Chapter 1: Introduction

"The dream is a one-way journey like a pilgrimage, the wakening a return home."

- Donald R. Howard

Context of return narratives

As the second millennium was drawing to a close, nearly all media were involved in reflecting on the state of the world as humanity collectively entered into the next chapter of history. Among the vast array of commentaries, one frequent perception was that the end of the second millennium was witnessing a move towards globalisation. The various media took the opportunity to promote themselves as they related stories and broadcast images of the previously ignorant or oppressed of the world enjoying the benefits of educational television programmes, magazine articles and, of course, internet access.

In addition to the increasing spread of ideas, information and images around the world, a great deal of attention was also paid to the rapid rise in the movement of human beings. Edward Said states in his article "Reflections on Exile" that "our age—with its modern warfare, imperialism and the quasi-theological ambitions of totalitarian rulers—is indeed the age of the refugee, the displaced person, mass immigration" (357). Paul Carter, in Living in a New Country: History, Travelling and Language, also agrees:

The period of modernity has been characterized by the massive displacement of populations. We are almost all migrants; and even if we have tried to stay at home, the conditions of life have changed so utterly in this century that we find ourselves strangers in our own house. (7)

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1 For an important contribution to this perspective, see Ismail S. Talib's "Malaysia, Singapore and Migration, "Malaysian Literature in English: A Critical Reader (Petaling Jaya: Selangor, Longman, 2001) 136-43. K.S. Maniam's commentary on the role of globalisation in contemporary society, page 139, is particularly pertinent.
These defining aspects of modernity are also significant to the histories of contemporary Malaysia and Singapore, countries whose economies are heavily dependent on the presence of migrant labour—primarily from other south and southeast Asian countries, as well as rural areas of Malaysia.\(^2\) Not surprisingly, the stories of those whose migration has been forced by economic, political or other necessities are not widely known or openly related, regardless of the important and pervasive presence of the immigrant in these societies. However, the stories of Malaysians and Singaporeans who have *chosen* to travel overseas—primarily to European and North American countries—are beginning to be told by writers who have had similar experiences. Some of these writers include those whose works will be addressed in this thesis—K.S. Maniam, Gopal Baratham, Lee Kok Liang, Ovidia Yu and Jit Murad. Their novels, short stories and plays emerge from the last twenty years of histories in Malaysia and Singapore. For the characters who populate these narratives\(^3\) (and who I will be focusing on in my discussion), overseas travel is largely voluntary rather than forced, and their returns to Malaysia and Singapore—though frequently prompted by circumstances outside of their control—are also more often the result of choices rather than of necessity.

The line between choice and force as factors in human life is impossible to draw distinctly, and yet there are some generalized differences which are important to consider for the purposes of this study. For people who leave home, including fictional characters in the texts I will be discussing, the "option" to return home is a defining aspect of their return experience because of the fact that the circumstances of their return are, to a large extent, the result of choices which they have made for themselves. Consequently, the possibilities and limitations available to them when they return home are defined in particular ways. The confusion and ambivalence they face are the outcome of their own voluntary decision

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3 Following an argument made by Seymour Chatman, I use the term "narrative" to mean not only novels and short stories, but also plays. This point will be further discussed in the section of this Introduction entitled "Return narratives to be discussed".
and therefore can be engaged with a certain amount of freedom of thought and consciousness of alternatives that are generally unavailable to those who cannot return home. For these individuals for whom "homecoming is out of the question" (Said 1979b: 361), whether because of political, economic, social or other realities, the term "exile" is frequently used, although, as Andrew Gurr points out, it can take many forms:

There is the Russian concept of the internal émigré, the alienated artist self-exiled even while still living within his own society. Exile can be self-imposed, a response to an internal compulsion such as Joyce gave to his Stephen Dedalus. Perhaps most commonly and certainly most conspicuously it has taken the form of a flight by the colonial or provincial writer while still only a fledgling to the metropolitan centre. (11)

Whatever form it takes, however, a general understanding of the experience of exile would constitute "a discontinuous state of being" (Said 1979b: 360) and one that is "nomadic, decentred, contrapuntal" (Said 1979b: 366). Also, this state of exile is in direct contrast to being an expatriate, where individuals have a "wholly voluntary detachment from their original home", "tend to be migrants from one metropolis to another" and also have the option to go home if or when they choose (McCarthy in Gurr 18). Aijaz Ahmad makes a similar distinction between exiles and expatriates:

The factor of exile! And I do not mean people who live in the metropolitan countries for professional reasons but use words like 'exile' or 'diaspora' - words which have centuries of pain and dispossession inscribed in them - to designate what is, after all, only personal convenience. I mean, rather, people who are prevented, against their own commitment and desire, from living in the country of their birth by the authority of state - any state - or by fear of personal annihilation. In other words, I mean not privilege but impossibility, not profession but pain. (85)

In the case of the texts which I will be discussing, the characters tend more toward being expatriates ("privilege" and "profession") rather than exiles ("impossibility" and "pain"), a point made obvious by the fact that they clearly have the option to return home. Nevertheless, there are ways in which none of them fits exactly into the category of expatriate--in some cases their overseas experiences or their returns home are decidedly temporary--and some characters exhibit emotional or psychological characteristics that are more typical of those in exile. The purpose of this study, however, is not to categorise these
Malaysian and Singaporean characters' overseas experiences, but rather to focus on what happens when they return and are confronted with the home contexts they left behind.

At this point in my discussion, it would be imperative to clarify the meaning of the most central term in this thesis: "return". The process of "returning" is defined as "the act of coming back to or from a place, person, or condition" (Def I.1, OED). This is distinct in some significant ways from "arriving", which is to "come to the end of a journey, to a destination, or to some definite place; to come upon the scene, make one's appearance" (Def. II.5, OED). When one "returns", one is coming back--this means that the place, person, or condition that one encounters has been known or experienced previously. Though "returning" clearly overlaps with the meaning of "arriving", the latter term could mean reaching either a new or a previously known destination. Returning, however, can only refer to a place previously known. In addition, as I will proceed to argue in the following chapters, though both "returning" and "arriving" are ambivalent processes,4 "returning" includes and encompasses the experience of "arriving", but is characterised by its own specific dimensions. These dimensions include, but are not limited to, the fact that whatever is being "returned" to is something that has been "known" previously as a result of first-hand, lived experience. This aspect, as well as numerous others, will be explored in the subsequent chapters of this thesis.

This differentiation between "arriving" and "returning" is important in literature because the kinds of issues explored by the characters reflect those that are characteristic of people's real life experiences when they return from overseas. In addition, when it is a "home" that is returned to, rather than a "new" place arrived at, the novelty and surprises are doubly confounding because "home" is a place one expects to recognize and be familiar with. However, although more and more Malaysians and Singaporeans are educated, working and living abroad, and most of them do return home at some point, there is a definite dearth of understanding or knowledge concerning the issues and challenges

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involved in these returns. In fact, I would argue that there is much more consciousness on a societal level concerning the challenges of leaving home and getting used to life in a new country than there is an understanding about the challenges a person faces when returning home.\(^5\) This is not surprising given the general sense people have about their home contexts; namely, that they are familiar, comfortable and "normal", whereas it is other places that are "foreign".

In terms of understanding the way in which people conceive of the places they consider to be "home", James Duncan and Derek Gregory's observations in their introduction to *Writes of Passage: Reading Travel Writing* are quite useful: "At the end of the twentieth century we are still in the age of 'industrialized' romanticism. By this we mean that although the bureaucratisation of travel has increased since the turn of the century, the romantic frame through which places are viewed remains much the same" (7). This observation is especially pertinent to this study because all of the characters discussed negotiate their return home with some degree of "'industrialized' romanticism." In particular, I would argue that the idea of "home" is imbued with even more romanticism than other places, due to the multitude of memories an individual may possess of her or his home, and, even more importantly, the accumulation of a society's assumptions about the significance of "home". One of the most prominent of these assumptions is the general expectation that any difficulties of readjustment merely require the passage of time so as to be resolved and that whatever changes a person has undergone while overseas will eventually dissipate or be assimilated into the larger Malaysian or Singaporean society. However, as the literature of the past two decades demonstrates, such expectations grossly simplify the complex questions and issues involved when people return home. As a result, individuals often suffer even more alienation, frustration and disorientation because the challenges they face are often downplayed and relegated to being exclusively of an individual rather than societal, or even national, concern. Nevertheless, the negotiations that occur at the individual level invariably reflect and have a lasting impact on the larger

\(^5\) Consider the ever-expanding travel book and guide sections of Malaysian and Singaporean bookstores. In addition, contrast the steady stream of articles in newspapers, magazines and newsletters telling of people's overseas adventures with the almost complete absence of stories of people's returns to their homelands.
society as people struggle to make sense of who they are, where they belong and what and where their home is.

I would also argue that there is an especially pressing need for Singaporean and Malaysian societies to recognize and understand the deeply important issues at the heart of the "returnee's syndrome". In the early 21st century, as more and more people migrate to and from their "homes" in different parts of the world, a question that frequently arises in public or national contexts is what Singapore's or Malaysia's place is in a globalised reality. Even so, I believe it is important to consider what Singapore's or Malaysia's place is in the hearts and minds of those who claim these places--or reject them--as their homes. It is imperative that there be a societal understanding of issues that arise for people whose identities are not taken for granted but are challenged by other cultural and social contexts.

The failure to develop such an understanding has deep and long-lasting effects for these societies--not only do individuals have to face difficult, vital questions for themselves, but the larger communities also risk losing a sense of their own collective identity. Whether on a personal or communal level, it must be understood that identities are more about "a coming-to-terms with our 'routes'," rather than a "so-called return to roots" (Hall 1996: 4). This idea of "routes" clearly reflects the multiracial, diverse communities of Malaysia and Singapore in which migrants increasingly constitute a large percentage of the populations of these two countries. In addition, these societies must recognize that their social fabric is changing--though, to be sure, not disappearing--as a result of people studying and living overseas, and also returning home. Guillermo Gomez-Peña states candidly, "In the current fog of confusion, one thing is clear: We must rediscover our communities in turmoil, redefine our problematic relationship to them, and find new ways to serve them" (17). Paul Carter explains that one of the things which is most important in the process of redefining our relationships to each other is that we recognize--and respect--the changing nature of our interpersonal encounters:

We live as others allow us to live, creating meeting places as we go along. Such places may not be monumental, they may be nothing more than encounters, spatial events that leave behind them less litter than a campsite,
yet they can form the basis of a social fabric, one that does not suppress the contingency of its community but makes its migratory haphazardness the material out of which it weaves its identity. (8)

In order to create and incorporate an understanding of how people can and do weave identities out of such "migratory haphazardness", literature clearly has a role to play. Writers--and characters--who see with "the migrant's double vision" (Bhabha 1994: 5)--that is, whose experiences allow them to see themselves and others simultaneously from the perspective of insider and outsider--may likely be those who are able to help all of us see 'not 'who we are' or 'where we came from', so much as what we might become, how we have been represented and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves" (Hall 1996: 4).

History of return narratives

In the history of world literature, stories of travelling are nearly as old as language itself. Heroes from virtually all societies set off on journeys, whether to achieve a particular pre-set goal or to wander, searching for fulfilment. In addition to heroic characters who often endure extreme hardship for the good of their home society, other travelling characters are also common: the pilgrim, the merchant, the immigrant labourer, the exile, the refugee, the tourist and--the figure that most frequently populates the narratives I will be discussing--the foreign student.⁶ Stories of such characters and their journeys permeate everything from folk and fairy tales to religious narratives such as Prince Siddhartha's departure from his home, Jesus' journey to the desert or Moses' and his followers' long trek to the Holy Land. In particular, some of the oldest and most influential journey narratives are those that have inspired real-life pilgrimages, perhaps the best-known example being the Hajj.

⁶ See also Zygmunt Baumann's essay "From Pilgrim to Tourist -- or a Short History of Identity" in Questions of Cultural Identity, Eds. Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay (New Delhi: Sage, 1996) 18-36. In this essay, Baumann chronicles the development of different types of travelers including the pilgrim, the stroller, the vagabond, the tourist and the player. Further discussion of these figures are noted in my discussion of characters in chapters three and six of this thesis.
Particularly in the case of English literature, religious pilgrimage is one of the oldest kinds of stories. As Donald Howard notes in his book *Writers and Pilgrims: Medieval Pilgrimage Narratives and Their Posterity*, an enormous amount of medieval literature focuses on pilgrimages made by Christians to holy sites. Howard explains that such a pilgrimage in fact "consisted of various individual 'pilgrimages' to various shrines" and that "its end was imposed when these were over, not when the pilgrims got home" (18-9). Howard also observes that "we have a real difference between the medieval mind and the modern. For us, the homecoming, the recognition scene, the sweet relief of getting back, lessons learned and memories nurtured--are all part of our idea of travel" (48). This is in distinct contrast to medieval pilgrims for whom "the return voyage was a mere contingency, an anticlimax" (48). Howard contextualises this mentality:

The idea of pilgrimage, and the institution, go back to the wandering and ascetic homelessness of early Christian times, and these practices positively discouraged a return. The hermits and desert fathers of the primitive church travelled into the wilderness to stay sequestered from civilization; they called the experience an exile. Some doubtless returned home, but the return was never part of the venture. Nor was a destination: they were practicing a form of spiritual recklessness, a search of the spirit in which the only destination would be union with God and eternal life. (49)

Throughout world literature, however, the concept of returning home was present much earlier than the 15th century. Some of the more famous examples come from classical literature, such as Odysseus' return to Ithaca in *The Odyssey*, the prodigal son's return to his father in the Bible and Rama's return to his home in *The Ramayana*. However, the significance of these homecomings—for the protagonists as well as for those who are there to greet them—is much more complex, ambivalent and multi-faceted.

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7 A similar sense of God as a singular and eternal destination is also apparent in early English verse, including in poems by John Donne such as "Hymn to God My God, in My Sickness" (Donne 223) and "The Progress of the Soul" (qtd. in Gurr 13). Howard also notes the first rendered account of a homecoming from a pilgrimage by Felix Fabri, "one of the greatest writers of his century [15th]" who returns to his convent at Ulm where "his brothers are at their prayers and no one knows he is back from his odyssey until the monastery dog recognizes his step and greets him with fervent barking" (46-7). Howard argues that this change in mentality about the experience of travel as one which includes the return home can be seen as a marker of the end of the Middle Ages (47) and the beginning of a turn toward modernity where pilgrimages have "turning points, crossroads, and a return" (7).
than only "the sweet relief of getting back, lessons learned and memories nurtured" that Howard mentions as an inherent part of modern ideas of travel (48).  

The fact that the significance of long journeys and long-awaited returns can be so diverse and have been written about for so long clearly indicates that there is not a single or an "essential" homecoming story but rather, like love, life, and death, the act of returning constantly provides fresh material for writers. In terms of travel narratives, there is certainly no shortage of examples in contemporary literature either: Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* and Claude McKay's *Banana Bottom* are examples of American literature that explore this theme, and writers like Paul Thoreaux and V.S. Naipaul have authored a lifetime of stories of their travels throughout the world. In particular, Naipaul has been widely recognized—as well as frequently criticised—for his writings which chronicle his own "returns", both to his boyhood home of Trinidad and his ancestral home of India. These kinds of return narratives, whether to childhood or ancestral homes, have become increasingly common, particularly among diasporic and displaced populations. One of the best-known examples of this is Alex Haley's *Roots*, and, especially in the last couple of decades, postcolonial authors such as Abdulrazak Gurnah, Paule Marshall and Michael Ondaatje have penned their own autobiographical and fictional versions of "returning home".

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8 Volumes have been written about the significance of Odysseus' return—the fact that he arrives disguised, that it is the nurse who first recognizes him and that his reunion with Penelope is forestalled by Odysseus himself who must ascertain and address the situation before revealing his identity. Similarly, countless sermons and religious treatises have sought to explain what the lessons are behind the perplexing welcome the father gives his prodigal son in the Bible.

9 It is interesting to note that in American literature, where there is an obvious obsession with "hitting the road", there is a corresponding absence of "return" narratives. As Janis P. Stout explains in *Journey Narratives in American Literature: Patterns and Departures* (London: Greenwood Press, 1983), "to the American imagination the return has signified retreat" (66). She adds, "Retreat is, in general, the connotation of American homecoming narratives, because they employ the surrendering of the great venture into the unknown. However, in the journey to Europe—and, in general, in that form only—the homecoming is at times presented as the satisfaction of a feeling of nostalgia or loss" (70).


It is within these international and historical traditions that contemporary Malaysian and Singaporean return narratives find their place and make their contribution to what Homi Bhabha argues may be the terrain of new world literature—the "border and frontier conditions" and the "transnational histories of migrants, the colonised, or political refugees" rather than the transmission of national traditions (1994: 12). The history and tradition of such conditions in this region of the world goes back thousands of years and one can easily imagine that for as long as people have been migrating to Malaysia and Singapore—which was even before the Christian millennia—12—they have been writing of their experiences.13

It is the literature authored by Malaysians and Singaporeans themselves, however, which most accurately represents and speaks to these contemporary societies. Since the end of the colonial era and the formation of an independent Malaya (later Malaysia and Singapore), new identities have emerged and, in conjunction with them, previous identifications with linguistic, ethnic, or other communities have altered significantly. Prior to independence, many of the communities that had been established for a number of generations identified themselves according to linguistic background, religious beliefs and cultural practices. For example, the Straits-born Chinese,14 whose hybrid culture is hundreds of years old, have in previous generations most consistently identified themselves as Peranaks—distinct from either ethnic Chinese or Malays—with unique cultural, linguistic and social practices.15 In contrast, prior to the middle of the 20th century, most

12 See chapters one and two of D.G.E. Hall’s *A History of South-East Asia* (London: Macmillan, 1981) for some of the early history of migration in this part of the world.
13 Some of the best-known examples of literature written prior to the 20th century are narratives written by British colonisers, especially bureaucrats such as Hugh Clifford and Frank Swettenham. These writings, such as *Bushwhacking and Other Tales from Malaya* (Kingswood, Surry: The Windmill Press, 1929) and *Malay Sketches* (Singapore: Graham Brash, 1984) and others like them, have been resurrected and subjected to academic scrutiny even though—or perhaps because—their writers were "never fully sure, even in their most ambitious literary efforts, whether they [were] presenting faithful records of episodes from 'native' life - largely Malay - or self-sufficient fiction based on actual experience" (Fernando 1978: 133). See also Mohan Ambikaiaper’s article "Knowing the Natives: Racial Formations and Resistance in Early Colonial Narratives of Malaysia", *Kunapi* 22.1 (2000): 32-42. Even more popular, and still widely read today, are stories and autobiographical tales from the 20th century such as Joseph Conrad’s *Lord Jim* (London: Penguin, 1986), W. Somerset Maugham’s *Ah King and Other Stories* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1988) and Anthony Burgess’s *Malayan Trilogy* (London: Penguin, 1986) all of which were written and published mainly for British consumption.
14 Peranaks are also known as Babas, Baba-Nyonyas or Straits-born Chinese. See Lee Kam Hing and Tan Chee-Beng, *The Chinese in Malaysia* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 2000) 48-56.
15 In a classic example of concurrent loyalties and identifications, Wan Boon Seng, pen-name Pana Peranakan, stated the following in the first issue (October 1930) of his Singapore-based periodical
immigrant communities continued to locate themselves in relation to their countries of origin, a trend which is apparent in some of the texts I will be discussing. Among the Chinese communities, the allegiance to China was due at least in part to the fact that most writers in the late 19th and early 20th centuries were born and educated in China (Lee and Tan 346). In addition, political events in China, particularly the war with Japan that broke out in 1937, also encouraged Malaysian Chinese communities to view themselves as part of a Chinese diaspora (Lee and Tan 343).

However, these kinds of allegiances began to undergo enormous changes, first with the onset of World War II and the Japanese Occupation, and later with national independence. For example, in the immediate post-war period, a group of Malayan Chinese writers called for the establishment of a Malayan identity in local Chinese literature because they felt that "immigrant literature of the previous period had served its purpose and should therefore give way to a literature fully identified with the people and the country here" (Lee and Tan 346). Also, by 1947, 60 percent of the non-Malay population in Malaya was born locally (Lee and Tan 346), thus greatly increasing the number of people whose lived experience was rooted exclusively in what would soon become the nation of Malaya.

In the 1950's, the sense of a national identity among Malayans of all races became increasingly important, a trend which is clearly reflected in the literature of the time. For example, the burst of literary activity centred at the University of Malaya in Singapore was largely concerned with articulating and engaging social and political concerns of the time, particularly a rising sense of anticolonial nationalism. In the later part of the decade

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16 See in particular my discussion of Periathai's and Naina's relationship to India in Chapter Two and the father's relationship to China in Chapter Five.

17 Raffles College, founded in 1927, and King Edward the VIIth Medical College, founded in 1907, were incorporated into the University of Malaya in Singapore in 1949 (Thumboo x; Nair 2). The university was later relocated to Kuala Lumpur.

18 The 1950's also witnessed the formation of what came to be known as the Angkatan Sasterawan 50 (ASAS 50, for short) or the 1950's Movement of Writers, a movement focused on literature in Malay. As noted in the Introduction to An Anthology of Contemporary Malaysian Literature, "The ASAS 50 was initially founded by Malay writers in Singapore. Among those involved in the early phases were Kamaluddin Muhammad (Keris Mas), Masuri S.N., Mas, Hamzah, Usman Awang and Asraf. The
and into the 1960's there was another group of writers who were students at the university--including Lloyd Fernando, Ee Tiang Hong, and Edwin Thumboo--who have been defining influences in Malaysian and Singaporean literature (Nair 2). The deeply entrenched influence of British colonialism resulted in the majority of educational institutions following a British system, including the use of English as the medium of instruction, even after Malaya gained independence in 1957. Therefore, the early generations of Malaysians who received a tertiary level education did so almost exclusively in English whether at the University of Malaya or in Britain. Post-independence educational trends, however, generally followed those established during the colonial era and the most prestigious option was to receive an education overseas. The earliest batch of Malaysian students included those sent to Brinsford Lodge and Kirby College beginning in the 1950s for teacher training, and were generally expected to return to their homeland and carry on the tradition of English education in Malaya.

In the last forty-four years of Malaysia's existence as a nation (and the last thirty-six of Singapore's), this pattern of overseas travel, particularly for educational purposes, has continued to reflect the historical relationship between Britain and the commonwealth. After independence, students who had been educated in English and had the opportunity to study overseas more often than not went to England to acquire their academic training.19 However, in later years when it became increasingly common to study in other countries such as Australia, the U.S., New Zealand and Canada20 (all former British colonies where the medium of instruction is English), England was still considered to be the most prestigious and rigorous of the educational options, and, therefore, also the one most sought after. Even with increased regard for scholarship originating from other countries, the

general aims of the organization were to 'extend and develop Malay literature and culture; to protect the rights of all its members and its writers; to modernise Malay literature without destroying the old' (Husin Ali, 1960). The concept of literature of the ASAS 50 complemented its nationalistic aims" (Muhammad Haji Salleh, xxii).

19 Students who were educated in Chinese, Tamil or other Indian languages had, in previous decades, been sent with increasing frequency to China and India for secondary or tertiary education (Lee and Tan 25-6). This trend has generally become less common over time as more and more students have opportunities to study either in Malaysian universities or in overseas institutions where the medium of instruction is English. Nevertheless, such ties have not been severed completely and a small percentage of Malaysian students opt to go abroad to India or Taiwan each year for tertiary education.

20 See Lee and Tan 31.
belief in an unquestionably superior British education is one which has persisted until the present day. In the texts I will be discussing, this trend is apparent in a number of ways, including the fact that the majority of the characters leave home in pursuit of an education in England and are also shaped significantly by their own and other people's anglophile views.

The history of linguistic, educational and cultural ties between Malaysia/Singapore and Britain are also apparent in the common expectation for students educated overseas to return home after they complete their degrees. Various versions of this kind of assumption have been and, to a large extent, continue to be quite typical of society's expectations for young people who study overseas, an assumption that is apparent in the texts I will be discussing. Still following the model set up during the era of British colonialism, the expectation is that those students who are fortunate enough to study overseas, especially in Britain, are precisely the individuals who should return to be leaders, whether of their families, their ethnic or religious communities or even their nations. However, these returnees often face a big dilemma--while they conceive of their homeland as a location of belonging, the centre of knowledge is situated with the colonial power. This is a vivid example of the way in which the history of colonialism continues to shape contemporary, postcolonial mind-sets.

Nevertheless, there continue to be a number of Malaysians and Singaporeans who are educated overseas and who do in fact return home, most often due to a combination of circumstance and their own preference or choice, and it is this scenario that is most commonly found in the narratives I will be discussing. Sometimes these returns are permanent relocations, sometimes they are only temporary visits, but though the intention to

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21This prejudice, as well as its historical context, is very aptly expressed in the play Gold Rain and Hailstones when Jay's character comments: "My father, from whom I inherited this receding hairline if nothing else, went to Kirby College - oh, a hundred years ago. It was a big deal then - he was the first in his family to get a degree, let alone go overseas. By the time it got to my turn they were sending thousands every year. Everywhere. But mostly to the U.S. Even when we have trade policies against Britain, academically we're still pretty anglophilic. 'Oh, he's a foreign graduate, but U.S. degree only. Never mind, at least he got to go overseas'" (12).

22A good example of this can be found in Chapter Six in which I discuss Jit Murad's play Gold Rain and Hailstones.
remain on "home soil" indefinitely or for only a short while can shape a person's sense of home and self, in either case he or she is confronted with the challenging, disorienting and often anxiety-ridden experiences inherent in reacquainting the present self with what was once "home".

The role of creative writing

In order to more fully understand what people experience when they return home to Singapore or Malaysia and to investigate the underlying concepts with which they attempt to make sense of their thoughts and feelings, it may be fruitful to consider the role that the creative arts--especially fiction--play in exploring the experience of return. Typically, in instances when issues of migration are publicly addressed, the areas of social science and policy are the realms in which these discussions take place. However, travelling, living or returning from overseas encompass experiences which repeatedly and unrelentingly require people to question their most basic notions of who they are and where they belong--questions which a purely scientific vantage point can only partially explore.

To enable a more complete understanding of these issues and to formulate more informed and beneficial approaches towards them, it is imperative to recognize the importance of the creative arts in articulating the experience of return. In the difficult process of reorienting oneself to one's "home", knowing about the similar experiences of other people, including their psychic and emotional confusions, coping strategies, and occasional resolutions, can be one of the best ways to understand one's own experience. In general, individuals who go overseas and return home do seek each other out and evenform communities with others who are coping with what is sometimes referred to as "returnee's syndrome". However, a consciousness and understanding of this dilemma is limited when

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23 One literary example of such a community are the four characters in Gold Rain and Hailstones--Man, Nina, Jay and Amy. As I will explore in more detail in Chapter Six, characters in the other texts I will be discussing do not have similar communities of people with which to share their thoughts and feelings, thus resulting in a generally more interior, private and psychologically-focused kind of narrative.
discussions are only confined to conversations between friends and acquaintances. In contrast, when such experiences are brought into the realm of the arts where they can be reflected on, shared, interpreted and discussed in a larger and more public sphere, individuals and society alike have a much greater opportunity to more fully recognize and understand themselves, a process that is important and should be encouraged. As Paul Carter argues, "A migrant poetics, an understanding of the rules of translation, the metaphorical leaps involved in living in a new country, may contribute more to psychic health than any number of bureaucratic initiatives" (4). This thesis argues that if Malaysians and Singaporeans are to possess a lasting or healthy sense of who they are, where they come from and their place in the world, an understanding of the issues involved in the experience of not only leaving, but also returning home, needs to become part of the social consciousness.24

Contemporary Malaysian and Singaporean writers are among those people who have risen to the challenge of incorporating experiences of migration, notions of home and concepts of self into their medium of choice--writing. One of the most popular genres in recent generations has been poetry, an area in which a number of writers have been successful in claiming a name for themselves and for local literature. In particular, issues of home, homecoming and/or identity have been potent themes for poets like Edwin Thumboo, Shirley Lim, Hilary Tham, Wong Phui Nam and Charlene Rajendran. Because of the extensive material that exists in the genre of poetry, and the fact that, in comparison to Malaysian and Singaporean prose, it has been studied more extensively, in this thesis I have chosen to focus on short stories, novels and plays.

24 In addition to writers, a number of Malaysian and Singaporean visual artists, playwrights, directors and choreographers have been exploring the theme of migration in their recent works. One example from theatre is Leow Puay Tin's play Family, which tells the story of a Chinese family's migration to Malaya, and which was staged both by Singapore's TheatreWorks in 1995 and Malaysia's Five Arts Centre in 1998. In the field of dance, Marion D' Cruz and Dancers' movement piece Immigrant in Bangsar was performed in Kuala Lumpur in 1997 and 1998. In the visual arts, notable exhibits include Wong Hoy Cheong's Of Migrants and Rubber Trees (Kuala Lumpur: National Art Gallery, 1996) and Schools (Kuala Lumpur: Valentine Willie Fine Art, 1998). Schools featured artists (including Wong) whose lives had been influenced significantly by their years spent overseas, and yet their artistic work was very consciously engaged with Malaysia, "the place, the people, the flora and the history" being influences which were "formative to the development of [their] visual sensibility" (Mandal 1). See also Sumit Mandal's further commentary in the exhibit programme.
Stories, by their very nature, are defined by the existence of some sort of narrative—that is, something that "must involve the recounting of an event or events" that "can be either real or fictitious" (Hawthorn 1998: 149). Writers of short stories, novels or plays, therefore, draw on whatever resources of personal experience, observation, or knowledge they have at their disposal and, with the powers of their imagination, "recount" a certain fictional "event or events". In narratives of return, however, writers have the particular challenge of creating characters who, because of their circumstances, are prone to the extreme confusion, conflicts, perplexity and changes which are intrinsic to the "in-between spaces" where cultures and histories overlap. This sentiment is also echoed by K.S. Maniam who explains:

Fiction is, for me, the harnessing of all human resources so that the individual, writer or reader, can move towards a sense of completeness. . . . My fiction has moved towards exploring and revealing some principle of coherence or integration that could be the basis for developing a fuller attitude towards life and the appreciation of man's many-fold talents. (2001: 264)

These descriptions of what fiction is capable of and why it is important tie in directly with the texts I will be discussing and the stories that each of them tells. In their recounting of what happens to characters who return home, "clear, sharp, edited version[s]" (Gardner 38) of muddy, murky and messy experiences come alive. Without fail, all of the characters encounter difficult realities that require physical, mental and emotional adjustments—adjustments which sometimes must happen in the space of a single moment and others which require weeks, months or even years of on-going negotiation.

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25 The limitations of this study do not allow a thorough discussion of the many theoretical issues surrounding the terms "story" and "narrative", debates that make giving a singular definition difficult and problematic. A very concise introduction notable concepts and also theorists can be found in Jeremy Hawthorn's book A Concise Glossary of Contemporary Literary Theory. To enable a discussion of the importance of fiction, for the time being I have chosen definitions and frameworks which are intentionally broad and as uncontroversial as is possible when it comes to literary theory.

26 "In-between spaces", a term coined by Homi Bhabha, will be discussed in more detail in the "Theoretical framework" section of this Introduction.
Return narratives to be discussed

In order to explore the issues of identity and the adjustments which must be made when individuals return to a place they consider "home", I have chosen to use a number of different Malaysian and Singaporean texts. These texts include a novel, The Return by K.S. Maniam; four short stories, "Return to Malaya" by Lee Kok Liang, "Welcome" and "Wedding Night" by Gopal Baratham, and "A Dream of China" by Ovidia Yu; and the play Gold Rain and Hailstones by Jit Murad. Though any one of these texts could be the subject of a thesis in its own right, I have chosen to study them as a kind of community of fiction in order to explore how returning home and identity are addressed in contemporary Malaysian and Singaporean contexts.

Some explanation may also be due regarding my decision to include texts from various genres, as well as my choice to refer to all of these genres as "narrative". Many literary theorists and critics make a distinction, particularly where the term "narrative" is concerned, between drama and fiction. The roots of this distinction in fact originate in ancient Greek thought which divides mimesis from diegesis, or "showing" from "telling". In short, mimesis, which is typically associated with drama, is the "showing" of a story in which characters enact an imitation of the kind of action we find in life, whereas diegesis, typically associated with fiction, requires the existence of a story and a story-teller. However, although this distinction is frequently accepted in theoretical discourse, Seymour Chatman puts forward a convincing, valid argument that drama and fiction are more alike than they are different and that both should be considered "narrative". He argues succinctly:

To me, any text that presents a story--a sequence of events performed or experienced by characters--is first of all a narrative. Plays and novels share the common features of a chrono-logic of events, a set of characters, and a setting. Therefore, at a fundamental level they are all stories. The fact that one kind of story is told (diegesis) and the other shown (mimesis) is secondary. By "secondary" I do not mean that the difference is inconsequential. It is just that it is lower in the hierarchy of text distinctions than they difference between narrative and the other text-types. (117)
Following from this argument, I will refer collectively to the texts discussed in this thesis as "narratives" and also approach them from the standpoint that, regardless of their levels of actualisation (Chatman 110)--that is, whether they are told by performers who enact the story or by a narrative voice that tells it in print--their commonalities in narrating stories of Malaysians' and Singaporeans' returns home are more significant than their differences.

**Theoretical framework**

In the study of postcolonial literature, issues of identity have frequently been a focus of theoretical and critical approaches. Building on the important work that has been done in this area, I will also be utilising certain contemporary approaches and perspectives--particularly those from the fields of cultural and postcolonial studies--about the formation of identity in my discussion of Malaysian and Singaporean return narratives.

The consideration of the nature of physical movement from one place to another and the important role this plays in people's notions of identity is beginning to receive considerable critical attention from literary theorists. Theories about space, place and movement have for a long time garnered attention primarily from geographers, anthropologists and political scientists. Now, however, an important area where the social scientists and literary theorists have found common ground is in the study of travel literature, in part because it provides fertile ground for exploring themes such as the formation of identity and the creation of subject positions--that site from which one perceives, interprets and assigns meaning.27 However, many of the theoretical issues that address feelings of displacement and the sense of unhomeliness when travelling to a

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27 Jeremy Hawthorn describes the "traditional sense of subject as an abbreviation of the conscious thinking subject, meaning the self or ego... or cogito" and adds--appropriately--that it "has been pressed into service in a largely pejorative sense in recent theoretical writing" (1997: 235). The "subject position" is in contrast to an "object position" where one is perceived, is interpreted, is assigned meaning by others. For the purposes of clarity, I have exaggerated this dichotomy. See especially Louis Althusser's discussion of "interpellation" and "ideology" in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: New Left Books, 1971) 66.
new place are important not only in travel writing, but are also central to accounts of characters who are confronted with the disorienting experience of returning home.

In these experiences, it is important to give appropriate weight to the fact that the changes in consciousness, subjectivity or identity for characters happen in the process of physically—as well as culturally—moving from one place to another. As James Duncan and Derek Gregory highlight, "some critical readings fail to register the production of travel writings by corporeal subjects moving through material landscapes" (5), a point which is similarly applicable to the texts I will be discussing. Although the texts I am looking at do not fall into the category of "travel writing", they may, however, also be described as belonging to a genre which fits "uneasily perhaps into a niche somewhere between fiction and autobiography" (Shattock 151).28 One of the reasons why it is important to highlight that the characters being discussed are "subjects moving through material landscapes" is that the protagonists all experience a vast difference between their imaginings of home while they are away and the particular, sometimes distressing, situations and emotions that a direct encounter with a specifiable location engender. In this way, it is obvious that one's "home" is a composite of how a person imagines a place, based on recalled memories of the past, and what they encounter in the immediate, present moments when they physically return to the homeland.

Recognizing the role of physical space in the act of returning is also important because, as Michael Keith and Steve Pile state in their Introduction to Place and the Politics of Identity, "spatialities draw on a relationship between the real, the imaginary and the symbolic" (9). It is these dimensions of space that characters struggle with when they return home. They expect to establish or find a stable identity, but instead

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28 In particular, The Return is frequently referred to as an autobiographical novel. Maniam also makes this assertion when he writes that the stories in Malaysian Short Stories, his novel The Return, and his play The Cord "portray the Indian community in Malaysia. Being of Malaysian Indian origin myself, it seems only natural that I write about my own community. It is commonly accepted that a writer writes about what he knows best. That material would stem from his immediate background, society outside his family and his educational background" (2001: 263). In addition, all of the authors of the texts I will be discussing have lived or studied overseas.
often find uneasiness and strangeness rather than comfort and familiarity. As bell hooks argues: "for those who have no place that can be safely called home, there must be a struggle for a place to be" (qtd. in Keith and Pile 5), and for these characters, this struggle takes place in the space of their Malaysian or Singaporean homes. What is important to recognize here is that the direct experience of the homeland repeatedly challenges characters' expectations and imaginings of their homes and themselves, and the process of mediating identity is the result of an on-going negotiation between the two.

This relationship between imagined and actual experiences of a place is another significant similarity between both travel and return narratives. Both involve what can be understood as

an act of translation that constantly works to produce a tense 'space in-between'. Defined literally, 'translation' means to be transported from one place to another, so that it is caught up in a complex dialectic between the recognition and recuperation of difference. (Miller qtd. in Duncan and Gregory 4)

This "space in-between" is akin to what Homi Bhabha calls "in-between spaces" which he describes as "those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences" (1997: 1). These spaces are usually encountered when one travels out of a familiar sphere into a different place. However, when the "translation" required of such a situation occurs in a home context, the tension of this "space in-between" is further heightened. Because the conflict between what is recognized and what is new occurs in a space and with people that were previously "known", one is confronted with the fact that knowledge, expectations and memories of home are both subjective and in flux, rather than static, pre-determined or stable. This realization is one which is uncomfortable and disorienting for most people, and is also apparent in the characters discussed in this thesis.
Another important dimension of Bhabha's theory about "in-between spaces" is that these spaces "provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood--singular or communal--that initiate new signs of identity" (1997: 1-2, emphasis added). Particularly in the case of characters who return home, there is a dramatic difference in the way that they view themselves--their "singular" identity--and the way in which they are viewed by other people and the community at large--their "communal" identity. As a result, a significant aspect of their return experience is often dictated by the need to understand and reconcile these two integral, but often opposing, parts of their identity.

Not only must characters confront the challenges of differing notions about who they are, but the relationship between place and self also raises similar questions. As they re-enter the home space after being overseas, they invariably experience a "disjunction" (Bhabha 1997: 5) between what is remembered, imagined, or expected and what in fact is encountered. Zygmunt Baumann observes: "One thinks of identity whenever one is not sure of where one belongs" (19), and, contrary to expectations, people may come to feel that "home" may not necessarily be where they "belong". Nevertheless, even if this is the case, characters are bound to ask some version of the questions, "If not here, then where? And if "this" is not who I am, then who am I?"

These questions of identity have been addressed by theorists from various disciplines, but perhaps most extensively by those involved in the fields of cultural, postmodern and postcolonial studies. One of the most basic and important, but perhaps most challenging ideas in theories of identity is the criticism "of the notion of an integral, originary and unified identity" (Hall 1996: 1). Stuart Hall clarifies the distinction between the commonly believed and easily understood, albeit inaccurate, concept of "identification" and the more challenging, but more illuminating and appropriate, "discursive approach" to identity:

In common sense language, identification is constructed on the back of a recognition of some common origin or shared characteristics with another person or group, or with an ideal, and with the natural closure of solidarity and allegiance established on this foundation. In contrast with
the 'naturalism' of this definition, the discursive approach sees identification as a construction, a process never completed--always 'in process'. It is not determined in the sense that it can always be 'won' or 'lost', sustained or abandoned. Though not without its determinate conditions of existence, including the material and symbolic resources required to sustain it, identification is in the end conditional, lodged in contingency. (1996: 2-3)

The conflict between these two concepts of identification noted above is central to the issues faced by the fictional characters in this study who return home to Malaysia or Singapore. The returnees, as well as the larger communities to which they return, seek to "recognize" each other and, when such recognition is not immediately possible, to "translate" that which is different or new. And yet the experience of identifying more often than not proves to be uncomfortable and disorienting physically, mentally and emotionally.

Another important dimension in the formation and articulation of identity is the tension that exists between the kinds of "subject positions" that are created by and for various characters--positions that constitute a tense and disorienting negotiation between the characters themselves and the larger communities to which they return. All the texts I will be discussing demonstrate various kinds of gaps or disjunctions between the returnees and their home cultures, gaps which exist because of differences in ideologies and their attendant discourses. Although these kinds of experiences often have negative connotations for the characters, feelings of disorientation, loneliness, confusion or discomfort often reveal a great deal about ways of understanding and negotiating identity. In this case, Hall's definition of "identity" is especially useful:

I use 'identity' to refer to the meeting point, the point of 'suture', between on the one hand the discourses and practices which attempt to 'interpellate', speak to us or hail us into place as the social subjects of particular discourses, and on the other hand, the processes which produce subjectivities, which construct us as subjects which can be 'spoken'. Identities are thus points of temporary attachment to the subject positions which discursive practices construct for us. (1996: 5-6, emphasis added)

There are a number of important points to note in this definition. First of all, it highlights the role played by both the forces which "hail us into place as . . . social subjects" as well as "the processes which produce subjectivities". That is, in the
formation of identity we must recognize that society and the individual both must be in
dialogue with and answer to one another for an "identity" to be formed. For the
characters that I will be discussing, these different forces are often in conflict with each
other, and yet neither one can be ignored or subtracted from the equation of what forms
identity. In addition, Hall's definition clarifies that identities are "points of temporary
attachment to the subject positions which discursive practices construct for us" (emphasis added), a point which helps shed light on many of the changes and
negotiations made by various characters.

An additional challenge encountered by characters who return home is that they
are often required to try to solve their "problems" of identity individually rather than
collectively. Baumann sheds light on this phenomenon:

Identity entered modern mind and practice dressed from the start as an
individual task. It was up to the individual to find escape from
uncertainty. Not for the first and not for the last time, socially created
problems were to be resolved by individual efforts, and collective
maladies healed by private medicine. (19)

When the escape from the uncertainty of identity is conceived as an individual task, the
implication is also that the "problem" is of an individual nature. But, as Baumann
points out, the true nature of this "problem" is that it is a "socially created one" where a
society, through ideology, articulates that which it expects individuals to be part of.
When an individual returns home, she or he comes back to a particular ideological
context which by its very existence is different from the one that was experienced,
accommodated and incorporated into their sense of self while overseas. Therefore, the
uncertainty, which is primarily one of different and sometimes conflicting ideologies, is
nevertheless experienced most intensely by the returning individual and is also typically
left to the individual to "solve" on her/his own. In addition, the dominant ideology of
the larger community which the individual re-enters possesses the enormous advantage
of its collective power and, consequently, its normalised status in the given society. As
a result, the returnee's ambivalence, discomfort, uneasiness or any other inability to
"join" (Bhabha 1997: 18) the dominant majority is most always relegated to the realm of
being an individual "problem", therefore maintaining the perceived wholeness of the larger community.

What the experiences of these contemporary Malaysian and Singaporean characters highlight, however, is that no matter how much they or others may imagine their difficulties to be individual in nature, the returnees in fact embody the ambivalence and questions which lie at the root of societies' conceptions of themselves. However a group of people imagines or defines its identity, it must be "constructed through, not outside difference (Hall 1996: 4-5) and therefore, the sense of "self"--whether individual and collective--can only exist through encountering difference.29 In the texts I will be discussing, characters often respond by thinking in binaries--"English" vs. "Tamil", "Singapore" vs. "China", "individual" vs. "community", etc. However, their return experiences often force them into confronting the limitations and unsteadiness of such binaries and instead indicate that making sense of one's self is much more about understanding and accepting the fluid and ambivalent nature of identity.

Conclusion

As Howard notes in the epigraph, just as a pilgrimage can be characterised as dreamlike, returning home is similar to the dramatic and unsettling experience of awakening and attempting to find one's grounding in what one suddenly faces as being "reality". However, just as the dreamer's sense of "the real" is affected by the dream, the returning character's understanding of home--and of themselves--is altered by the ways she or he has been changed by the "foreign" experience. In addition, a negotiation of memories and expectations with the immediate and direct experiences encountered in

29 One of the first literary critics to address the importance of "difference" in the creation of meaning, particularly in the realm of linguistics, was Ferdinand de Saussure. Perhaps more important for the issues under discussion in this study, however, is Jacques Derrida's term "differance". As Jeremy Hawhorn summarises, differance "a portmanteau term...bringing together (in its French original) the senses of difference and deferment". In addition, differance "sees meaning as permanently deferred, always subject to and produced by its difference from other meanings and thus volatile and unstable. Meaning is always relational, never self-present or self-constituted" (1997: 51). The ideas of difference and differance have led to a tremendous amount of important theoretical scholarship, particularly in the areas of feminist and queer theory and in the exploration of the nature of binary thought.
the home space pose considerable challenges to characters' sense of their own identity. In my own discussion of Malaysian and Singaporean characters' return experiences, I will be using Bhabha's notion of "spaces in-between"--or "in-between spaces" to explore the ambivalent, confusing and often contradictory feelings that characterise these encounters. In addition, I will be looking at these characters' identities as being at "the point of suture" where they are both "hailed into place as social subjects of particular discourses" and where they "produce subjectivities" of their own (Hall 1996: 5-6). I will also be focusing primarily on how, in the face of such challenges, characters' identities are actually "about questions of using the resources of history, language and culture in the process of becoming rather than being" (Hall 1996: 4), and my discussion looks at how they negotiate the tensions between conflicting notions and experiences of essential or constructed identities, both as a result of how they see themselves and how others conceive of them. Lastly, I will explore the important dimension that physical movement and presence play in the formation of identity for characters who return home to Singapore and Malaysia.