Chapter 7: Conclusion

As the protagonists in this study of contemporary Malaysian and Singaporean texts demonstrate, the experience of returning home after travelling or living overseas is one that is characterised by numerous difficulties and conflicts. It is an experience in which an individual comes back to a physical location that was previously known and which has its particular historical, social and cultural context. In such an experience, the home space becomes a site for some of the most profound questions about both personal and communal identities and characters invariably find that everything from their mode of thinking to way of speaking to style of dress is no longer familiar or appropriate. As a result of the processes they go through in the attempt to make sense of who they are, each in her or his own way finds themselves both "more truly and more strange" within the very space they consider home.

The returns made to home spaces also entail returns to the past, particularly to parents' generations and sometimes even to the experiences of grandparents or ancestors. Though various characters react in very different ways to the influence of their histories, it is important to note that this is a predominant aspect of their search for clarification about their identities. In part, this common motif that is found in the texts underscores the important role played by history in the formation and articulation of identity or, as Stuart Hall states, that "cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories" (1999: 302).

In addition to confronting their histories, the characters' return experiences are also affected by the way they conceive of themselves and the way they are perceived by others. These two forces--what Hall refers to as "subject positions" and "interpellated


58 The one text in which family or community history does not play a dominant role is in "Return to Malaya". The absence of this dimension of the protagonist's experience may perhaps be due to the influence of Buddhism which teaches individuals to learn how to exist mindfully only in the present.
positions”—often are in extreme conflict with one another and individuals are faced with having to reconcile these very different aspects of their identity. Though various conclusions are reached in each text, one clear commonality is that identity is always some combination of the singular and the communal, with neither having the power to completely overpower the other. Rather, there is always a dialogue between individuals’ own views of themselves and the way in which they are “hailed into place” by their larger context.

In terms of understanding the role played by history and the on-going negotiation of singular and communal identities, Homi Bhabha’s “in-between spaces” vividly defines the site wherein the returnee “finds” her/himself. Specifically, the “space in-between” one’s past and present, as well as the “space in-between” how one sees oneself and how one is seen by others, is precisely that “space” where characters’ identities are located. It is extremely difficult for these different forces to reach an easy alliance, but we can observe how “in-between spaces” are precisely those that are occupied by individuals who return home after being overseas.

These generalities, as well as the characters to whom they apply, should, however, also be viewed in their own historical contexts. Specifically, Ravi in *The Return, Bala in “Welcome” and Krishna in “Wedding Night” are all part of the first generation of Malaysian and Singaporean students who went to England to further their studies. As a result of these experiences, and as testament to the enormous power wielded by a colonial education system, these characters are all influenced by colonialist and orientalist notions of themselves and their home contexts. In particular, assumptions of static binaries—in which “the English” (or “the west”) is repeatedly deemed superior to “the Tamil” (or “the east”)—dictate a particular kind of approach to the characters’ questions about identity. This framework also results in an especially difficult struggle for them as they feel they must “choose” one identity or another, when, in fact their lived reality straddles many of these binaries and exists in an “in-between space”. In addition, these characters also tend to perceive their home spaces
and attendant histories as something against which to define their individual identities, thereby often forcing painful and unnatural splits between themselves and their home communities.

The protagonist of “Return to Malaya” is also part of this early generation, but approaches his experiences and identity from a very different—and, notably, non-western—perspective. Though to a certain extent he too is influenced by “foreign” mentalities and habits he acquired overseas, his framework does not assume the terms of “either/or” that form the basis of his contemporaries’ thinking. Instead, he does not attempt to make strict definitions about who he is or is not, but seeks an understanding of himself that is part of a broader community and an acceptance of the fluid, unstable nature of identity. In this regard, the text is surprisingly forward-looking to some of the ideas that characterize a more recent generation of “returnees”.

In this more recent generation, as indicated by the protagonists in “A Dream of China” and Gold Rain and Hailstones, there is an increased consciousness—as well as critical interrogation—about the role of history, and, in particular, family histories. This consciousness is also one that is not quite so restricted, limited or weighed down by the past, but is instead more able to engage with the past as one of many important factors that shapes a person’s identity. In addition, characters that are part of this later generation view their own identities more as a matter of conscious choice, and also view identity as something that is always in process, changeable, fluid and not strictly defined. In the words of Stuart Hall, these characters perceive identity as “not a fixed essence at all, lying unchanged outside history and culture. It is not some universal and transcendental spirit inside us on which history has made no fundamental mark. It is not once-and-for-all. It is not a fixed origin to which we can make some final and absolute return” (1999: 303). Instead, the process of returning home would seem to be one full of challenges, but also one that offers possibilities for newness and a journey towards an understanding of the self.