

Imagining Home at a Snail's Pace in Shani Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night*

Anna Royal

In her novel *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996), Shani Mootoo creates characters that simultaneously inhabit both the centre and margins of her text. As part of the colonised nation of Lantanacalara, both Tyler and Mala are rendered homeless at the start of the novel, and not only do they find themselves swept to the side of their current residence at the Paradise Alms House, they are alienated by its inhabitants and rebuffed by its current cluster of employees. Similarly, despite the ultimate centrality of their narratives, at first glance, the personal voices of these characters seem difficult to locate within the larger context of the novel. Tyler has consciously written himself into the margins of the text, while Mala, unable to speak, is left completely voiceless, though, interestingly, not altogether silent. In fact, I would argue it is the story of Chandin Ramchandin that threatens to overtake this text, for just as the novel centres itself around his mudra house, so too does his narrative seem to centre itself within the novel. As colonised people, the characters in Mootoo's novel find themselves dispossessed and marginalised upon their native soil. When Chandin deliberately chooses to build himself a house in Lantanacalara, he becomes a coloniser in his own right on a microcosmic level, making his home and its surroundings the seat of oppression and tyranny. Mala, as a result, is rendered doubly homeless, and because the reality of home does not exist for her either culturally or personally, she must imagine and create it in alternative ways. When Chandin is killed and his narrative accordingly silenced, Mala slowly redefines what home means to her, first by moving its focus into the garden spaces and ultimately by relocating it within her own imagination and memory. Furthermore, because Mala no longer has the ability to tell her own story at the novel's end, she must rely on others such as Tyler to tell it for her. Thus, in the same way her home is decentralised, so too is her story, for it is the interweaving of her story, along with the stories of several other characters, that creates a narrative that not only lacks 'a centre' but ultimately defies it.

Set on the fictional Caribbean island of Lantanacalara, the novel opens with the character of Mala, who arrives at the Paradise Alms House as an ostensibly mad woman, unfit to stand trial for the alleged murder of her father, Chandin Ramchandin. In fact, Mala has become almost like the flora and fauna that surround her, imitating the parrots' calls (rather than vice versa) and closely associated with the cereus plant clipping, given to her soon after her admission to the alms house. Tyler, a cross-dressing and sexually ambiguous male nurse, shares with Mala a kind of sexual hybridity that draws him towards her.¹ Throughout the course of the novel, Tyler unravels Mala's story and within it, that of her sexually abusive father, Chandin. Tyler learns that Mala's mother had unwillingly left both she and her sister, Asha, for another woman, the same woman her own father had been in love with years earlier. In the wake of this abandonment, Mala and Asha become victims of Chandin's despotic and, I argue later, colonial rule over their home that included incest and isolation. Despite this trauma, however, Mala does

¹ The reader learns later that she is a victim of sexual incest, making her a sexual outsider and a victim of sexual patriarchy, much like Tyler.

not leave home, but rather becomes its protector and guardian, ultimately rebuilding her house in her own imagination.

In his phenomenological exploration, *The Poetics of Space*, it is the house that Gaston Bachelard is most interested in. In this work, Bachelard explores the house as a creator of memories and daydreams, and he is particularly interested in the imprint the home has on one's imagination. According to Bachelard, the oneiric house, one's first home, is a kind of first universe, asserting that 'all really inhabited space bears the essence of the notion of home'.² As a child, one experiences a sense of intimacy and memory in the home that precedes knowledge and conscious thought. For Bachelard, the house is the most intimate of spaces that allows us to dream and daydream, and, in turn, the house protects the daydreamer. In his concept of topoanalysis, which he defines as 'the systematic psychological study of the sites of our intimate lives',³ Bachelard asserts that these memories of home, and the multiplicity of spaces within it, set up 'the theatre of the past ..., [and] the stage setting maintains the characters in their dominant roles'.⁴ Our past experiences and our initial moments of the first house are not so much remembered but re-experienced every time we enter a new home. In the end, Bachelard suggests that we carry the blissful dwelling we experience as a child engraved within us. We re-enter the rooms of our first house in our imagination, by means of the poetic images of daydreaming.

Living under the rule of imperial authority, Tyler and Mala already occupy a marginalised social position that is only further compounded by their sexual deviancy. Due to 'the binary structures inherent in colonialism',⁵ both Tyler and Mala are othered by the ruling hegemony, signified by the Shivering Northern Wetlanders, and the result is that the 'notion of community that this novel produces is correspondingly not of universal incorporation, authentic belonging, or unambivalent identification'.⁶ Because of their cultural and physical origins, these characters are deemed strangers in their own land; however, not only are they marginalised by the dominant imperial powers, they are also slighted and estranged by their own society of fellow Lantanacamarans because of their anomalous sexual identity. Critic Grace Kyungwon Hong adds that, in his narrative, Tyler 'situates himself and Miss Ramchandin as two marginalized figures whose "queerness" refers to sexual practices that transgress cultural codes of heterosexuality and masculinity, placing them outside social limits of acceptability'.⁷ Doubly alienated at the start of the novel, Tyler and Mala do not seem to occupy a central space in the social order of Lantanacamara, nor does there seem to be any geographical place to put them. Consequently, both characters are relegated to the outskirts of their community and find

² Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* trans. by Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969) 5.

³ Bachelard 8.

⁴ Bachelard 8.

⁵ Coral Ann Howells, 'Changing the Boundaries of Identity: Shani Mootoo, *Cereus Blooms at Night*,' *Contemporary Canadian Women's Fiction: Refiguring Identities* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003) 79.

⁶ Grace Kyungwon Hong, "'A Shared Queerness': Colonialism, Transnationalism, and Sexuality in Shani Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night*,' *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism* 7.1 (2006) 76.

⁷ Hong 96.

themselves, at the novel's opening, at the Paradise Alms House, which is 'not en route to anywhere' and where 'nothing [lies] beyond'.⁸

In his essay, 'Writing in Colonial Space,' Dennis Lee speaks of the difficulties a post-colonial writer faces in terms of language and the ability to express himself in the most basic ways. He writes the following:

[I]f we live in a space that is radically in question for us, that makes our barest speaking a problem to itself And alienation in that space will undercut our writing, make it recoil upon itself, become a problem to itself.⁹

Although Lee is addressing his own experiences as a post-colonial writer who is living in a foreign nation, I would argue that Tyler, a native writer living under European imperial rule, faces similar challenges. He begins his narrative in relative obscurity and anonymity, marginalising his own personal story from the very start of the novel. Asking the reader to address him simply as 'Nurse Tyler' (3), he does not offer his last name and states that he is simply the narrator who existed on the 'periphery of events' (3). Tyler further underlines his subordination in the Lantanacamaran society by calling himself an 'outsider' (6), as he relates his unique situation of being the sole male nurse in a predominantly female field. Furthermore, even as a nurse, Tyler is relegated to doing trivial and menial jobs such as hosing down garbage pails and 'scrubbing the concrete paths around the residents' bungalows' (11). Finally, he alludes to his own aberrant sexual identity in choosing to wear a colourful and feminine neckerchief (15), causing him to be the subject of a certain amount of mocking by his fellow employees. Although Tyler declares that his only function is to relate Mala's story and not his own, one can also argue that in being denied his civil space as a colonial subject, he is also denied a verbal space, for as Lee notes, a 'subtle connection'¹⁰ links the two. Facing these linguistic challenges, Tyler struggles to find a voice, and one can argue that he is consequently unable to form a personal narrative of his own.

Much like Tyler, when Mala is first introduced into the novel, she is both literally and figuratively difficult to 'place'. Scandalous rumors circulate about her past, and the facts concerning her life are unclear and mysterious, as Judge Bissey complains that 'he was not about to have an old woman, a crazy old woman, tried to his court based on a lot of words and no hard fast proof of anything' (8). According to Dennis Lee, that 'the colonial writer does not have words of his own',¹¹ and in the same way, neither Mala nor those around her seem to have the right words to describe her life's story. With no authentic social identity to speak of, Mala becomes more like a curiosity and a grotesque, a misplaced oddity rather than a dignified human being, and even Tyler cannot resist the urge to touch her (11). Though Mala's marginalisation represents a kind of spectacle to the Lantanacamarans, she is nevertheless unwanted, and when the policemen first bring her to the Paradise Alms House, Sister does not welcome her arrival,

⁸ Shani Mootoo, *Cereus Blooms at Night* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1996) 131. Subsequent references to this work will be included in parentheses in the text.

⁹ Dennis Lee, 'Writing Colonial Space,' *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader* ed. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2006) 398.

¹⁰ Lee 398.

¹¹ Lee 399.

for there is ‘no room’ (9) for her in the inn (as it were). Complaining that ‘this is a place for poor people. This is not a place for psychiatrics’ (9), Sister tries to deny Mala a spot in the already humble and meager community of the alms house and further negates her a space in Lantanacamaran society. Homeless and destitute, however, Mala has no place else to go, and when ‘the men gently rest [her] motionless body on the floor of [Sister’s] office’ (10), Mala is further robbed of her humanity and treated, instead, like an inconvenient and inanimate object. When Tyler lifts Mala to her bedroom, he describes her as a ‘human bundle’ (13), and Mala herself soon becomes like the furniture, for not only was her body covered with ‘a sheet’ (13) upon her arrival, her arms and legs are strapped to her bed making her seem a part of that object (19). Even the cereus plant given to Mala soon after her arrival becomes like an object gathering little or no notice, and Tyler mentions that, in its dormant state at least, the plant ‘soon became as much a part of the room as her bedpan’ (13).

Living at an alms house in a colonised nation seems to reinforce both Mala and Tyler’s sense of socio-cultural and physical inferiority; however, Floyd-Thomas and Gillman note that Lantanacamara, at least, is an ‘alternative social imaginary’¹² and can therefore be seen as a liberating space for its colonised inhabitants. Vivian M. May explains further that because this fictionalised nation is ‘not tied down by real geographies, [it is] not limited to the spaces named by colonial rulers and mapped by colonial cartographers’.¹³ However, one can counter-argue that this imaginary place only serves to further obscure and complicate the identity of these characters. Even in this fictionalised landscape, the characters inhabit the margins, and, in a sense, they are doubly isolated and segregated, for the reality is that neither Tyler nor Mala is wanted in ‘Paradise’.

As a native of Lantanacamara, Chandin Ramchandin shares a marginal social status with Tyler and Mala; however, while they occupy the fringes of its society, Chandin attempts to appropriate its centre. Moreover, unlike Tyler and Mala, his life’s story is one that seems to be easily remembered¹⁴ and oft told, though ironically, Cigarette Smoking Nana recounts, ‘It’s like he [himself] disappeared off the face of the earth’ (27). Therefore, while Tyler and Mala appear voiceless at the novel’s outset, it seems as if Chandin’s right to be heard lives on longer than he does. Plucked from the fields of Paradise, Chandin is pulled from the periphery of society to its centre, and he is invited by Reverend Thoroughly “‘to go and live in he own house’” (30). However, though Chandin is asked to learn the values of the Shivering Northern Wetlanders and to appropriate their behaviours, Vivian May points out that ‘he is a symbol of appropriate assimilation and conversion for other Indians in the labor camps and simultaneously a symbol of the (heretofore) heathen-like, tropical non-Christian for his classmates’ (112). Therefore, despite his seemingly privileged upbringing, Chandin can escape neither himself nor his origins, and the result is that he is often relegated to the peripheral spaces throughout the Thoroughly home. Despite his own valorising of the coloniser’s way of life and his genuine attempts to embrace it,

¹² Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas and Laura Gillman. ‘Subverting Forced Identities, Violent Acts, and the Narrativity of Race: A Diasporic Analysis of Black Women’s Radical Subjectivity in Three Novel Acts,’ *Journal of Black Studies* 32.5 (2002) 528.

¹³ Vivian M. May, ‘Trauma in Paradise: Willful and Strategic Ignorance in *Cereus Blooms at Night*,’ *Hypatia* 21.3 (2006) 108.

¹⁴ After his religious and social salvation by the Thoroughlys, the neighbouring Indians told each other to ‘Remember that name’ (31).

Chandin 'was unsure of his place in this new household. He felt conspicuously lost' (33). Even when he does find 'a very definite place ... a straight-backed upholstered chair' (33), it seems to be a less important, less natural, and altogether less comfortable spot in the family's living room. As a place to plant himself down in the Thoroughly household, this chair soon becomes an 'antidote for [Chandin's] uprootedness' (33), however, rather than a symbol of fecundity and organic growth, the chair, composed of dead wood and elaborate fabric, offers Chandin nothing but sterility and ornamentation. Therefore, despite being raised by the reverend as his 'own child' (30), Chandin will never grow to become a part of the Thoroughly family and is left to function only as a kind of embellished showpiece of the reverend's successful ministry.

However, Chandin is like the 'chandelier that hung low' (33) in the centre of the Thoroughly's living room and continues to dream of appropriating hegemonic power by centralising himself within the Thoroughly family, and his sexual desire for Lavinia symbolises his own ruthless desire to unite himself with colonial and hegemonic power. This wish to spotlight himself within his adopted (and native) society also extends itself to Chandin's narrative, and I would argue that the text starts to focus itself on his tragic story of unrequited love for his 'sister' Lavinia. Unlike Tyler, who at least claims to guard himself from the temptation to digress and relate 'every scintillating detail' (113) of his romantic relationship with Otoh, Chandin, from the start, seems intent on playing the role of the hero within a romance novel. Not only does he pine away over Lavinia, he determines to win her over at all costs and vows that his love for her, like the firefly's flickering light, 'would never die' (40). I would argue further that his story drifts into a kind of overbearing and grandiloquent melodrama, as we read that Chandin 'brooded with an air of romantic sullenness [and] stroked his chin habitually and reveled in the tragic knowledge that his love-sickness could bleed so freely within him' (36). Just as he tries to appropriate colonial beliefs and practices, then, so too does Chandin try to appropriate the narrative away from its focus on Mala's life story. However, Chandin's attempts to connect himself to the imperial culture only conclude in underscoring his inescapable differences from the Shivering Northern Wetlanders. Not only does his dark skin contrast with his 'brilliant cricket whites' (42), it makes him the centre of attention for all the wrong reasons. When the Thoroughlys' return to Lantanacamara, they 'spotted him' (45) first, not because Chandin had successfully transformed into a fellow coloniser with imperial authority, but merely because he was 'one of the few brown-skinned people on shore not employed in bringing the ship in' (45). Although Chandin has internalised the values of his European colonisers, he soon realises that his external appearance functions as an insurmountable obstacle that will always relegate him to the margins of society.

Chandin does not get the girl in the end, and his own narrative of heroic romance and melodrama is truncated into a much darker story of a different kind of unrequited love. Although Chandin cannot align himself completely with the ruling classes, he still appropriates their sense of superiority over his own kind, and we read that '[h]e felt immense distaste for his background and the people in it' (34). Therefore, though Chandin gives up his dream of building a 'stone and mortar house' (53), he does not, in fact, give up the desire to build a house altogether. One can argue further that because he no longer fits into the native or ruling societies of Lantanacamara, Chandin, in effect, colonises a little piece of the island just for himself and creates what soon becomes an oppressive and tyrannical autocracy of his own making. As a result, Chandin is both coloniser and colonised, as he simultaneously occupies both the centre and the margins of his

society. He builds 'his own home' in a cheap 'underdeveloped section of Paradise called Hillside', yet he centres himself within it as the ruling authority. He is further described as the home's 'overseer', yet he also seems 'to take no interest in the house itself' (53), spending the majority of his time on the back porch, where he was 'invariably to be found lying on his side in the hammock, rocking on the back porch' (54). In the end, Chandin takes possession of land in order to underscore his own sense of authority, and like a proper coloniser, he does not consider the needs or desires of his home's other inhabitants.

The house is meant to offer a lasting sense of peace and repose according to Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space*. Bachelard calls the house 'the human being's first world' where '[l]ife begins well, it begins enclosed, protected'. As the place where one's first knowable experiences occur, the house should ideally function as a womb-like space that is protective and sheltering, and if one's first experiences of home are of positive 'well-being', then those first memories will cultivate an endless store of reassuring and heartwarming daydreams.¹⁵ Not only does the house supply the space for daydreaming, but it also helps create and nurture it. Bachelard notes further, 'We comfort ourselves by reliving memories of the protection. ... Memories of the outside world will never have the same tonality as those of home, and by recalling these memories, we add to our store of dreams'.¹⁶ Furthermore, Bachelard underlines this 'solidarity of memory and imagination'¹⁷ and goes on to say that the house one remembers is not, in fact, the real house of one's childhood but a picture filtered warmly through the imagination.

However, the house that Mala grows up in does not seem to offer the ideal that Bachelard depicts. Even before Sarah and Lavinia make their escape, the Ramchandin house functions more like a prison than a protective shelter, and we see that Mala and Asha (and everyone else, it seems) prefers to be outside its confining boundaries. Captives in their own home, 'Chandin's family never made ... trips' to the countryside like other families (54), for in order for Chandin to retain his imperial-like authority, his subjects must remain within the precincts of his home. Therefore, when Lavinia starts to call on them, Mala and Asha were 'unable to stand the waiting', using her visits as an excuse to escape the tyranny of home for the freedom of 'the beach or river' (56). It is also interesting to note that though Chandin had redecorated the house in anticipation of Lavinia's visit, even buying 'a modest chandelier' for the drawing room (54), the women immediately draw Lavinia away from the home's centre (which according to Bachelard ought to be a comforting place rather than a suffocating one) into the more marginal spaces such as the kitchen and the garden (56). When Sarah and Lavinia make their final escape, the Ramchandin house becomes even more oppressive for Mala and Asha. The women have taken many of the mementoes that make a house a home, 'gathering photographs off the walls' (66); Chandin burns the remaining photos and, in so doing, turns the house into a kind of empty shell rather than the locus of memories and imagination. Not only has the house become a prison for these children, however, it has also become a kind of panopticon, and we see that Chandin 'fence[s] off his house crudely with chicken wire' (70), and like a sentinel, occupies a central

15 Bachelard 7.

16 Bachelard 6.

17 Bachelard 6.

space within the home 'in a spot equidistant from the back door and the front door', never letting his children 'out of his sight' (70).

As a whole, the house, as Mala knows it, bears little or no resemblance to Bachelard's idyllic model, and consequently, Mala does not find comfort within its four walls. Furthermore, the incest and trauma that Mala experiences creates a home of nightmares rather than of dreams. Even within the house's interior, Mala's experience of home has centred on its darker nooks and crannies rather than its more comforting corners. Bachelard maps the house from top to bottom, underlining its 'centrality' in one's consciousness and its 'verticality'¹⁸ as a gateway for daydreaming. He further elaborates on the meaning behind significant parts of a home, focusing specifically on attics, cellars, and various stairwells. According to Bachelard, the attic is not only the site of rational thought, but it is also a place for dreaming.¹⁹ Mala's house, however, does not provide her with this privileged space²⁰ where she can 'dream of heights',²¹ for her house does not go up, but rather it goes down. The Ramchandin house has only two stories, the main floor and what is ostensibly the cellar. Although the 'sewing room' is located on what would be considered the ground floor, 'an enclosed stairway (54)' was the only access to this space, making it feel more concealed, constricted and subterranean. As the locus of one's deepest and darkest secrets, the cellar 'becomes buried madness, walled-in tragedy',²² and it is therefore significant that Mala's early childhood memories centre on this space. When Sarah and Lavinia's affair becomes more pronounced and defined, their trysts move down into the sewing room, and Mala, aware of their secret, becomes a guardian of this room, keeping a watch for Chandin's unexpected arrival. Furthermore, rather than using her imagination for cultivating heartwarming dreams in an attic that does not even exist, Mala instead indulges in her 'childhood fears'²³ in the basement sewing room and '*imagined* [the women] kissing [and] *imagined* Papa finding them kissing' (61; emphasis added).

As victim of incest and the consequent trauma associated with it, not only is the 'unforgettable intimacy'²⁴ of Mala's bedroom obviously destroyed, her memories of home are further eradicated. In her essay 'Traumatic Departures,' Cathy Caruth quotes Freud on the subject of trauma and memory:

People think the fact that the traumatic experience is constantly forcing itself upon the patient even in his sleep is a proof of the strength of that experience: the patient is, as one might say, fixated on his trauma ... I am not aware however, that patients suffering from

¹⁸ Bachelard 17.

¹⁹ Bachelard notes that 'in order to satisfy our daydreams, [a house has] to be differentiated in height' (25). Preferring the three-story house, he goes on to say that 'one floor more, and our dreams become blurred' (25).

²⁰ Mootoo notes that even the roof of Mala's house becomes like the ground, squeaking and sagging under the weight of 'several pepper plants [which] had sprouted in the dirt and rust of the roof' (124).

²¹ Bachelard 18.

²² Bachelard 20.

²³ Bachelard 19.

²⁴ Bachelard 24.

traumatic neurosis are much occupied in their waking lives with memories of their accident. Perhaps they are more concerned with *not* thinking of it.²⁵

As a victim of traumatic childhood events, Mala's memories of home are cluttered with dreams that force themselves upon her unconscious, leaving no room for the daydreaming or imagining so important to Bachelard's paradigm. By day she is occupied with forgetting her past, and by night she revisits it in terror. Mala cannot relive the home's 'memories of protection',²⁶ for the home itself has become the site of her own destruction. In the end, Mala uses the polluted memories of her past to remind herself of her own survival,²⁷ and we witness Mala repeating a yearly ritual of self-affliction in which she reminds herself that 'she had survived. She was alive' (144).

A question we must ask ourselves as the novel progresses is why does Mala remain in the home space if it has served as a place for traumatic early childhood experiences, and it has been forsaken by everyone else? One possible answer is that Mala shares Chandin's sense of ownership over the space; however, while Chandin had transformed the house and its surroundings into a colonial regime in miniature, Mala allows the land to grow into her own version of Paradise. Mala's sense of rootedness to this place is first illustrated when she collects bits of seed and shells in preparation for her escape with her mother and Lavinia. As a young child, Mala sees home as a concrete and tangible place, and she literally tries to carry a portion of it with her. Ironically, it is this 'bag with all the seeds and the shells and the cereus cuttings' that causes Mala's father to snatch her away and maroon her at home (67). Just as Mala cannot leave her little bag behind, neither can she bring herself to leave home. Because Mala has not yet learned to internalise her home into daydreams, the physical attachment to the home space trumps its symbolic significance.

Because Mala's home has become a site of violence and violation, she designates herself as its protector.²⁸ Her desire to protect the home space is first aroused by the story Lavinia tells her about snails in their shells, in which she declares, 'Protect a living snail and when it dies, it doesn't forget. ... It will come back after it has died looking for its old home ... , guarding and protecting you in return' (58). This respect for home makes such a strong impression on Mala that she continues to protect (and collect) snails throughout her life, believing 'that good fortune' will be visited upon her as their guardian (98). In fact, Mala herself is like a snail in its shell, attached to the inanimate shell of her home as a form of her own self-protection, for as a victim of incest she is, in a sense, 'half dead, half alive' (109). One can also argue that not only is Mala guarding the home space by watching over the snails, so too is she protecting memory. Unlike

²⁵ Cathy Caruth, 'Traumatic Departures: Survival and History in Freud,' *Trauma and Self* ed. Charles B. Strozier and Michael Flynn (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 1996) 31.

²⁶ Bachelard 6.

²⁷ Caruth writes, 'the survival of trauma is more than the fortunate passage past a violent event, a passage that is accidentally interrupted by reminders of it, but rather the endless *inherent necessity* of repetition, which ultimately leads to destruction' (33). She goes on to say, 'What one returns to, in the flashback, is not the incomprehensibility of one's near death, but the very incomprehensibility of one's own survival. Repetition, in other words, is not simply the attempt to grasp that one has almost died, but more fundamentally and enigmatically, the very attempt to *claim one's own survival*' (34).

²⁸ We have already witnessed this tendency in Mala when she tries to protect her mother and Lavinia's secret from her father.

Mala who has nothing worth remembering and everything to forget, ‘snails, like most things in nature, have long memories’ (58). In the end, we realise that the reason why Mala leaves her father’s dead and decaying body within the home space – or rather within his shell – is that she is merely transferring Lavinia’s advice (given to her when she was protecting snails as a young girl) to her new situation protecting her home: ‘Just wait to find some naturally emptied shells, honey’ (58).

Once Chandin is killed, Mala takes over as the house’s keeper, and we witness her slowly shift the centre of the house towards its margins. Living both inside and outside the house, Mala roots herself in the very real earthiness of the garden, yet she also searches for her own imaginary house in her memory. Bachelard calls this the ‘oneiric house, a house of dream-memory’,²⁹ explaining further that the house one inhabits in his early life becomes ingrained in his memory as a kind of ‘Motionless Childhood’.³⁰ It becomes a daydream one can visit again and again for comfort and pleasure. Bachelard writes further, ‘We live fixations, fixations of happiness. We comfort ourselves by reliving memories of protection’³¹ and goes on to say, ‘the house shelters [this] daydreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace’.³² In essence, Bachelard is saying that the home space becomes a part of us, existing internally in our memories and dreams rather than externally in objective and subjective description. As a ‘home for the homeless’,³³ the garden spaces are appropriated by Mala, as she extends the once confining perimeters of home. Turning the gardens into a refuge, Mala is often seen sitting there, rocking in her chair, remembering and daydreaming.

However, because Mala’s childhood home does not offer her the kind of solace and comfort that Bachelard writes about, Mala must utilise her imagination to search for and create a new home for herself. Bachelard writes that ‘imagination antedates memory’,³⁴ and we read that when Mala recalls the past, she ‘remembered a little and imagined a great deal’ (152). At this point in her narrative, it is also interesting to note that Mala begins to disassociate herself from her childhood self, Pohpoh, and they become two separate beings: Mala existing in the real world, while Pohpoh living in the softer and fuzzier world of memory and imagination. Because Pohpoh and Mala do not have a benign and happy home to revisit, a ‘Motionless Childhood’ that Bachelard speaks of – an oneiric house, a house of dream-memory – Pohpoh must go on her imagined night-time adventures in search for a comforting ‘lamp in the window’³⁵ and an idealised space to call home, for, in her own home, we learn that Mala had ‘never lit a lantern in her house’ following the death of her father (249). Although Mala’s first attempt to find a home is upset by a barking dog named Tail, she soon finds a home where she ‘imagined bedrooms with a happy family, a fairy tale family in which the father was a benevolent king. There would be a fairy queen for a mother, and enough little cherub siblings to fill a very large shoe or pumpkin carriage, their fat pink faces smiling even as they slept’ (168). As Mala indulges in

²⁹ Bachelard 15.

³⁰ Bachelard 5.

³¹ Bachelard 6.

³² Bachelard 6.

³³ Mark Francis and Randolph T. Hester, eds, *The Meaning of Gardens: Idea, Place, and Action* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1990) 6.

³⁴ Bachelard 120.

³⁵ Bachelard 34.

imagination and recreates memory, she discovers a home that is the epitome of a child's fantasy-land. However, even in this imagined memory, Mala sits perched like a gargoyle as the protector of the home space, and she further 'imagined herself ... thwarting monsters and demons who tried to lay a finger on the little baby in whose room she found herself' (168). Ultimately, the home space becomes successfully and indelibly engraved into Pohpoh's mind, and we read that 'during these night-time adventures she had learned that the layouts of houses were predictable' (170).

In the end, Mala protects the home space by not only remaining at the Ramchandin house after everyone has left, but also by imagining a new home in her memory. Furthermore, the home in Mala's memory is not only indelible but also untouchable, as it is unable to be accessed or violated by those around her. In the same way, Mala protects Pohpoh by housing her inside of herself, and her body and mind become a kind of protective shelter for Pohpoh, one that the little girl inside herself never had. When the authorities come to investigate Mala's house, she quickly hugs and protects Pohpoh, promising that 'Mala will take care of you, Pohpoh. No one will ever touch you again like that' (186).

'Snails build a little house which they carry about with them,' so 'they are always at home in whatever country they travel', Bachelard writes.³⁶ In the same way, inside Mala's memory, the home space becomes not only fortified but also decentralised and portable, not limited to one particular place and not tied down by geography. Furthermore, Mala successfully lives in the centre of the home space and also in its margins, for not only does she protect the house (and sleep amongst its gardens), the house also lives inside of her. No longer does Mala need to collect bits of dirt and seed to hold onto her home, for by relocating the home space in memory, she has both decentralised the concept of home and centred it within herself. Similarly, in Tyler watching over Mala, he too, is nurturing a protecting home. In the end, Tyler reveals that a series of letters from Asha addressed to a place – a house – ironically never makes it there. Instead, they are diverted and given to a person, Mala, and to the home that resides in her. One can argue further that Mala's story, as told through Tyler, Otoh, and the interweaving voices of Lantanacamara, becomes itself an open letter: a homeless narrative with no fixed address, but with a hope that its message will, like its characters, one day find its way.

Anna Royal received her MA from McGill University, where she specialised in postcolonial and gender theory in nineteenth-century Victorian literature. Other recent publications include 'Wax Dolls: Shaping a New Identity in Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret*' in *Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies*.

³⁶ Bachelard 122.