

Narrative strategy in postcolonial 'return home' novels

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English 295
Independent Study: Migrant writers returning home in their fiction
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December 1, 2002

As long as humans have left their homes and returned, and as long as storytelling has existed, there have been ‘return home’ stories. The ancient Indian epic, the Ramayana, includes the return of Sita, who had been abducted by Ravan and taken away to Lanka. There is the Greek epic of Odysseus’ return from the war at Troy to his island home in Ithaca. In the New Testament of the Bible, Jesus relates the story of the prodigal son.

Migrants have left their homes for adventure or because intolerable conditions forced them out. Or they simply had no choice in the matter: they were kidnapped into slavery or conscription. With the advent of colonial empires crossing the oceans, the initial migration involved white adventurers and conquistadors. They were followed by settlers promised new lives in lands seized by the Europeans. Then came the first great movement in the opposite direction – the forced transportation of African slaves into the Americas. With the abolition of slavery, the British shipped desperate Indians as indentured labor to work in the Caribbean, Africa, Fiji and the Malayan peninsula. Chinese laborers were brought to North America to work on the railroads. A trickle of migration also began from the colonies to the colonial centers.

With the end of World War II, the migration from the colonies, now gaining political independence, to Europe, North America, and (slowly) Australia took on huge proportions. This wave included people from the middle and upper classes seeking higher education, but also ever growing numbers from other backgrounds seeking to make a new life. Political exiles and war refugees added to those numbers.

Emergence of the postcolonial migrant writer

From the aspiring intellectuals among the emigrants, a wave of writers emerged. Many had left their homelands to go to college in the metropolitan centers. They tended to be from

privileged backgrounds and were adept in the colonizers' languages. While they might have originally intended to return, most settled in their adopted countries. Elleke Boehmer has observed of this group:

The late twentieth century has witnessed demographic shifts on an unprecedented scale, impelled by many different forces: anti-imperialist conflict, the claims of rival nationalisms, economic hardship, state repression. As Neil Bissoondath has darkly reflected in his short stories, the populations of Western cities tend now to be formed out of the constant sedimentation of diverse movements of transcontinental drift (*Digging up the Mountains*, 1985). In post-independence literature, the result has been that the cosmopolitan rootlessness which developed in urban pockets at the time of early twentieth-century modernism has in a sense 'gone global'. Cultural expatriation is now widely regarded as intrinsic to the end-of-century postcolonial literary experience, impinging on writing and the making of literature worldwide....

For different reasons, ranging from professional choice to political exile, writers from a medley of once-colonized nations have participated in the late twentieth-century condition of migrancy.... In the 1990s the generic postcolonial writer is more likely to be a cultural traveler, or an 'extra-territorial', than a national. Ex-colonial by birth, 'Third World' in cultural interest, cosmopolitan in almost every other way, he or she works within the precincts of the Western metropolis while at the same time retaining thematic and/or political connections with a national background. (232-3)

Because of these connections, these writers have taken as their subject stories set in their homelands, though they have also created hybrid texts set on both sides of the imperial divide. They have brought in Third World influences into the colonizers' languages and literature. Often many of them have re-engaged with their homelands through 'return home' stories, either in memoir, short fiction, or novels. While this theme can be found as a subordinate element of some novels, such as Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses*, enough texts have been written to contend that there is a distinct genre of 'return home' stories by these postcolonial migrant writers.¹

'Return home' novels in this survey

I reviewed seven novels that qualify in this genre: Bharati Mukherjee's *The Tiger's Daughter*; Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day*; Caryl Phillips' *A State of Independence*; Meena

Alexander's *Nampally Road*; Adib Khan's *Seasonal Adjustments*; Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Admiring Silence*; and Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*. Most of these authors were born in South Asia (three in India, one each from Bangladesh and Sri Lanka). The other two are from Africa (Zanzibar) and the Caribbean (St. Kitts). All of them write in English and share a common history of originating in countries under British colonial rule. They now live in the U.S., Canada, England, and Australia.

These books were published in the last thirty years of the 20th century. An earlier generation of migrant writers, during the first half of the century, had written fiction marked by the hope invested in decolonization. The books from this more recent period reflect disappointment. They carry the marks of the promise of independence already degenerated into corruption, tyranny, widening of class inequalities, and ethnic violence.

Any conclusions reached in this survey will be suggestive because the books reviewed here fall within a narrow range. They do not adequately reflect the experience of African or Caribbean writers. Nor Asian writers outside the subcontinent. It also does not take into account postcolonial writers from other colonial and language traditions: French, Dutch, Belgian, Portuguese, or U.S.² The last thirty years also witnessed another body of emigrant literature, from people with origins in the territories that had shaken off the yoke of European colonialism much earlier, such as the Latin American countries or Haiti. Fascism in these countries had created legions of refugees in Europe and North America. With the coming to power of civilian governments, some exiles went back and 'return home' narratives have emerged from writers born in Chile, the Dominican Republic, Haiti, Uruguay, etc.³

Form and content in return narratives

While I would not universalize the point, there is often in fiction a close relationship between content and form. One critic, reviewing a collection of stories by Langston Hughes observed:

One can easily see the inseparability of form and content in the study of poetry where form controls and shapes the content just as the content determines the form. While there are some ideas which simply cannot be expressed in sonnet form, there are others which can be expressed in no other way. The close interrelationship between form and content of poetry has been widely discussed by the formalist critics, and it is only natural that the critical concepts which they have developed should be carried into the study of fiction. As the formalistic critical theories have been applied to works of fiction, there has been born a renewed awareness of technique and the importance which narrative point of view plays in shaping a work of fiction. (Nifong, 93)

Nifong only looked at narrative point of view and its organic relationship to the content of Hughes' stories. In considering form, I would broaden it to a more encompassing conception of narrative strategy, including: choice of protagonist and secondary characters, linearity or non-linearity in structure, setting, and voice or mode of storytelling. Certain archetypal stories almost organically give rise to a certain form for telling them. The journey story is one such type.

The *Journey* is the oldest, truest, most inescapable shape for a story. From nursery story to biblical narrative to contemporary novel, someone is always setting out from home.

The *Journey* doesn't need to be a literal voyage.... It can be physical or mental, deliberate or accidental, voluntary or forced, a quest or a flight. (Stern, 33)

The journey motif appears in the oral tradition of most cultures. It is integral to the emergence of the first European novels (found in both *Don Quixote* and *Robinson Crusoe*).⁴

Return stories are a specific form of journey narratives. One study of migration literature notes:

...finally, it must be noted that amongst all the literature of migration the highest proportion deals in some way with ideas of return, whether actualized or remaining imaginary. To return may be to go back but it may equally be to start again: to seek but also to lose. Return has both a temporal and a spatial dimension. For the individual

returning to their 'own' past and place it is rarely fully satisfying: circumstances change, borders in all senses are altered, and identities change too. (White, 14)

The return motif itself gives rise to a certain 'natural' pattern. Either due to a crisis in life (the prodigal son has squandered away his inheritance, mid-life crisis) or the end of a certain cycle of existence (rescue of Sita, the war's end for Odysseus, time for a vacation), the protagonist returns home. She or he comes back to close gaps and there is a personal quest to come to terms and maybe make peace with one's home community. While there might be an outer plot involving a quest of some kind, there is usually an inner plot, one of seeking an end, or at least a compromise with one's divided self, a self divided by having grown up in one place and shaped by later experiences in another.

Core Narrative Strategy associated with the return theme

The return novels surveyed here all contain a common theme: a personal quest of the returnee to answer the problem: 'where do I belong?' After examining these books, and also recalling other texts written around this theme, I would assert that the return theme is almost organically linked to a certain kind of narrative strategy (henceforth referred to as Core Narrative Strategy). The elements of this include:

- A narrative point of view, either in first person or a single, close third person, from a protagonist with autobiographical similarities to the author.
- An underlying linear structure with an arc from homecoming to departure, decision to depart, or opting to stay. It might also include the journey of the return itself, but in these days of rapid airplane travel, it is not essential to the form.
- A return is rooted in certain settings and characters because a return is always a return to a place: a house, neighborhood, city or nation (in the case of small countries).

- Place being both location and community, a return also comes back to a circle of characters from the returnee's past. This includes family, friends, and comrades.
- Mirroring the overarching journey motif, these narratives also repeatedly use journey as a subordinate motif. Walks, road trips, or train rides are used to depict the protagonist observing and re-negotiating the changes that have taken place since the original departure.
- A realist mode of writing.

Four of the novels in my survey display these essential features while three contain only elements and make departures from it.

The Core Narrative Strategy outlined here can be adequate to tell a personal story of confronting alienation, and the writers in this survey skillfully use it to depict several arcs of how their protagonists come to terms with their 'awaynes' in the context of the return to their homelands. In one instance, the protagonist comes to realize that she belongs elsewhere, that 'home' is no longer the place where she was born; that place has become too unrecognizable, too alien, too threatening. In two cases, the protagonist accepts the self as permanently divided and this is the price he will pay for the migration, he will always be an outsider. And in another instance, the returnee decides to attempt to stay and explore the challenge of belonging, despite disappointments, broken expectations, and unease about whether it will work out.

By sticking to this strategy, some of the writers are also able to make compelling and vivid observations about the political changes in their homelands. Most of these novels include strong critiques of the postcolonial outcome.

However, if a writer wants to do something more ambitious, to go beyond telling the tale of a self-focused journey, it requires him or her to break out of the pattern of the Core Narrative

Strategy. I would argue that the unique social position of migrant postcolonial writers asks more from them than to merely tell a self-focused story. Boehmer makes this observation about the place of such writers in the contemporary world:

Here it is important to remember the apparently self-evident, but none the less significant fact that migrant literatures represent a geographic, cultural, and political retreat by writers from the new but ailing nations of the postcolonial world back to the old metropolis. The literatures are a product of that retreat; they are marked by its disillusionment....

But the more practical response by many writers to what Fanon called ‘the farce of national independence’ has been to seek refuge—if not to be forced to seek refuge—in less repressive and richer places in the world. In making this move, and in then securing a positive reception, writers have been much advantaged by the class, political, and educational connections with Europe or America which in many cases they enjoyed. They have developed what was anyway a cosmopolitan tendency, often picked up as part of an elite upbringing in their home countries. This fact may not appear important to their writing as such. But it is fundamental in explaining their reception and their status as privileged migrants in the West. Because of their connections or their upbringing, they have tended sooner or later to win acceptance by metropolitan elites. Essentially, they have been able, by migrating, to secure for themselves a different, more comfortable location in the wider neo-colonial world. (237-8, emphasis added)

These writers living in the North have a privileged relationship with their homelands. They tend to live more prosperous than most writers do at home, they have wider freedom to write (some of them have been forced out of their home countries), and in some cases they might even make a lot of money from their books. In contrast, the lands they return to are lands of heat and pollution, intermittent electricity, rigid class structures, and limits on expression. They are often lands of ‘blocked toilets,’ to borrow an oft-used phrase in Gurnah’s novel *Admiring Silence*.

The problem of privilege cuts in two directions. What role does such writing play in the North? And today, at a time when increased global contacts have made possible distribution of such books to readers in both North and South, what meaning can such literature have for Third World readerships?

Until not so long ago, it was mostly imperial writers who represented the Third World in the minds and imagination of readers in the developed countries. Some writers living in the Third World do write in European languages and some others who write in other languages have had their writings translated, but these writers mostly do not get large readerships abroad and often many of their ideas are ‘lost in translation.’ Today, at the dawn of the 21st century, the postcolonial migrant writers have been elevated as a growing literary intermediary between Northern readers and Third World realities. This really is a one-way street. A one-way street that brings images and stories manufactured from the ‘raw materials’ of the South to the entertainment sensibilities of a segment of Northern readers. Yes, there might be a sidewalk-sized lane going the other direction where the postcolonial migrant writers’ works might occasionally reach an elite few, but the main highway transporting images from the developed countries to the Third World is firmly monopolized by Hollywood and the giant entertainment cartels. In their transport containers, postcolonial writers’ books are still absent.

Indeed the postcolonial ‘return home’ novel has a problematic burden. It could be seen as a descendent of the colonial-era quest novel to the interiors of the colonies. The history of colonization is replete with such narratives. Such stories helped shape the environment in Europe in which colonization thrived and fired the imagination of countless men (and some women) who answered the call of Empire.

The position of the postcolonial writer thus calls forth the responsibility of responding to the historical and present-day burdens of privilege. Boehmer ponders the relevancy of such writers to the Third World:

...in certain lights it may seem that writers’ connections with their Third World background have become chiefly metaphorical. They can appear to concern themselves with scenes of national confusion and cultural *brouhaha* primarily to furnish images for their art. Which also means, once again, that they thus participate in the time-worn

processes through which those in the West scrutinize the Other to better understand themselves....

Of course, to borrow a term used positively by Rushdie, this historical 'weightlessness' is probably one of the main factors explaining migrant popularity in the West. It may be that Western readers find that they are entertained yet at the same time morally absolved by being made to confront, for instance, Okri's surrealist scenes of neo-colonial devastation. But it remains an open question whether this kind of writing holds much meaning for the people—even the members of resident elites—who inhabit the scenes of Third World confusion. (239)

Balanced between two worlds on either side of the imperial divide, the postcolonial writer faces the challenge of making his or her work have meaning for readers in both worlds, especially because closer global ties have made possible for such writers to have their writings reach readers on both sides. Creating such meaning, I suggest, involves confronting their privileged position. This is of course not an easy problem to solve. As long as the migrant writer lives in the North, remains the product of a colonized upbringing, and as long as the division of the world between Northern wealth and power and Third World servitude continues, what is the migrant writer to do?

Can choices made in narrative strategy help? This is the question I wish to explore using the example of 'return home' novels. I suggest that as long as writers do not break out of the personal quest strategy outlined above, they can only deal with the issue of privilege in limited ways. However, more radical departures from the strategy offer some avenues for confronting the burden and responsibility of privilege.

Novels that stick close to the personal quest strategy

Bharati Mukherjee's *The Tiger's Daughter*

Like the author at the time this book was written, the protagonist is of similar age, social background and personal history. The novel is written from a limited third person point of view. In all but a few places, that point of view belongs to Tara Banerjee, a young Bengali Brahmin

woman, a capitalist's daughter, who returns to Calcutta after some years away in the U.S. She had been sent there to study, and she had married a white American man. The novel traces the arc beginning from her arrival in Bombay and a train ride to Calcutta to a moment where she sits in a locked car amidst a violent street demonstration, yearning for departure.

During her visit, Tara reunites with her parents and friends, but the book is mostly about return to the place of her girlhood, to Calcutta. It is a radically different city than the one she had left. To her eyes and those of her upper-class social circles, the city is on the verge of revolution. Factory owners feel under siege and there are daily mobilizations of workers and youth on the streets. Tara embraces the fears and anxieties of her class, even as she recognizes a distance from them, a distance, the book suggests, that comes from values and outlooks acquired through living in the U.S. Tara arrived already feeling a certain distance from Calcutta and India. The novel traces an arc of her plunging alienation.

Her confrontation with the changed face of Calcutta takes place through repeated journeys: some in the company of friends and family and others in the company of new people she encounters.

By going outside the circle of characters from her past, Mukherjee strays from the Core Narrative Strategy. There is Joyonto Roy Chowdhury, an aged aristocrat who takes as his mission to save Tara from the narrowness of her friends by taking her to certain parts of Calcutta she would not otherwise see, such as the community of refugees who are squatting on his estate on the outskirts of the city. But more significant is Tuntunwala, a capitalist magnate Tara first encountered on the train ride from Bombay. He becomes the political candidate preferred by the city's upper classes to save themselves from the angry poor. Despite some unease, Tara finds herself drawn to him, suggesting that her class loyalties remain steadfast. But Tuntunwala has

other intentions and in the end, a journey Tara takes with him ends in him raping her, an act that seals her final alienation from India.

Mukherjee also brings in two characters from the U.S. into her return visit. One is a black exchange student who initially is housed in one of her friends' houses, and the other is a white woman who Tara and her entourage run into during a trip to Darjeeling. There is already an American character in the novel who is part of Tara's life; that is David, her husband, present off-stage, mostly through her memories or their correspondence. These other Americans seem to play a role of allowing the narrator to comment on American society. But Mukherjee has chosen to represent the visitors as stereotypes. Washington McDowell, the exchange student, represents the 'other America' that recognizes its solidarity with the masses on Calcutta's streets, while Antonia Whitehead (!) carries a version of 1960s-style 'white people's burden' with her ambition 'to rouse [India] to help itself' (198).

Mukherjee has made an interesting choice by going beyond the traditional characters representing 'home.' It enables her protagonist to go near the vicinity of the 'other Calcutta,' to bring aspects of U.S. society in a living way into the narrative (without having to break the linearity of the journey structure). But the narrative never emerges beyond the privileged upper class society to which Tara belongs; the other Calcutta never gets to be present as character, it is simply the mob. As for the presence of the Americans, they are too caricatured to offer any deep insight into the society which Tara has chosen as her new home. They do allow us to see that Tara comprehends Americans in a way that her circles in Calcutta do not, still stuck as they are by awe of American capitalism and the icons of Western modernity.

This limited break from the typical narrative strategy is not used to take the novel beyond the story of one person's quest. Indeed the break even reinforces this aspect. It is the despicable Tuntunwala, an outsider, who is the agency of Tara's final alienation.

The Tiger's Daughter appears to be a novel reflecting Mukherjee's personal choice. She has become a major spokesperson for an assimilationist perspective among migrant writers, with repeated polemics against hyphenated identities. I read the novel as a working out, in fictional form, of the author's recognition that she no longer belongs in Calcutta. She belongs in North America. The final words of the novel are well chosen to reflect that:

And Tara, still locked in a car across the street from the Catelli-Continental, wondered whether she would ever get out of Calcutta, and if she didn't, whether David would ever know that she loved him fiercely. (247-8)

Caryl Phillips' *A State of Independence*

This novel has a protagonist who is not patterned after the author. Otherwise it sticks tightly to the Core Narrative Strategy. Phillips was a child when his parents emigrated to England. He wrote this novel in his twenties. The novel is told from the third-person point of view of a much older man.

Bertram Francis returns to his island home just as it is about to proclaim independence from Britain. He had left twenty years earlier after winning a scholarship to go to college. But he had dropped out of college and dissolved his connections to his mother, brother, lover and friends. When he returns, he finds that his brother is dead and his mother does not want him. She has contempt for him having squandered away his life and she scorns his half-baked ideas about staying and starting some kind of business. He hopes that his boyhood friend Clayton, who is now a minister in the government, will help him. But Clayton also turns him away. Only Patsy, his ex-lover, welcomes him back and it is the promise of her love that tips the balance and

suggests that Bertram will stay. He will try to win back his mother's love. The book ends on a mixed note:

He tried hard to imagine how he might cope, were he to make peace with his own mediocrity and settle back on the island. And then he glanced upward. He saw a man who, at this time of the morning and considering what was happening in Baytown, appeared unreal. The man was threading wires from telegraph pole to telegraph pole, as though trying to stitch together the island's villages with one huge loop. Then Bertram remembered. That evening the people would receive their first cable television pictures, live and direct from the United States. Bertram waved courteously to the man and turned away. Then he spat. He ground the spittle into the Tarmac with the tip of his shoe. And then he walked on and wondered if later this same day he should ask Mrs. Sutton how he might help his mother. (157-8)

These concluding observations and thoughts happen during Bertram's walk back to the village from the independence day celebrations in the capital. The novel contains repeated descriptions of Bertram's journeys: walks, bus trips, wanderings around the village and the capital. As this final paragraph indicates, the walks are used to observe and comment on the changes on the island. One point that is driven home through observation, dialogue and commentary is that independence from Britain means exchanging the British tutelage for the American umbrella. By including that point in the finale of the novel, Phillips has used the personal story of Bertram's return to comment on the dubious independence of Third World countries like his island home. And it seems that to bring this theme to the fore, the author does not dwell on the immigrant's life in England, other than a few well-chosen metaphors and memories that show how he was seduced by 'English gluttony' and how his life went nowhere. That life was so thin that it was not even worth presenting in detail.

Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Admiring Silence*

This novel is written from a first person point of view. The unnamed narrator is a man close in age and personal history as Gurnah himself. Both in their early 40s when the novel is

published, they had left Zanzibar (or its unnamed fictional equivalent) in their late teens and lived in England ever since.

The novel begins with the mess the narrator has made of his life in England. He has a heart condition, his relationship with his white partner Emma is in crisis, and he is estranged from their teenage daughter Amelia. A letter arrives from home. There is a political opening on the island after the old dictatorship had given way, and he can return home for a visit.

He returns and confronts a society ruled by a government that still maintains a heavy-handed grip while not being able to provide basic services. His family welcomes him back, but not having been informed that he has a family in England, they arrange a marriage for him. The government also makes an offer to him to return and work on a foreign-funded translation project. Though seduced by the prospect of a local wife where there would not be need for 'translation,' he rejects the marriage offer and tells his family about Emma and Amelia. He also turns down the government because he is contemptuous of their inability to unblock the toilets. Weighed down by the conditions of life and the ostracism of his family, he yearns for England and Emma. The only positive experience during his visit home is that he manages to get his mother and stepfather to tell him the story of his biological father who had abandoned his mother and him when he was an infant.

When he returns to England, his fantasies are destroyed. Emma leaves him, soon followed by his daughter. At the close of the book, he realizes that he is responsible for the mess he finds himself in. He had deceived everyone around him, by keeping the truth veiled by make-believe stories.

The book ends on two notes. In one, he receives a reply from his family on the island to the letter he had sent them of his breakup with Emma. He is surprised to find that instead of

gloating they sent their sympathy. They also take the occasion to ask him to return home to their fold.

But it wasn't home any more, and I had no way of retrieving that seductive idea except through more lies. Boom boom. (217)

And he wonders if he should phone Ira and 'ask her if she would like to see a movie.' Ira was an Indian woman he had met on the plane back home and her story had suggested that she had walked a similar road: growing up in Africa, coming to England as an adolescent, facing racism, marrying an Englishman, and the marriage gone to bust. He seems to desire a connection where translation would not be needed, a relationship where the two, of similar histories, could be themselves, without evasions and deceptions. But, he ends with, "I am so afraid of disturbing this fragile silence" (217). It would seem that because of the costs of migration, and the choices he made, he remains imprisoned and trapped. His own self is the ultimate 'blocked toilet.'

Gurnah sticks closely to the Core Narrative Strategy. His only departures are that although his novel is written in a realist style, he presents us with an unreliable narrator and gives him a deeply ironic voice.

The protagonist is a consummate peddler of tales. For Emma he made up a story about his family that was a modified version of his real family. He did that because, as he understands at the end, he could get away with it. For Emma's racist father, he spins 'Empire stories' that bolster the man's belief that the Empire had been in Africa only to uplift and civilize the natives and everything has gone to pot since the British were forced out. Again, he did this to ease his relations with the old man. And to his family on the island, he had represented a different life about himself, a life that did not include Emma and Amelia. He did not have the courage to confront them with the truth. It was easier to make up lies. It appears that the unreliability of

this narrator is an authorial comment on the migrant's tendency to consider reality as fluid.

Salman Rushdie wrote:

What the triple disruption of reality teaches migrants: that reality is an artifact, that it does not exist until it is made, and that, like any other artifact, it can be made well or badly, and that it can also, of course, be unmade." (280)

But while Rushdie celebrates this notion, Gurnah appears to say, yes, the migrant can make things up as real, but if you do that simply because it is easy, you will pay a harsh price.

Facing the truth takes courage. And it is not so easy to unmake 'reality.'

Meanwhile the narrative voice drips with irony. This is the weapon with which Gurnah questions Empire. The novel begins with and maintains a running commentary on colonialism, its effects on England itself, and the wretchedness left behind in the colonies. These passages are perceptive and have bite.

But does the unreliability of the narrator undermine the effect of the irony? The same voice that scorns Empire is also the voice that has taken the easy road to tell lies to his loved ones. While his diatribes about England and its racist imperial tradition might disturb some English readers, the narrator's playing with the truth might lead them to treat it all as entertainment rather than serious critique, as merely the mutterings of an inveterate liar, an odd, broken person. Unless the narrator found a way to respond to this charge somehow. Despite several instances where the narrative voice speaks to the reader or questions his own choices, Gurnah does not seem to address this potential problem.

Adib Khan's *Seasonal Adjustments*

This novel too is written in the first person. The narrator, Iqbal Chaudhary, is similar in age and personal history as the author. At the time the book was written, both were in their early forties and each had left Bangladesh shortly after independence in 1971 to go to college in

Australia. They both taught school outside Melbourne. Beyond this, published biographical accounts do not seem to reveal other similarities.

Iqbal Chaudhary's return to Bangladesh is precipitated by a crisis in his marriage. A friend advises him to heal himself by returning to his womb. He goes back for the first time in 18 years, and he takes along his pre-teen daughter. The family he returns to is wealthy, part of an aristocratic (zamindari) lineage, and the parents are fairly conservative in their Islam. While experiencing nostalgia, especially for the village where he spent many of his boyhood vacations, Iqbal feels estranged from his family over their wealth, their religious beliefs, and their lineage that includes brutality against peasants.

At its core, the novel reveals Iqbal's journey to come to terms with his family's claims on him (they want him to stay but he chooses otherwise) and his daughter, to introduce her to his culture and people (and learn some lessons about how to raise her), and to re-connect with a circle of boyhood friends and comrades, especially one man whose trust he had betrayed during the liberation war. He comes to an uneasy acceptance with his family and friends and when it appears that there might be a possibility for reuniting with his wife, he decides to return. There is a moment of realization of his 'in between' situation:

Now I know that the fabric of my life cannot be separated into their individual strands. They must remain interwoven in a complex texture. I shall never be able to close the sizeable hole at the center of my life and shut out the view of that other world. I am destined to fret and pine, and endure the lonely burden of a dissatisfaction no one else will understand. I shall brood over what might have been. This is the way it must be. I have known too much to live contentedly. (296)

More than any of the other books in this reading, *Seasonal Adjustments* comes to this particular solution to the migrant returnee's dilemma: an acceptance of the divided self in a state of grace. The character in Gurnah's book also realizes that he lives in such a state of liminality, but he feels lost, broken, and blocked by that recognition.

Besides the story of Iqbal's journey, which may well reveal the author's own journey, this book also succeeds in describing aspects of Bangladesh's liberation war and the subsequent disappointments, the gluttonous lifestyle of the wealthy, the anger simmering among the poor, the racism faced by dark-skinned immigrants in Australia, and the hypocrisies of the believers of both Islam and Christianity.

Khan breaks the linear structure existing in the Core Narrative Strategy. Nearly all the chapters meander back and forth, between the present of the return, to elements from the past and also to Iqbal's life in Australia. His distance from his family's prejudices is juxtaposed to his resistance to the bigotry of his Christian in-laws and the culture in Australia that does not take kindly to difference. For example, near the end of the book, Iqbal is in a mosque, brought by his brother to thank Allah for his daughter's recovery from illness. He describes his remoteness from the scene around him, and that feeling becomes a bridge to go back to a scene in Australia where he sits in the back pew of the school chapel. He describes a conversation with the pastor over warrior images in Christian hymns, a conversation that could equally have taken place with a Muslim on the question of jihad.

Adib Khan seeks to portray his migrant character as a person 'in between' two worlds. Breaking the linear structure is a natural way to achieve this effect. He succeeds in showing that both worlds are alien as well as a part of who Iqbal is. The novel is meant to disturb the self-satisfied reader in both societies.

The character who finds himself in between two worlds was formed in a past in Bangladesh, the legacy of colonialism. Forays into the past work effectively to depict the creation of an alienated self. Before he describes Iqbal's schooling in a Catholic missionary school in Bangladesh, he notes:

Of all the harm colonization has inflicted on the subcontinent, none has been more damaging than the cultural havoc wrought by that hallowed and sacrosanct institution, the English medium school. It is a remarkable mechanism which has survived the insular fury of nationalism and continued to flourish. It uses impressionable children from affluent families as raw material to be shaped and molded into arrogant stereotypes before spouting them out as aliens in their indigenous environments. (88)

Novels that break the narrative strategy

Meena Alexander's *Nampally Road*

Mira Kannadical has returned to India after college in England where she had specialized in Wordsworth. In this novel, she has come to live in the southern city of Hyderabad where she has a job teaching college. While there are autobiographical similarities between Mira and the author who also spent some years in Hyderabad teaching college, this is not a traditional 'return home' novel.

She has not returned to a place or community she had known before. The setting and the people around her are entirely new. Neither is there an issue of her leaving for England again. That is not even suggested as a choice. Mira's quest is not belonging in terms of location. It is a quest for belonging in terms of meaning and relevance.

She had returned to India with a certain hope:

I returned to India determined to start afresh, make up a self that had some continuity with what I was. It was my fond hope that by writing a few poems, or a few prose pieces, I could start to stitch it all together: my birth in India a few years after national independence, my colonial education, my rebellion against the arranged marriage my mother had in mind for me, my years of research in England. How grotesque I had felt, how cramped and small, tucking myself day after day into a library seat, reading up on my chosen authors. Now in Hyderabad I was fully adult. In any case my mind had grown stronger. I could live my life. (30-1)

But experiencing life upon her return, Mira questions her initial choices:

It was not so long ago that I had felt Wordsworth should be my model. He understood suffering; desire that could not let itself free. Why couldn't I write with that clarity, that precision of feeling? I had forgotten that the Wye Valley poet hated crowds,

had no conception of the teeming, boisterous life we lived. The lines between inner and outer he valued so deeply were torn apart in our lives. That distinction had dropped into the ditch where the broken orange cart lay.

But still the old model held me in its grip, and I was stuck as a writer. When I managed a sentence or two, my words made no sense that could hold together. The lines sucked in chunks of the world, then collapsed in on themselves. Our streets were too crowded, there was too much poverty and misery. The British had subdued us for too long and now that they had left, the unrest in rock and root, in the souls of men and women, was too visible, too turbulent already to permit the kinds of writing I had once learned to write. (31-2)

Framing her internal turmoil is the outer plot of the novel: a political struggle over a woman raped and imprisoned by the police. Alexander succeeds in interweaving the inner and outer plots using a braiding technique. One depends on the other and, in the main, she successfully involves the other major characters: Mira's lover Ramu the political militant; Durgabai, a friend's mother who is her landlady and also doctor-caretaker of the poor; Rameeza Be, the woman who is raped; and Maitreyi, the midwife who rescues her.

Alexander succeeds in making this novel reflect the concerns of people in India during the 1970s, a time marked by social upheaval and struggles against fascistic tyranny. Her returnee becomes a woman sorting her relevance in the midst of a volatile political situation and surrounded by men and women who represent different kinds of choices that lie before a thinking person.

Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day*

Set in the 1960s, Tara has returned to her family home in old Delhi with her husband. This is not an extraordinary return. They come home every three years. The timing of this visit coincides with a wedding of her niece in Hyderabad. Tara and her family will go. But Bim and Baba, the sister and brother who live in this house, will not. It turns out there is a deep historical rift between Bim and their brother Raja in Hyderabad.

Tara's visit is incidental, it is mainly a device to open up the story of the siblings, especially Bim's story. The novel is written in third person, but in both voices. And it breaks linear structure. Beginning and ending in the present, the novel sandwiches two middle chapters that go back 20 years to the time of India's partition, and the story of this family is told through each sister's memory.

Tara does have a personal quest. She has carried guilt over having abandoned Bim and Baba. When a marriage possibility had presented itself during her youth, she had taken it. During this visit, she seeks Bim's forgiveness and she also tries to encourage Bim to put aside her grudge against Raja.

Foregrounding Bim's point of view is the radical departure in this novel. It is the point of view of someone who did not leave. And to add to that effect, the book eschews the journey motif. The entire novel is set within this house and the immediate neighborhood: the next door houses and the riverbank. Two journeys are described, one in the past when Bim went out on a date and the other in the present when the autistic brother Baba makes a vain attempt to leave and take a bus, but both journeys end in frustration. This is a book that opts for the motif of enclosure, a choice often made by women writers. And even though Bim teaches college, in the time period depicted in the novel, even college is brought into the house where Bim organizes a tutorial session for her students. In the end, she reflects on the house and her family:

With her inner eye she saw how her own house and its particular history linked and contained her as well as her whole family with all their separate histories and experiences—not binding them within some dead and airless cell but giving them the soil in which to send down their roots, and food to make them grow and spread, reach out to new experiences and new lives, but always drawing from the same soil, the same secret darkness. That soil contained all time, past and future, in it. It was dark with time, rich with time. It was where her deepest self lived, and the deepest selves of her sister and brothers and all those who shared that time with her. (182)

Bim, the person who has stayed home, who has nursed her memories and grudges, who had been left behind by those who ran for the exit doors, finds it in herself to let go of her resentments. She appreciates her house and sees it as the embodiment of sibling love.

With her break from a linear structure, Desai brought in memories from the past of this house. Unlike Adib Khan's book, she does not use it as a technique to depict Tara's life abroad. In fact, it is mostly unconcerned with her life in the U.S., another way she emphasizes the present and Bim and Baba's lives in the house.

Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*

Ondaatje's returnee, Anil Tessera, is a character very different than the author. She is a woman who left Sri Lanka at eighteen and returns in her thirties. Ondaatje is a man who had left at eleven and wrote the book when he was in his fifties. The story line is not autobiographical.

Anil is a forensic scientist who, after the collapse of a love affair with a married North American writer, takes a job as a human rights investigator sent to Sri Lanka. There she teams up with Sarath, a local archeologist. They discover the bones of a recent skeleton amidst what were supposed to be older skeletons in a government-protected sanctuary. She succeeds in convincing Sarath to give up his hesitations and join her in a quest to uncover the identity of the skeleton they name Sailor. This search – the outer plot of the novel – takes them to Sarath's mentor, a disgraced archeologist who has taken refuge in an old Buddhist ruin, and then to Ananda, an artisan who paints eyes on Buddha statues, a man who they commission with the task of making a head for Sailor. Along the way, this quest takes the reader through the killing fields of Sri Lanka, and we are also introduced to Gamini, Sarath's brother, who is a doctor in Emergency Services. Eventually they identify Sailor, who turns out to be a miner disappeared by the government. But Anil is betrayed and ultimately she vainly confronts a government

audience. Her proofs, including the skeleton, have been taken away from her. Through a maneuver, Sarath returns the skeleton to Anil and advises her to take her proofs and flee the island. He himself pays for his support for her with his life.

There is a personal journey of belonging for Anil the returnee. At first she is described as someone who has long ‘courted foreignness’ and felt ‘completed abroad’ (54). She returns to the island driven by her work – and she is very much a woman depicted as totally driven by her work. She takes on the crusade to identify Sailor with a zeal that she appears to identify as part of her Sri Lankan identity. Back on the island she has virtually no real connections with anyone, and she develops fragile ones with Sarath and Gamini. At the close of the book she stands before the authorities and accuses them of murdering ‘us.’ In her mind, she has renewed her identification as a Sri Lankan. Sarath gives her a way to get out with her proofs, but the novel ends Anil’s story at that point without even informing us if she made it out.

Anil’s personal journey is simply a device to open up a larger story of how people endure (or do not) in the midst of the civil war that has consumed the island. If there is a hero in the book, it is Gamini, and Ondaatje devotes considerable attention to drawing his story: his childhood in the shadow of his brother; his isolation in the family; his coveting his brother’s wife; his own failed marriage; his futile attempt to save his brother’s wife after she attempted suicide; and his selfless dedication to providing medical care for the victims of the country’s violence. Sarath plays the role of martyr. He had misgivings about Anil’s crusade which he had questioned as something akin to putting ‘a flame against a sleeping lake of petrol’ (156). He ends up paying the ultimate price for her zeal.

Ondaatje’s main break from the Core Narrative Strategy, besides having a non-autobiographical protagonist, is precisely this: allowing other points of view besides Anil’s. It

especially succeeds with Gamini. Alongside Sarath's, this is the voice of those who endure Sri Lanka and do not consider exiting. Ironically, as Anil is about to leave Sri Lanka (or possibly after she already has), she recalls a conversation among the three of them:

At one point that night, she remembered, they spoke of how much they loved their country. In spite of everything. No Westerner would ever understand the love they had for the place. 'But I could never leave here,' Gamini had whispered.

'American movies, English books—remember how they all end?' Gamini asked that night. 'The American or the Englishman gets on a plane and leaves. That's it. The camera leaves with him. He looks out of the window at Mombasa or Vietnam or Jakarta, someplace now he can look at through the clouds. The tired hero. A couple of words to the girl beside him. He's going home. So the war, to all purposes, is over. That's enough reality for the West. It's probably the history of the last two hundred years of Western political writing. Go home. Write a book. Hit the circuit.' (285-6)

Anil leaves the story at this point, and this remembrance by her might suggest that she has a belated recognition that, despite how she had claimed to belong here, she has remained a Westerner. After this moment there are three more chapters in the book. One describes Gamini discovering Sarath's body. Another focuses on the suicide bombing that kills the president. And the final chapter depicts Ananda, the artist, putting eyes on a new Buddha statue built to replace one that was bombed. Life goes on. The visitor who was in the end really a Westerner might have left, but the story is not over.

Ironically by bringing to the fore Gamini's story, and to a lesser extent, the other major characters, Sarath, Palipana, and Ananda, Ondaatje might have ended up painting Anil less clearly. Anil is depicted as someone who left at eighteen but it is somewhat incredible that she has so little connection with the island, other than one childhood nanny she visits briefly and a few scattered memories of growing up there. The past that we are shown in more detail is her life in England and North America, much of it focusing on the ghost of the failed love affair. We never really know her. Is this another way Ondaatje chose to show her as peripheral to the real story in Sri Lanka, despite the appearance of making this novel seem to be about her?

Beyond the personal story: avenues to confront privilege

While all the novels here include, in central or peripheral roles, a personal quest theme, most of the books have additional agendas. These other themes – to depict the postcolonial condition, to question the imperialist legacy, to dramatize the violence of civil war, to show the enduring power of love in a divided family, to promote the decolonization of the colonized mind – show that a variety of stories can be told through the return narrative. But the survey of these novels suggests that an author needs to diverge from a traditional strategy of a personal quest story to build these richer, more ambitious stories.

Gurnah's effort, which in many respects sticks closest to the personal story, shows that even within that pattern, one can tell a complex story of empire and neo-colonialism. But he had to put irony in the voice of his first-person narrator to achieve that effect. He is the only one in this book to adopt a different sort of voice. It is curious that nearly all the writers in this particular survey mainly use a realist voice, one that is very intellectual, rational, and self-conscious in relating to the world around them. Is this an outgrowth of privilege itself, or the British-colonized tradition? Nearly all the returnees are invested with privilege and their lives, even in the extreme example of Anil in Sri Lanka, are really never seriously threatened. But what if you had a character returned within a violent reality like Sri Lanka but lacking in such security as these returnees? What if you had a character suddenly stripped of shielding and tossed in the middle of a minefield within a so-called failed state, like Somalia, the Congo, or Afghanistan? What kind of voice would such a character have? There are some indications that some Latin American writers might use a radically different, fabulist (magical realist) voice to lay out return narratives.

Ultimately, however, using point of view is key to going beyond the self-focused narrative. This is hardly surprising. As soon as the writer allows others to speak, the migrant's story is no longer central. Desai and Ondaatje have brought in the voices of those who stay, by choice. The story of the homeland has existed outside his or her return. When the migrant returns, it might create a ripple in the water, it might set off certain chain reactions, it might even create new tragedies, but in the end, life goes on. Both Desai and Ondaatje emphasize this point by having the novel end after the migrant leaves the stage.

Opening up these other points of view also reveals how well the writer can depict how people live in lands of blocked toilets, terrible hungers, and horrifying violence. Can the emigrant writer imagine how people live under such conditions? Readers in the Third World might well sympathize with emigrant writers' observations about the post-colonial disappointment but they will be more open to their perspectives if there is evidence of real empathy. They will not find much meaning in those who create characters who come in like Westerners, show disdain and amazed questioning of the sort, 'how can people possibly live like this?', and then leave, taking the camera with them.

But using other points of view is not the only way to confront privilege. Novels that break out of the homecoming to departure arc and focus on a returnee faced with the struggle to stay can also meet the challenge. Phillips ended with his character choosing to stay but the difficult story is the one that comes after that decision. Alexander writes such a story with Mira's struggle to find meaning as a teacher in Hyderabad. It allows the writer to depict an outsider who might have her eyes opened by a different experience abroad but one who faces – despite and perhaps because of those new sets of eyes – the problem of how to live under the conditions of home.⁵

Nearly all the writers use flashback to break out of a strictly linear structure and comment on the past, both in their native lands and in their new home places. Desai and Khan departed more radically from the linear structure. Desai used it to bring the past to the fore, because it was her intent to comment on memory and history and their continuing hold on the present. Khan used it to reveal the creation of the alienated self within a Third World society still shackled by colonialist legacy and also to emphasize the in-between status of the migrant by juxtaposing life in Bangladesh and Australia. Though he stuck to a personal quest story, he managed to write it with depth and self-understanding. He showed that even a migrant's personal quest story can be written with a relentless eye focused on oneself.

NOTES

1. The theme also shows up in Trinidad-born V.S. Naipaul's *An Enigma of Arrival* and Tanzania-born M.G. Vassanji's *Gunny Sack*. Short story collections that include 'return home' stories include Bharati Mukherjee's *The Middleman and Other Stories*, Neil Bissoondath's *Digging up the Mountains*, and Julia Alvarez's *How the Garcia Girls Lost their Accents*. Some 'return home' texts also appear as essay or memoir. Examples include Jamaica Kincaid's *A Small Place*, Michael Ondaatje's *Running in the Family*, and Edwidge Danticat's *After the Dance: A Walk Through Carnival in Jacmel, Haiti*.

2. The seminal text of return to the Caribbean was Aime Cesaire's epic poem *Cahier d'un Retour au Pays Natal*. Many of Guadeloupean Maryse Conde's novels include return story lines. Alec Hargreaves briefly surveys some return narratives written by French-born Algerian immigrants in France. These include Mehdi Lallaoui's *Les Beurs de Seine* and Akli Tadjer's *Les ANI du 'Tassili'*. (See Hargreaves, Alec. "Perceptions of Place Among Writers of Algerian Immigrant Origin in France." *Writing across Worlds: Literature and Migration*. Routledge, 1995.)

3. Quebec-based Gloria Escomel, a Uruguayan writer who writes mainly in French, has published two novels that deal with the theme of return, *Fruit de la Pasion* and *Pieges*. For a survey that includes these novels, see Hazelton, Hugh. "Quebec Hispanico: Themes of exile and integration in the writing of Latin Americans living in Quebec." *Canadian Literature*, n142-143 (Fall 1994). 120-135.

4. For a detailed study of the journey motif in another genre of literature, the French African novel, see Mortimer, Mildred. *Journeys through the French African Novel*. Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1990.

5. One of the finest examples of such a narrative comes from a different place, the American South. In his book *A Lesson Before Dying*, the Louisiana-born writer Ernest Gaines focuses on a black teacher in rural Louisiana who had left and returned, who desperately wants to leave because of the constant racial humiliations and because he thinks he can make no difference there. He finds himself in a situation where his aunt and the community want him to teach a condemned black man dignity in the face of death. The novel shows an arc that moves from alienation to love and commitment. Despite being written from a single point of view (the protagonist's own), Gaines uses other narrative techniques, such as the tight braiding of the inner and outer plots and the arc reversing alienation, to reveal how people 'back home' endure and can even make a difference.

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