when secure belonging is impossible, often appearing in small acts of survival, care, and improvisation.

Methodologically, the article uses close reading of a compact comparative corpus rather than attempting exhaustive coverage of both books. The analysis centers on "The Girl Who Ran," "A Legal Alien," and "Huma and the Birds" from Kanwal and "Rani," "My Bones Hold a Stillness," "Worry Doll," "Ruby," and "The Last Days of Bilquees Begum" from Javed. These stories were selected because they most clearly dramatize unstable home, constrained mobility, and the uneven distribution of belonging across Pakistan and the diaspora. The method is comparative but thematically organized so that each pairing sharpens, rather than dilutes, the central argument.

### Analysis

#### **Domestic Disorientation: "The Girl Who Ran" and "Rani"**

Kanwal's "The Girl Who Ran" and Javed's "Rani" both begin by exposing the family home as a site of regulation rather than refuge. In "The Girl Who Ran," Amal leaves her Houston home through a hurried marriage to Zee, imagining that movement itself will produce freedom. Yet the story's early description of the wind that seems to "blast away the last of the home she was about to escape" (Kanwal, 2026, p. 9) already makes clear that home is not a sentimental object of loss. It is something she must endure, flee, and survive. Ahmed's concept of orientation is especially helpful here because Amal is not only leaving a place. She is turning herself toward what she hopes will be a more inhabitable future.

The problem is that the new line Amal follows remains shaped by older structures of patriarchy. Her departure is framed through family commentary, supervision, and gendered assumptions about dependence. Dadi's question, "Can you carry all that yourself, girl?" (Kanwal, 2026, p. 21), sounds ordinary, but it also reveals that a young woman's movement is always being measured. Amal's body, luggage, love, and future are all legible only within a moral order controlled by elders and men. As the story unfolds, marriage appears less as liberation than as the reorganization of female dependence. She leaves one structure of authority only to discover another.

Brah's concept of homing desire clarifies why this movement matters. Amal is not motivated by an abstract longing for homeland or tradition. She seeks a livable arrangement, a place in which she will not be reduced to obedience, shame, and silence. But homing desire in the story remains frustrated because the available homes are already saturated by patriarchal expectations. The story therefore complicates any easy opposition between oppressive home and

liberating world outside. The outside is already prepared by the same ideological materials as the inside.

“Rani” stages a different but related drama from within Pakistan. Quratulain, who has moved back into the family house after divorce, is not geographically displaced, yet she is clearly unhomed inside her own kinship world. The family reads divorce as damage, disgrace, and failure. Her return is therefore not a restoration but a suspended existence in which she is present but morally unsettled. Ahmed’s framework is particularly valuable here because orientation does not require migration. One can inhabit a familiar house and still lose one’s bearings.

The story deepens this domestic disorientation through the grandmother’s fading memory and the reappearance of Nargis, the young maid once humiliated and expelled by the household. As old scenes return, the house becomes an archive of gendered violence. Nargis’s body, sexuality, and shame were managed through discipline, while Quratulain’s divorced body is now managed through pity and judgment. The home is therefore not a neutral domestic setting. It is a machine for sorting respectable and unrespectable femininity.

Read together, the two stories show that home may fail women before migration even begins. Houston and Lahore may look like separate worlds, but in both stories the family house works through surveillance, obedience, and the management of female movement. The search for home, then, cannot be reduced to travel between nations. It begins with the effort to find a livable position outside the moral architecture of patriarchy. Both Amal and Quratulain reveal how difficult that effort is when the available domestic spaces are already hostile.

#### **Conditional Belonging Abroad: “A Legal Alien” and “My Bones Hold a Stillness”**

If the first thematic cluster shows that domestic spaces can produce unbelonging, the second demonstrates that migration does not automatically repair that condition. In “A Legal Alien” and “My Bones Hold a Stillness,” America appears as a space of conditional welcome in which Pakistani presence remains vulnerable to racial suspicion and violence. Here Brah’s distinction between homeland and homing desire becomes especially important. The host nation may be imagined as a destination of security and mobility, but that desire is repeatedly interrupted by structures of race and state power.

Kanwal’s “A Legal Alien” is particularly sharp in its representation of precarious inclusion. The narrator’s community possesses many of the signs of settled immigrant success: homes, jobs, routine, and a practiced suburban performance of belonging. Yet the story punctures this stability with the stark admission that “we were all brown” (Kanwal, 2026, p. 46). In one brief phrase, the story undoes the fantasy that legality, class position, or civic respectability can erase racial legibility. The community responds by intensifying its visible Americanness, but that response only confirms how anxious and conditional its belonging is.

Ahmed’s theory helps explain this behavior because the community tries to reorient itself toward the nation through proper surfaces, proper papers, and proper conduct. They want to face America correctly so that America will finally face them back as legitimate. Yet the story shows that orientation is not simply chosen by the subject. It is also structured by who is allowed to take up space with ease. Brown bodies remain overexposed to suspicion, and the desire to belong becomes inseparable from the fear of being expelled from recognition.

Javed’s “My Bones Hold a Stillness” offers a more intimate but equally devastating account of this fragility. The story revolves around the killing of a Pakistani exchange student in an American school shooting. At the memorial, the imam asks people to pray so that the dead

girl may “find her home in heaven” (Javed, 2025, p. 102). The line is deeply painful because earthly home has already failed her. The host country cannot protect her, and the mourning around her death is shadowed by the knowledge that life must continue in a setting that remains structurally unsafe.

The narrator’s anger broadens the story’s political field. She recognizes that the event will not remain local. It will also affect “petrified young women back home” (Javed, 2025, p. 103) whose parents may now refuse to let them travel abroad for study. In this way, the story links an American act of violence to the narrowing of women’s futures in Pakistan. Home and abroad are not separate spheres; they shape one another through fear, memory, and restriction. The loss of one student changes the horizon of mobility for many others.

Together, these stories show that America functions in both collections not as secure destination but as unstable social terrain. Pakistanis may desire it, work within it, and invest in it, yet they remain unevenly recognized inside it. The result is not simply exile or assimilation. It is a mode of conditional belonging in which the subject repeatedly learns that home abroad can be interrupted at any moment by race, violence, and the state.

### **Suspended Homemaking Under Migration: “Huma and the Birds” and “Worry Doll”**

The third cluster examines women who are central to homemaking yet denied home as secure belonging. Kanwal’s “Huma and the Birds” and Javed’s “Worry Doll” portray two very different migrant figures: a domestic worker in Dubai and a dependent wife in the United States. Their class positions are not the same, yet both women occupy domestic spaces they cannot fully inhabit as their own. The stories therefore reveal that home under migration is often produced through women’s labor while simultaneously withheld from them.

In “Huma and the Birds,” migration begins with aspiration but quickly turns into discipline. Huma leaves poverty in search of possibility, only to be told that Dubai is “a gilded cage” because “nobody ever admires wings without also imagining how to clip them” (Kanwal, 2026, p. 81). This short statement offers one of the clearest diagnoses of fragile belonging in either book. Huma is physically mobile, yet her mobility has already been folded into a structure of service and control. She works within an affluent household, tends to its routines, and absorbs its rules, but she remains outside its protection.

Ahmed’s concept of orientation helps illuminate the way Huma’s body is trained into the architecture of someone else’s home. She wakes, cleans, serves, watches, remembers, and quietly reorients herself through recitations and inner memory. The foreign house becomes her daily world without ever becoming her own. Brah’s concept is equally important here because Huma’s desire is not reducible to nationalist return. She seeks a condition in which her body and labor are not clipped for the convenience of others. Home appears less as a place to go back to than as the absent possibility of dignity.

Javed’s “Worry Doll” turns to a different kind of migrant suspension. Zara arrives in Maryland as a dependent spouse and finds that marriage and immigration have shrunk her world rather than expanded it. The apartment complex slogan, “REDEFINING HOME” (Javed, 2025, p. 114), is deeply ironic because Zara experiences the apartment as a site of narrowing routine, emotional isolation, and stalled identity. Her frustration accumulates through small details: the jammed mailbox, the snow, the apartment stairs, the silence, and the long days in which she no longer recognizes herself.

The emotional center of the story comes when Zara admits, “I don’t know what I am here” (Javed, 2025, p. 127). This is an Ahmedian crisis of orientation in its purest form. Zara has

crossed the border, entered marriage, and settled into the home, yet she cannot place herself within any coherent line of becoming. Her worry doll becomes a metaphor for feminized containment, for feeling buried inside a role that absorbs fear but offers no language of release. Migration has not simply displaced her. It has transformed her into a subject whose daily life is organized around suspension.

Read together, “Huma and the Birds” and “Worry Doll” reveal that women often become the laboring center of domestic life without ever possessing home as secure recognition. One woman supports the household through wage labor; the other supports it through emotional and marital labor. Yet both are caught in spaces that depend on them while denying them freedom. This is why Ahmed and Brah are so effective together. The framework captures not just movement and longing, but the ordinary, repetitive, and gendered production of disorientation.

### **Improvised Home After Loss: “Ruby” and “The Last Days of Bilquees Begum”**

The final cluster turns to stories in which home is rebuilt after damage, though never in a fully secure form. Javed’s “Ruby” and “The Last Days of Bilquees Begum” both examine feminine endurance under conditions of widowhood, illness, precarity, and care. In both stories, home persists not as sanctuary but as something improvised through labor, tactical adjustment, and emotional survival.

“Ruby” is especially rich because it links widowhood to a paradoxical opening. The narrator remarks, “Without a husband, Ruby was a free woman” (Javed, 2025, p. 140). The sentence does not erase grief, but it reveals the degree to which marriage had functioned as containment. After the husband’s death, Ruby reinvents her appearance, her habits, and her way of moving through the world. Yet that freedom remains economically fragile. She and her daughter must relocate, negotiate employers, and survive in a city structured by class and religious exclusion.

The religious dimension becomes stark when the narrator reads the notice, “Only Muslims can live in these quarters” (Javed, 2025, p. 141). Ruby’s answer, “Then, we will be Muslims for the next few months” (p. 141), is not merely witty. It shows how home may have to be tactically performed in order to become temporarily accessible. Brah’s concept of homing desire is invaluable here because Ruby is not seeking authenticity or return. She is seeking a livable arrangement, however provisional. Home becomes a matter of strategy, not essence.

“The Last Days of Bilquees Begum” explores a darker form of improvised home through illness and care. The story opens by stating that Bilquees “had come home to die” (Javed, 2025, p. 67). That sentence immediately rejects any sentimental image of return. Home here is bound to bodily decline, memory, and unfinished moral tensions. Noorie, the young caretaker, enters the house in order to manage pain, food, waste, stories, and emotional need. Her work exposes a truth that both collections repeatedly affirm: home survives through feminized labor that is intimate, exhausting, and often poorly recognized.

Bilquees’s reflections on women’s survival make this point explicit. She suggests that even when life feels like a burning building, women continue to stand, carry, and endure. That insight resonates beyond the story itself. It also clarifies the logic of “Ruby,” “Worry Doll,” and “Huma and the Birds.” In all these stories, what remains after damage is not secure home but women’s ability to improvise continuity within damaged structures. The home may be unstable, yet women keep it functioning because there is rarely anyone else to do so.

These two stories therefore extend the article’s central claim. Home in contemporary Pakistani women’s short fiction is often made after fracture, not before it. It is pieced together

through care, passing, labor, and tactical adaptation. Homing desire does not disappear when secure belonging is impossible. It reappears in the modest but difficult work of making life livable under adverse conditions.

### Conclusion

The comparative reading of *Talking with Boys* and *What Remains After a Fire* yields four central findings. First, both collections dismantle the assumption that home is naturally protective. In the selected stories, the family house is often the first site of discipline, shame, and constrained mobility. Second, migration does not automatically resolve unbelonging. The United States and the Gulf appear as spaces of uneven recognition in which legality, marriage, labor, and aspiration remain haunted by exclusion. Third, women are repeatedly tasked with making and maintaining domestic life without being granted secure belonging within it. Fourth, even in damaged worlds, homing desire persists through small acts of improvisation, care, and tactical survival.

Ahmed's concept of orientation and Brah's concept of homing desire are especially effective because they allow domestic and diasporic unbelonging to be read within the same framework. Ahmed clarifies how bodies seek lines of familiarity, reach, and inhabitation. Brah clarifies that home cannot be reduced to nation or origin. The result is a model that can account for a divorced woman in Lahore, a dependent wife in Maryland, a domestic worker in Dubai, a racialized Pakistani community in Houston, and a widow negotiating religious exclusion in Pakistan without forcing these figures into separate theoretical boxes.

The article's broader contribution lies in identifying a shared archive of fragile belonging in contemporary Pakistani Anglophone short fiction by women. Kanwal and Javed do not treat home as a final destination, a sentimental memory, or a simple political category. They show instead that home is desired, regulated, improvised, and repeatedly withdrawn. In these collections, to seek home is to struggle for a condition of recognition that remains partial and contested. That insight makes both books vital to the study of Pakistani literature, diaspora studies, and feminist literary criticism.

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