

REFUGEE, MIGRATION, DIASPORA

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Lecture09

Lecture 09: 'Home and 'Uncanny'-II

Thank you. Good morning and welcome back to the lecture series on Refugee Migration and Diaspora. So today, we are going to discuss the concept of home along with the concept of the uncanny. When we talk of the uncanny in the context of migration and refugee experience, we are talking about the feeling of discomfort that arises when we are exposed to a new situation, an unprecedented or strange kind of setting or environment.



So, Ernst Jentsch was a German psychiatrist and essayist, and Jentsch had produced an influential work titled *On the Psychology of the Uncanny*, which came out in 1906. This work lays the foundational concepts for the understanding of the uncanny. Jentsch argues that the uncanny arises from uncertainty about what is real and what is imagined. So, the uncanny, which can also be transcribed into this term *unheimlich*, *unheimlich* or *unheimlich*.

So, *unheimlich* refers to the feelings of discomfort. As I was saying, this feeling of discomfort arises when familiar things suddenly become strange or they lead to an unsettling feeling. So, according to Jentsch, I quote, 'The uncanny emerges when the unconscious mind grapples with perceptions that defy the boundaries of reality,' unquote.

The feeling of uncanniness or unfamiliarity and the sense of eeriness or strangeness that arises out of it creates a cognitive dissonance where one's beliefs and perceptions actually clash.

They conflict with one another. This dissonance, this chaotic state can lead to a feeling of alienation and also a sense of confusion, especially when one is moved to or transposed to a new environment. So the sense of dissonance, the sense of chaotic state of mind can lead to feelings of alienation and confusion, especially in a new milieu. So this dissonance can lead to feelings of alienation and confusion, especially when a person is transposed to a new milieu. While Jentsch's work does not address the issues of migration or refugees directly, his concepts can be extended and applied in our understanding of the psychological experiences of the displaced population.

Refugees often face environments where familiar cultural symbols seem to have become alien and this alienation of familiar cultural symbols or familiar understandings, familiar codes, this defamiliarization of familiar codes and symbols heighten their feeling of uprootedness of dislocation. So, the experience of being in a diaspora often leads to cognitive dissonance. This is, I mean, also applied this whole idea of unheimlich, of uprootedness and thereby the mental dissonance and chaotic state can be applied to the refugee state as well as the state of being in a diaspora where one's identity feels fragmented beyond reconciliation. Refugees often feel torn between their heritage and the new cultural context that they are in. And this leads to an internal struggle, an internal conflict.

And the uncanny we are talking about embodies this struggle or conflict. So to quote Jentsch, without a doubt, this word unheimlich or uncanny implies appears to express that someone to whom something uncanny happens is not quite at home or at ease in the situation concerned, that the thing is or at least seems to be foreign to him. So, Jentsch associates this feeling of unheimlich or uncanny with a lack of orientation. When a person feels disoriented, a person

inadequate you know to the symbology that surrounds that encompasses him or her and he or she is inadequate, is unable to decode the surroundings in a way, to disentangle the meaning, to decipher the significance of one's immediate surrounding that leads to a sense of unfamiliarity, a sense of discomfort and that's precisely what unheimlich or uncanny is about. So the experience of seeing one's cultural practices as acknowledged and yet foreign can create a profound sense of the uncanny. where one's own cultural

practices, one's clothing, one's food habits, one's language are treated as foreign in a land. Even if those practices are acknowledged, they are not seen as illegal or criminal, but they are seen as foreign.

This kind of foreignness, this kind of alienation of certain practices can accentuate the sense of a group's sense of uncanny. It can accentuate, it can further emphasize a profound sense of the uncanny among a group. So, encountering the uncanny can lead to anxiety, depression as well as a struggle for identity. The feeling of not belonging can further be exacerbated.

It can further be worsened through a cognitive dissonance. So, Jentsch argument suggests thereby that that this dissonance can amplify the feelings of the uncanny as the individual wrestles with his or her identities and the fear of losing connection to both the past and the present. So, when a person feels disconnected, You know, that is something very immediate, very, you know, synonymous with the experience of uprootedness.

A person has been disconnected from his or her land of birth due to political unrest, natural disaster, and so forth. Furthermore, when the person is not truly absorbed in the host land—not fully accommodated or assimilated in the true sense into the host land or culture—this feeling of the uncanny, of wrestling with one's identity or other identities, comes to the surface. The sense, you know, the feeling of not belonging anywhere, neither here nor there. This leads to a certain sense of unfamiliarity, fear—one could say insecurity—or even, you know, a chaotic state, as we have been discussing. So, to quote Jentsch again: 'It is the ambiguity of the known and the unknown that evokes the uncanny in us.'

Thus, encountering familiar languages, cuisine, or customs in a foreign context can provoke both nostalgia and a sense of discomfort. Further, Jentsch states that the feeling of the uncanny is closely related to the feeling of the familiar, and it is most often triggered by a disturbance of the familiar. Right. So, when the familiar codes and symbology are shuffled—when they are tampered with— we cannot feel very settled.

We cannot feel very comfortable, and we cannot, you know, take for granted our immediate surroundings. We have to re-familiarize ourselves with a new set of meanings, a new set of symbology—unlearn and relearn, you know, new ways of being, new ways of survival. And this entire journey that an uprooted person traverses leads to a feeling of chaos, of the uncanny. So, in this sense, the uncanny emerges as a complex emotional

response, thereby highlighting how deeply intertwined our identities are with the environments we inhabit, right?

So, identities emerge not from nowhere. Identities emerge from a vacuum. They draw their lifeblood from the immediate environment. When that environment is taken away from a person in diaspora or a refugee, the identity—a chunk of the identity—also goes away or starts feeling imperiled. It starts

feeling jeopardized or tampered with. Right. So here, I'm quoting Jentsch yet again. The source of uncanny fear is not always external. It can also emerge from within the psyche, confronting us with our own uncertainties, unquote.

So, from the above quote by Jentsch, we see how internal fears can manifest as feelings of uncanniness when individuals are uprooted from their homes. They are not only faced with external challenges, such as navigating a new culture and language, but they also struggle with profound internal conflicts. So, the challenges, the difficulties are not only posed by the host society; they are not only coming from social, cultural, economic, or linguistic aspects. The struggle also has to do with the state of one's own self, the internal state of oneself.

So this can include grappling with feelings of loss, identity crisis, as well as the haunting memories from the past. So, in literature and artworks, the uncanny often serves as a device to create and represent tension, chaos, and ambiguity in a given situation. Authors and artists use familiar settings or characters in unfamiliar ways to elicit this sense of the uncanny.

The Uncanny: Insights from Ernst Jentsch

- “The source of uncanny fear is not always external; it can also emerge from within the psyche, confronting us with our own uncertainties” (Jentsch, 1906).
- Jentsch's insight highlights how internal fears can manifest as feelings of uncanniness. When individuals are uprooted from their homes, they are not only faced with external challenges, such as navigating a new culture and language, but also with profound internal conflicts.
- This can include grappling with feelings of loss, identity crises, and the haunting memories of their past.
- In literature and artworks, the uncanny often serves as a device to create and represent tension, chaos and ambiguity of a situation.
- Authors and artists use familiar settings or characters in unfamiliar ways to elicit the 'uncanny'.



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Now, based on this background, we are going to understand the novel *The House of the Spirits* by Isabel Allende. So, *The House of the Spirits* is a novel by Isabel Allende,

which was published in the year 1982. The story spans several decades and follows the Trueba family in Chile. So, the Trueba family is located in Chile, and the plotline of the novel intertwines personal narratives with the socio-political changes that were happening in the country. Author Isabel Allende is a renowned Chilean author who is best known for her novel *The House of the Spirits*.

This novel blends personal and political narratives through magical realism. So, this is one of the major traits we find in the genre of magical realism, where through personal stories, we are also, you know, throwing in glimpses of the contemporary political times, contemporary political happenings. The two are interwoven, and they speak to each other. They kind of construct each other, right?

The personal cannot be dissociated from the political, and the real cannot be dissociated from the magical. When the two blend, what results is magical realism, right? So, magical realism, which is actually a commentary on contemporary political, social, or some kind of—it could be a comment on race, it could be a comment on gender, it could be a comment on ethnic violence— So, it uses a magical lens to comment on some kind of bias, some kind of injustice that is happening in contemporary times.

It could be in the form of a political era, a political regime, or some kind of social unrest. It could be some gendered treatment or some racist or ethnic violence. So, magical realism uses the device of magic, the device of fantasy or defamiliarization, to comment on the real that can be questioned, the real that is problematic. So, we see here that Isabel Allende's experiences of exile and loss heavily influence her writing, which often features strong female characters and themes of social justice.

So, just like I was saying, magical realism uses the lens of magic. It deploys fantasy or defamiliarization. to talk about social issues. Here too, we see that Allende discusses social injustice or highlights themes of justice in society through her strong female characters. So, in the plotline of **The House of the Spirits**, we see that the Trueba family experiences generational conflicts, political upheaval, and personal tragedies, which culminate in Clara's death—the death of this character called Clara—and the eventual exile of their granddaughter Alba. So, before we proceed, let us quickly summarize the plotline of **The House of the Spirits**.

The story begins with the del Valle family, particularly the character named Clara, who possesses supernatural gifts. Clara's family history is steeped in magic, which contrasts with Esteban's materialistic ambitions, right? So, the two characters, Clara and Esteban,

marry. However, the relationship soon becomes strained. Esteban's harshness, materialistic aims, ambitions, and his possessiveness toward Clara clash with Clara's gentle nature, and we see that Esteban often neglects Clara's emotional needs.

Now, the character of Blanca Trueba. Blanca, who is the daughter of Esteban and Clara, falls in love with a man called Pedro Tercero. So, Pedro Tercero is the man whom Blanca loves. However, the love relationship between Blanca and Pedro is fraught with obstacles due to class differences. Esteban, obviously a man of position and materialistic aims, disapproves of Pedro, and it leads to tension and conflict.

As the story progresses, the political landscape shifts, reflecting real historical events. Pedro becomes involved in revolutionary activities, which further alienates him from Esteban and his family. And the story's plotline illustrates the class struggles in Chilean society. Next, we see Ferula, the character who is Esteban's sister. Her life is marked by unrequited love for him and a profound sense of isolation as a result.

Ferula dedicates herself to the family, particularly caring for her mother. However, in turn, she feels increasingly marginalized as Esteban prioritizes his own ambitions and later marries Clara. So, Ferula's emotional turmoil represents a haunting presence in Esteban's life. It comes back as a haunting presence in Esteban's life. Her bitterness and resentment toward him grow as she feels further eclipsed and overshadowed by Clara and forgotten by the family.

So, Ferula Trueba's character in *The House of the Spirits* is complex and deeply intertwined with themes such as rejection, betrayal, and familial loyalty. Now we see that Clara's death, In the story, Clara's death marks a turning point for the entire family. Esteban, now faced with the consequences of his own actions, begins to reflect deeply on his life. In the climax of the novel, the political situation escalates, leading to a violent coup.

So, when understanding the uncanny in *The House of the Spirits*, we must unpack the different themes and motifs. So, Freud's exploration of the familiar becoming strange, Jentsch's focus on cognitive dissonance, And Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection altogether illuminate the psychological complexities faced by the characters in this novel. So, Esteban's authoritarian nature creates a domestic environment that becomes suffocating. His home, which is meant to be a safe space, transforms into a site of conflict and trauma.

So, home is something that we have traditionally understood and, you know, identified with familiarity, with a sense of safety and security. It is understood as a haven. However, with the presence of an authoritarian, dictatorial character like Stephen, the home becomes an unfamiliar, uncanny space. It transforms into a site of conflict and trauma. This reflects the idea that the home carries the weight of history and is also the hub of so many generations' secrets.

This creates an uncanny atmosphere where the familiar becomes oppressive, right? So, the characters within this, you know, space of home in this plotline face abject experiences as they grapple, as they struggle with their traumas. Clara's clairvoyance or her prophetic quality and the haunting memories serve as constant reminders of their painful pasts. Now, coming to the description of Esteban's house, the fact that the house is on the corner encapsulates the uncanny through its dual nature as both a straightforward structure and a complex symbol of the Trueba family's legacy. It reflects the intricate interplay of past and present, the haunting of memories, as well as the emotional turmoil, the emotional unrest that defines these characters' lives.

Through its contradictions and the presence of spirits from the past, the house becomes a central motif that reinforces the novel's exploration of the uncanny and invites readers to confront the unsettling, disquieting truths that lie beneath the surface. So, here is an extended quotation, an excerpt from *The House of the Spirits*. I would read out the excerpt. He could hardly guess that the solemn, cubic, dense, pompous house, which sat like a hat amidst its green and geometric surroundings, would end up full of protuberances and incrustations. Of twisted staircases that led to empty spaces, of turrets, of small windows that could not be opened, doors hanging in midair, crooked hallways, and portholes that linked the living quarters so that people could communicate during the siesta—all of which were Clara's inspiration, unquote.

Right. So, we see, you know, many in-between existences in this house where there are niches, there are corners, there are, you know, staircases leading to empty spaces. There is a sense of liminality. There is a sense of, you know, some meanings that are hanging midway in the air, windows that cannot be opened, doors hanging in midair, and crooked hallways. So, there are certain

Understanding the 'uncanny' in *The House of the Spirits*

- The description of Esteban's house on the corner encapsulates the uncanny through its dual nature as both a straightforward structure and a complex symbol of the Trueba family's legacy.
- It reflects the intricate interplay of past and present, the haunting of memories, and the emotional turmoil that defines the characters' lives. Through its contradictions and the presence of spirits, the house becomes a central motif that reinforces the novel's exploration of the uncanny, inviting readers to confront the unsettling truths that lie beneath the surface.
- "He could hardly guess that the solemn, cubic, dense, pompous house, which sat like a hat amidst its green and geometric surroundings, would end up full of protuberances and incrustations, of twisted staircases that led to empty spaces, of turrets, or small windows and could not be opened, doors hanging in midair, crooked hallways, and portholes that linked the living quarters so that people could communicate during the siesta, all of which were Clara's inspiration."
(*The House of the Spirits*, 1898)



Secrets, certain nooks and corners throughout the house that become storehouses, that become repositories of secrets, of haunting images, haunting memories from the past that become home or other homes to spirits, right? So, the house starts as a grand structure, but then it becomes increasingly cluttered with impractical additions. And these additions reflect Esteban's desire for status, but at the same time, they also create a sense of chaos and confusion, mirroring the complexities of the family's history. Clara's inability to communicate with the spirits ensures that the house is filled with ghosts and memories. This supernatural presence in the house makes it feel alive with past traumas.

It is never rid of those past traumas, which leads to an atmosphere of constant unease and disquiet. So, the presence of the ghosts and spirits in the house reinforces the notion that both the house and the narrative are haunted by the past. The memories of previous generations, filled with trauma and unresolved issues, echo throughout the house, making it a living repository of family history. So, here in the House of the Spirits, characters like Alba and others experience displacement due to political upheaval and personal choices. This migration

Creates a sense of alienation where familiar places become strange all of a sudden. The uncanny emerges as characters navigate new environments, which challenge their sense of self, and this uncanniness is reflected at different junctures throughout the novel. So, migration triggers memories of home and family, evoking nostalgia but also a sense of discomfort. For instance, as characters move away from Chile, they confront the ghosts from their past, and these ghosts are both personal and historical. The uncanny is therefore manifested in how the past lingers,

affecting their relationships and decisions even in new settings. As the narrative unfolds, the effects of social injustice, political oppression, and personal betrayal become evident.

The characters are constantly grappling with their own pasts. They are haunted by memories and the supernatural, ultimately seeking redemption and understanding. The novel employs magical realism, as I have already said, and it incorporates elements of the supernatural in order to explore themes of power, memory, as well as the impact of trauma.

The spirits present in the novel represent repressed memories and unresolved traumas. The presence of Clara's prophetic qualities or clairvoyant abilities highlights how the past intrudes upon the present, making familiar settings and memories feel strange and unsettling. So, in *The House of the Spirits*, the uncanny manifests through the interplay of memory, trauma, and identity. Jentsch's theory of intellectual uncertainty emphasizes the anxiety which arises from the ambiguous, from the state of ambiguity. The shifting identities within the Trueba family create a sense of disorientation.

For example, Stephen's transformation from a hopeful young man to a brutal patriarch reflects a disjunction between his past ideals and his current reality. The plot underscores the tension between what is known and what is unknown, thereby creating a sense of unease. Esteban's struggle to comprehend Clara's psychic abilities and the spirit's influence illustrates the intellectual uncertainty that Jentsch discusses. So, the family's interactions with the supernatural challenge their perceptions of reality, thereby evoking a sense of anxiety and fear. Kristeva's concept of the abject, or abjection, relates to the confrontation with what is both familiar and repulsive.

So, the abject arises from the confrontation with what is at once familiar and repulsive. The political violence illustrated throughout the novel, particularly during the coup, exemplifies this sense of abjection. The characters' encounters with death and trauma reflect their struggles with abjection, particularly in how they confront their past. So, the uncanny manifests as Esteban Garcia, a figure who initially appears as a vague, dreamlike creature, haunting Alba's life. So, their encounters are marked by an unsettling familiarity and foreboding, which culminates in a violent confrontation.

In the novel, the blurring of dreams and reality further emphasizes the uncanny. The terror that Alba feels is rooted in a real person who embodies her grandfather's repressed sins. To quote at length: So, here is another excerpt from *The House of the Spirits*. Alba did not see Esteban Garcia again until he was standing next to her in the university parking lot, but she could never forget him.

She told no one of that repulsive kiss or of the dreams she had afterward, in which Garcia appeared as a green beast that tried to strangle her with his paws and asphyxiate her by shoving a slimy tentacle down her throat, unquote. The multiple meetings between Alba and Esteban Garcia evoke a sense of inevitability and suggest that the past cannot be escaped. The past has to be faced, however repulsive or grisly it is. So, the relationship between Alba and Esteban serves as a form of retribution for Trueba's actions and illustrates how unresolved issues from the past can continue to haunt the present. This cyclical nature of time in the novel does not treat time in a unilinear fashion; there is no particular beginning, middle, or end, you know.

There is a cyclic treatment of time and temporality in the novel, which emphasizes the uncanny, accentuating this uncanniness further where past traumas manifest in unexpected ways and create a perpetual state of anxiety and tension. So, the merging of dream and reality alongside the haunting presence from the past creates an unsettling atmosphere, revealing the profound effects of memory and trauma within the Trueba family. Their relationship highlights how the legacies of love and violence are inextricably linked, making the familiar feel as strange and threatening. So, Ferula, who is Esteban's sister, curses him after she is thrown out of the house by him upon being discovered in bed with Clara.

So, Ferula shouts to Esteban, saying, 'I set my curse on you, Esteban.' 'You will always be alone.' 'Your body and soul will shrivel up, and you will die like a dog.' Unquote. So, Esteban's physical deterioration as he becomes aware of his shrinking body reinforces the notion of the uncanny, where his own body becomes unfamiliar to him.

His decline, his degeneration, can be interpreted as a manifestation of his internalized guilt. And the repercussions of his oppressive actions are coming back, all coming back to him, manifesting on his body, making the familiar—his own body—feel foreign and disturbing. So, the interplay of magical realism allows the curse to operate on both a symbolic and literal level. Esteban's experiences highlight how past actions reverberate and resonate through time, reinforcing the uncanny feeling that past traumas are never truly buried. They keep coming back time and again.

Understanding the 'uncanny' in *The House of the Spirits*

- Ferula, Esteban's sister, curses him after she is thrown out of the house by him upon being discovered in bed with Clara.

- "I set my curse on you, Esteban!" Ferula shouted back. "You will always be alone! Your body and soul will shrivel up and you'll die like a dog!" (*The House of the Spirits*, 1898)

- Esteban's physical deterioration, as he becomes aware of his shrinking body, reinforces the notion of the uncanny. His decline can be interpreted as a manifestation of his internalized guilt and the repercussions of his oppressive actions, making the familiar (his body) feel foreign and disturbing.

- The interplay of magical realism allows the curse to operate on both a symbolic and literal level. Esteban's experiences highlight how past actions reverberate through time, reinforcing the uncanny feeling that past traumas are never truly buried.



They keep, you know, surfacing and resurfacing across generations. So, Julia Kristeva's idea of abject or abjection is also present in Ferula's intense emotions. Her curse stems from a deep sense of rejection and betrayal, reflecting the pain of familial ties gone wrong, gone awry. This emotional turmoil creates a repulsive yet fascinating dynamic between them. As Ferula's anguish comes back to haunt Esteban's life, it adds torque, it adds a propellant to the entire narrative.

So, Esteban neglects and dismisses her, prioritizing his own ambitions over their familial bond. Her deep affection for him remains unreciprocated, leaving her feeling isolated. So, the situation worsens when Esteban marries Clara, whom Ferula initially supports but later feels overshadowed by, intensifying her anguish and her sense of being replaced, rendered redundant, and completely invisibilized. So, Ferula's curse exemplifies Jentsch's concept of intellectual uncertainty. So, the ambiguity of whether the curse is merely a psychological manifestation of Ferula's anger or a literal force remains.

Creates a tension, and this tension further blurs the line between reality and supernatural influence. From here emerges—from here emanates—the sense of magic or magical realism, which is the meeting point of reality and supernatural influence. So, Allende's portrayal of the uncanny in *The House of the Spirits* reflects on the complexities of human experience, revealing how the uncanny operates at the intersection of memory, identity, and the haunting legacies of the past. This exploration deepens our understanding of how the study of the home and the uncanny is an important category in the phenomenological analysis of migration and displacement. To wrap up our discussion, we may draw an analogy between this novel and the current refugee crisis we see across the globe.



I mean, populations are being shuffled and reshuffled due to political unrest, economic crisis, natural disasters, as well as certain incentives such as better living conditions, jobs, and education. So, when we try to understand—in the light of migration, the refugee crisis, as well as the diasporic experience—when we try to understand nation and history as a closed entity or a very clear-cut formation, we might be inadequate in our interpretation of the past. So, a nation actually functions as a palimpsest. It has so many layers of memories, so many regimes that have ruled a nation, so many different leaders who have shaped and reshaped policies, and so many social groups that have come, settled, and gone.

So, it is very difficult to give one familiar, know-it-all kind of picture of a home or a nation, with new social groups coming with their own baggage of history that can hardly be buried or ignored. The nature of the past, the nature of human experience itself, becomes more complex and multifaceted. And so, as migration and diaspora scholars, we must take into consideration the human dimension as well of this entire process that has been happening, that has been affecting the histories of nations for decades, for centuries. So, with this, I would like to come to the end of our lecture today.

Let's discuss a new topic in our next lecture. Thank you.