

## **The Journey to Belonging: The Immigrant Experience in *Tell Us We're Home***

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### **Abstract**

*Marina Budhos's book Tell Us We're Home highlights the difficulties faced by young immigrants Jaya, Lola, and Maria as they navigate life in Meadowbrook, a suburb where they feel a sense of not belonging and invisibility. The story delves into the struggles they face both within their families due to poverty and outside as immigrants, facing humiliations and misfortunes. This article examines the experiences of these three young women as they balance their household responsibilities and struggle with the concepts of home and belongingness in the context of migration. The narrative highlights the complex nature of the idea of home and belongingness in the context of migration. The article provides a nuanced look at the impact of migration on the individual and their sense of home and belongingness, highlighting the ongoing struggle for many immigrants to find a place where they truly belong.*

**Keywords:** Home, Belonging, Migration, Challenges, Young Adults

This article aims to examine the complexities that young immigrant families and their children face in their quest to establish a sense of belonging in their new environment. "Home" is not limited to a physical structure or geographic location, but rather encompasses an emotional space where an individual feels secure and a sense of belonging. As Glamatti notes, "Home is a concept, not a place; it is a state of mind where self-definition starts. . ." (254) and is deeply rooted in emotional connections and a sense of belonging. The experience of migration and resettlement is often accompanied by feelings of attachment to a specific place, leading to a complex interplay between places, relationships, and people. The article seeks to examine these challenges in the establishment of a sense of belonging for young immigrant families.

Marina Budhos is a celebrated author who has gained recognition for her writing on the experiences of young immigrants, undocumented teenagers, and girls of mixed race. Her work, *Tell Us We're Home* was selected as a 2017 Essex County YA pick and offers a vivid depiction of immigrant families working in the domestic labor sector through the eyes of three teenage immigrant girls, Jaya, Lola, and Maria.

Jaya Lal is the daughter of Mrs. Lal, who is employed as a housekeeper by Mrs. Harmon. Jaya is often called upon to assist her mother in household tasks during her free time. Lola Svetloski, on the other hand, faces challenges in her household due to her father's inability to work since the family's move to New Jersey and her mother's occupation as a housekeeper. This situation has resulted in Lola assuming domestic responsibilities while her mother is employed by the Vital family.

Maria Alvarez resides in a basement apartment with her mother and her maternal uncle's household. She migrated to the United States with the assistance of her uncle following the demise of her father. As a means of repayment, Maria is obligated to return home from her educational pursuits promptly in order to fulfill household tasks such as preparing meals, laundry, cleaning, and organizing her cousin's playthings.

According to Budhos, the primary protagonists Jaya, Lola, and Maria are referred to as "Three daughters of maids and nannies!" (53). The trio forms an unexpected friendship, with Jaya initially encountering Lola during one of the latter's arguments with Anthony. Upon becoming friends, they develop a strong bond and come to realize that they are part

of a similar community. Lola perceives that Jaya, much like herself, experiences unhappiness and exhaustion and can relate to Jaya's struggles in accepting her mother's employment with "families of kids she went to school with" (46).

The narrative in Marina Budhos's *Tell Us We're Home* delves into the challenges faced by immigrant children as they strive to establish a sense of belonging in their new environment. The characters Jaya and Maria in particular encounter feelings of estrangement and disassociation from their cultural heritage and the American society. Nevertheless, their friendship provides a source of solace and support, as they find comfort in each other's shared experiences and a reduction in feelings of outsidership. The title of the novel embodies the aspiration of these children to attain a true sense of home in their adopted surroundings.

This novel highlights the fear of crime that US natives associate with an increase in immigration. Jaya's mother is falsely accused of theft and loses her job, adding to the trauma faced by Jaya and her family. Jaya herself experiences the injustice of false accusation when she is accused of copying a jewelry design in an art class.

The widespread belief among US citizens is that an influx of immigrants leads to a rise in criminal activity. This notion is exemplified by the experiences of individuals like Renaldo, who is a cousin of Maria and a member of a discriminated and excluded immigrant community. Renaldo and his group face barriers in accessing playing fields and are consistently vulnerable to job loss, among other forms of discrimination.

The psychological toll of trauma and discrimination takes its toll on each character differently. Jaya struggles with the false accusation against her mother and must take on a part-time job to support herself. Lola longs for her father to be more proactive, even after her mother's diagnosis with diabetes, but instead he becomes more self-absorbed. Maria is struggling with depression and abuse from friends, and is even physically punished by Renaldo for not doing household chores. The complex and overwhelming experiences of discrimination and trauma take a significant toll on these immigrants, as Budhos highlights in her writing,

"This country was full of hard stuff and hard people. A place where maids could lose their jobs over stupid earrings. Where high school boys beat up Mexicans. Where you didn't have good friends. And the angles were no more than hollow plasters" (114).

Budhos masterfully illustrates the contrasting lifestyles of immigrants and native Americans through her characters. In her portrayal of Maria and Tash, she highlights the divide between the poor immigrant and the wealthy native. Maria lives with her uncle's family and yearns to be adopted by Tash's family, who live a privileged life "above the trees, above all" (135).

*Tell Us We're Home* highlights the struggles of immigrants in America through the lives of three young girls, Jaya, Maria, and Lola. The novel shows the dichotomy between immigrants and natives and how the three girls navigate through the challenges of discrimination and prejudice. Through their experiences, the girls learn to appreciate their identity, their mothers' hard work, and the importance of friendship. The novel is a powerful commentary on the struggles of immigrants and the importance of speaking up against discrimination.

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