Chapter 3: 
"Welcome" and "Wedding Night"

"Welcome" and "Wedding Night", the first two stories in City of Forgetting: The Collected Stories of Gopal Baratham, are narratives that, like The Return, focus primarily on individual male characters from Tamil communities. In this case, the characters are also Singaporean Tamils who look to England and things "English" for a sense of their individual identities and this sets them apart from their home communities. Unlike K.S. Maniam, however, Gopal Baratham chooses to write his stories in a humorous vein, poking fun at the characters and communities that populate his stories and exposing their weaknesses with his ruthless wit. In part, this humour serves to highlight the orientalist ideas that these anglicised protagonists have internalized about self and home community. Although their stereotypical views serve to partially confirm these notions, the narratives as a whole interrogate the colonialist discourse that the protagonists take to be truth.

Baratham also capitalises on the unique opportunities of his genre, the short story, by often drawing out a single scene for a number of pages in order to highlight the significance of particular details as they build to climactic narrative moments. This technique is especially relevant to my study of return because both stories detail the growing anxiety of the main characters as they attempt--and fail--to maintain their composure and their carefully protected, "English" identities when confronted with the challenges posed by their "Tamil" home contexts. In particular, these characters' failed attempts suggest an underlying consciousness on the part of the author that identities cannot be "'won' or 'lost', sustained or abandoned" (Hall 1994: 13), but instead are "incessantly reconstituted, and, as such, are subject to the volatile logic of iterability. They are that which is constantly marshalled, consolidated, retrenched, contested and, on occasion, compelled to give way" (Butler qtd. in Hall 1994: 17). In the cases of
Baratham’s protagonists--Bala and Krishna--their identities are indeed subjected to such processes and, as I will discuss, are also at last "compelled to give way".

Welcome

In both "Welcome" and "Wedding Night", the points of view expressed in the narratives come primarily from adult male characters who have a great deal in common: both have been studying in England for a number of years, both conceive of themselves as more "English" than "Tamil" (or for that matter "Singaporean") and both have an excessive dread of having to confront their Tamil families--a dread remarkably similar to the anxiety felt by British colonists about "native" cultures. However, in "Welcome", there is also a second character--Bala's English wife, Margaret--whose perspective and reactions are important especially in the earlier half of the narrative that recounts her and Bala's impending arrival in Singapore. For Margaret, however, this is a first arrival rather than a return home and, as such, her thoughts and worries are quite different from her husband's. In short, her concern is focused on the fact that she does not know what to expect from Bala's family or from Singapore, and therefore worries about these enormous unknowns that are about to become significant parts of her life as soon as the boat docks. In contrast, because Bala is returning to a context that he has previously known, his fear is that he does know what to expect from his family, and dreads that these expectations will be fulfilled.

One of the manifestations of this underlying yet immensely significant difference between Bala's and Margaret's feelings and reactions is the physical distance which exists between the two of them at the outset of the story, as well as at its conclusion. This space also functions as a metaphorical distance between the two individuals, reflecting the "space in-between" the two cultures that are about to meet. This "space in-between" the two cultures--between Bala's consciousness of "Englishness" and "Tamilness" and between Bala and Margaret themselves--becomes
more anxiety-ridden as the time and place of the encounter (what Hall refers to as a "point of suture") draws nearer.

To begin, the distance between Bala and Margaret at the beginning of the narrative--Margaret is in her cabin whereas Bala is on deck--and the spaces each of them inhabit indicate their different concerns with regard to their impending arrival. Not only are the two of them not physically together, a fact that further highlights their different concerns and feelings about the events of the near future, but also the specific choice of their respective locations is telling. Margaret's anxiety and nervousness are manifested completely in her concern with the way she will be viewed by Bala's family and, as such, she gazes in the mirror while attempting to tie her sari. What this indicates is that her concern is more physical and visual than her husband's fear, which is primarily emotional and psychological. In contrast to Margaret, his worry stems from what he knows he should expect, based on his knowledge of his home community, including his expectations of the party that will be greeting them when they arrive. Perhaps most of all, he worries excessively about the scene of arrival when Margaret, "normally undemonstrative, hygienically distant and impeccably English" (44), will meet his relatives, "extravagantly emotional, instantly intimate and uncompromisingly Tamil" (44).36 In this conception of the dramatic conflict which he imagines is soon to ensue, Bala has clearly essentialised "Englishness" and "Tamilness", pitting them against each other as two opposing and irreconcilable forces. Therefore, as if trying to foresee how this conflict between the "English" and the "Tamil" might be averted or its impact at least lessened, Bala looks at the shore, trying "to distinguish individuals among the mass of humanity waiting on the wharf" (44).

The physical separation between Bala and Margaret at the beginning of the story also indicates the inherent difference between arriving in a place for the first time and

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36 All subsequent references to "Welcome" are from The City of Forgetting: The Collected Stories of Gopal_Barathram, ed. Ban Kah Choon (Kuala Lumpur: Times Books Intl., 2001) 42-7 and will be referred to by page number.
returning to a place one has previously known. For Margaret, who knows very little about the people she is about to meet, especially because "Bala had been particularly uncommunicative about his family" (43), her concern is with herself and her fear that she may not be accepted. The fact that she has been attempting to tie her sari for two hours indicates her dedication to fitting in as much as possible and, in addition, the comical description of the state of her sun-burnt skin, which she had "hoped would make her less conspicuous among the brown-skinned people of Singapore" (43), again testifies to her desire to be accepted and not stand out. At the same time, however, this desire also betrays her lack of knowledge about the place in which she is about to arrive and about Singaporeans—many of whom would also have fair skin—as well as her western assumption of racial difference being marked largely by physiognomy. Her particular preoccupation with skin colour, and its typically orientalist associations, is also noted when the narrator tells us that her husband "had the kind of dark, smooth skin which unfailingly aroused in Margaret an unbridled lust" (43), a phrase which suggests a parody of the "civilised" white woman's uncontrollable sexual attraction to dark-skinned "natives". However, the importance of Bala's "charm" and the "lust" his skin inspires suddenly pale in comparison to the anxiety she has been experiencing in her preparation for arrival in Singapore. In fact, her general worry and immediate frustration cause her to go so far as to "bitterly regret . . . the indiscretion that had resulted in Babu [her son], her hurried marriage to Bala and the lunatic urge that had moved them to return to Singapore" (43)—thoughts which seem especially foreboding for a woman who has chosen to marry, have a child and follow her husband half-way round the world. The lack of shared knowledge between her and Bala as well as the distance between them in terms of their differing concerns about the impending arrival are further confirmed in the final sentence of the section that focuses on her: "She had met and married her husband in an environment which was entirely foreign to him and which was in many ways completely artificial and admitted to herself that she could not expect to really understand him" (43).
For Bala, who is nervously pacing the deck above, this arrival in Singapore is not an anxiety-ridden adventure into the unknown, but rather an anxious return to what he believes he knows very well. For instance, when "the deodorant he had applied so liberally in the morning was already losing the battle against the sweat provoked by wool, heat and anxiety" (43), his thoughts depict a typical colonial representations of the east:

he was certain that however malodorous his person might become all smells would soon be drowned in the symphony of odours is awaiting relatives were even now, doubtless, generating. Normally sweaty, they invariably embellished their natural pungency by the liberal use of perfumes of near-anaesthetic potency, not to mention the stale alcoholic fumes that would hang like haloes over several of their heads. (43-4)

Here again, Bala's internalized colonialist perspective is apparent in that the predominant characteristic he notes of his home community is their "sweaty", "pungent", "potent" and "stale" smell. When the ship draws closer to shore and the members of the crowd are more clearly visible, again Bala's thoughts indicate that he knows what behaviour to expect: "The manner in which some of them staggered left Bala little doubt as to how they had spent the earlier part of the afternoon and he was sure that Uncle Sambasivam would be outstanding in this group" (44). When he and Margaret do disembark, every expectation he has had is in fact played out, including his earlier realisation "that hopes are often the harbingers of disaster" (44). The crowd which greets them is every bit as emotional, intimate, physical and drunk as he feared they would be, down to the fine detail of Uncle Sambasivam being the most inebriated of them all. The fulfilment of all of Bala's expectations serves to clarify for the reader that, even given his absence of five years, the home he returns to is largely the same as he left it, and as unchanged in precisely the ways he feared it would remain unchanged.

However, the single significant change that has taken place in his absence is the death of his mother. Unfortunately for Bala, his "best hope [had] resided in his mother on whose good sense he had always depended" and he had been hopeful that "she would have used her authority to limit both numbers and alcohol consumption" (44). Obviously, though, her death has made it impossible to exert her influence over the
family--instead, it is the enormous Mariama who leads the crowd and informs Bala, "I am the oldest member of her [Bala's mother's] village and therefore took upon myself the heavy burden of greeting you with this sorrowful news" (46). As a testament to what is of most concern to Bala, however, he meets the news of his mother's death with the fear "that he would soon join his recently deceased parent" as a result of being "pinned under [Mariama's] mountain of flesh" (46), rather than being shocked or grief-stricken at this unexpected news. This particular fear is yet another example of the typical colonialist horror of "natives" physical bodies and it indicates Bala's internalisation of this "English" perspective.

Bala's anxiety about the encounter between the English and the Tamil is also an external re-enactment of what has happened to him internally--the Tamil meeting the English and the English meeting the Tamil. However, as the final line of the story clarifies, this is also "home"--not only a place where he comes from, but also where he has chosen to return and, perhaps most importantly, a place he belongs to. Therefore, this homecoming can also be seen as a return, whether desired or not, of Bala to his "Tamil" self, a "reacquaintance" sure to be as difficult and anxiety-ridden as the imminent meeting with his relatives.

The twist, however, is that though the "English" has previously won out in terms of Bala's conception of himself (as evidenced by his Saville Row suit, liberal application of deodorant and views about his home community), in this scene, the Tamil aspect of his identity is quite clearly more powerful and destined for victory. This fact is driven home in particular by the incredible physical size and force of both the crowd and of Mariama, again conveying a sense of typical colonial anxiety. In addition, the physical impact experienced upon arrival highlights the important differences that exist between a homecoming that is imagined and one that actually takes place, particularly for a character like Bala. The fact that he is travelling by ship and that methods of communication have not allowed him to learn of his mother's death indicate that his homecoming would have taken place during the initial generation of Singaporeans who
were educated overseas and who would therefore have little idea about how two very different cultures would or even could meet, much less co-exist.

The incredible power inherent in the experience of return, particularly for Bala's character, is foreshadowed as the ship approaches the dock and he observes the crowd that awaits him: "Orange jostled beside purple, gold crashed against blue, scarlet interrupted mauve. Yet somehow this optical tornado achieved a certain cohesion. Chaos was their order as they swayed, jostled, jumped, waved and literally overran each other in their excitement" (44). Likening the crowd to a tornado immediately highlights its extraordinary power, a force into which Bala and his new family are pulled. Not only is the power of the crowd incredible, it is also led by the enormous Mariama who he describes as having

a build that would make a Sumo wrestler resemble an inmate of Belsen. Her skin had that depth of blackness which intermittently produces the illusion of grey as thought the eye, bombarded by an excess of black, sought refuge in an alternative shade. Her eyes, almost invisible in this abundance of face, were overhung by a hairline so low that distinction between it and eyebrow was impossible. (45)

Once the ship docks, Bala experiences first-hand the physical power of Mariama.

Before he had quite reached the bottom of the gangway the purple woman reached out and placed the garland round his neck with the greeting "Vanakkham. Welcome"—then hurled herself forward, engulfing him in her infinite bosom and including in some recess of her enormous person both suitcases and holdalls. The gesture was so unexpected that Bala was unable to take evasive action. In attempting to extricate himself from her, he slipped down the end of the gangway and crashed onto the dockside, losing his suitcase in the process but not the embrace of the large woman who crashed to the ground with him. (45)

This extract represents Bala's total loss of control in which his restraint and cultivated poise fall apart. This scene also effects Margaret who, "horrified by what she saw happening to Bala" (46), attempts to retreat up the gangplank to safety. Her earlier fear of the unknown instantaneously becomes a horror of what she observes and, fearing that "some form of sexual assault [is] imminent" from Uncle Sambasivam, "eyes bloodshot, exuding fumes of alcohol almost undiluted with air, and hoarsely screaming 'Premai, premai. Dearest, dearest" (46), she flees back toward the ship. However, like her
husband, she too is unable to escape as Uncle Sambasivam catches up with her and embraces her and Babu "in a highly alcoholic but unmistakably avuncular embrace" (46). That is, in the very moment of the meeting of the English and the Tamil, Bala is immediately wrenched from the ship onto the land that is his home and Margaret, as well as her son Babu, though attempting to flee back to the ship, are also physically overpowered and "embraced" in "Tamilness".

The fact that Bala and Margaret are totally overwhelmed by Bala's family seems to indicate that there is no way for there to be a gentle, graceful, comfortable meeting between the English and the Tamil cultures and, in this case, the Tamil culture is destined to win. Not only are Bala and Margaret physically "captured"--Bala is entirely unable to extricate himself from Mariama--but the final lines of the narrative demonstrate how this physical force also possesses an emotional and mental dimension as well. "Bewildered, breathless and now virtually blinded, Bala was acutely aware of a fact as inescapable as the embrace he was in. He was home" (47). In spite of his English clothes, wife, experiences and even perspectives, the Tamil side has triumphed.

This climactic conclusion to the narrative highlights a number of important aspects about the way in which Bala experiences his identity. His return challenges his essentialising views about identity--what he labels as "Tamil" and "English" are, he believes, mutually exclusive and incompatible. The only way in which he is able to imagine or experience the two of them together is in a relationship of opposition where any "space in-between" is characterised by conflict. This is particularly apparent in the way he experiences Mariama (as well as the way Margaret experiences Uncle Sambasivam)--he is "hailed into place" (Hall 1996: 5) not only by the discourse of a Tamil context, but by the physical overpowering of his very being.

Although the binary set up between "Tamil" and "English" is perhaps at its peak in this dramatic conclusion, what is simultaneously challenged is the ostensibly objective viewpoint espoused by Bala about what "is" English and therefore also who
and what he "is". E. Laclau explains: "If... an objectivity manages to partially affirm itself it is only by repressing that which threatens it. Derrida has shown how an identity's constitution is always based on excluding something and establishing a violent hierarchy between the two resultant poles--man/woman, etc." (qtd. in Hall 1996: 5). In Bala's case, the typical hierarchy of English/Tamil is overturned, thereby calling into question the very basis of its existence and suggesting instead that identity is "in the end conditional, lodged in contingency" (Hall 1996: 3). In addition, the "fact" of which Bala is "acutely aware"--"he was home"--indicates that identities, as well as homes, are determined by the power of the contexts and discourses in which they operate rather than by individuals who seek to uphold "objective" definitions and what they view as inherent truths.

**Wedding Night**

In its scenario and characterisation of its protagonist, "Wedding Night" is in many ways quite similar to "Welcome". The short story relates in a very witty and humorous tone the return of a young man who has been studying overseas in the U.K.--in this case medicine rather than law--to Singapore. Like Bala in "Welcome", Krishna is extremely uncomfortable with and even contemptuous of the community he comes from. He dreads meeting them, finds fault with the fact that they are noisy, effusive, emotional, drunk and community-focused, and imagines himself very much an unwilling participant in the wedding festivities. In addition, at the conclusion of the story (as is the case with Bala in "Welcome") Krishna's attempt to remain separate and uninvolved in his extended family's "demonstrative" and "outrageous" behaviour fails completely and hilariously.

However, despite these similarities to "Welcome", there are a number of notable differences that distinguish "Wedding Night" as a return narrative and illuminate various aspects of the experience and process of returning. One of the most significant of these differences is the fact that Krishna, the central character in "Wedding Night", 
has returned to Singapore and Malaysia to visit his ailing father and not to remain there permanently. This is important because Krishna consistently maintains the belief that his thoughts and actions are only temporary, while his "true" self and identity—"the bit of the self which remains always-already 'the same', identical to itself across time" (Hall 1996: 3)—remains stable in an English context. Also, he relies on the fact that he can and will return "home" to England, thus being able to manage a graceful and easy "escape" from his family into the safety of his English identity. This "safety package" of having a "home" to return to at will (Mathews 30) also indicates that Krishna conceives of himself as a "tourist" in Singapore and Malaysia rather than a "native", an identity which he constructs early in the story:

In his seven years abroad Krishna had cultivated a belief in the sanctity of privacy and developed an abhorrence for demonstrativeness, an attitude which had significantly contributed towards his acceptability in Britain. He pursued under all circumstances a policy of nonintervention in the affairs of others and, if commitment was demanded, assumed an indifference which he felt was the only basis for a civilised society. (48)

Notably, what Krishna believes to be "the only basis for a civilised society" is not a characteristic of Tamil community. This clearly indicates that he not only sees Tamils from a particularly imperialist point of view, as is evidenced by his appropriation of the notion of what makes a society "civilised", but he also excludes himself from this judgment by conceiving of himself as English.

Another important difference in "Wedding Night" is that the scenario into which we are invited allows us to observe Krishna's trip from Singapore through Malaysia and then, more fully, his participation in his cousin's wedding festivities. In this regard, the treatment of the return motif is different than in "Welcome" in that there is no anticipation of arriving "home" and conceiving of the home space in terms of geography, nation or even family. A crucial distinction needs to be made that this story

37 It is important to note the fact that this story makes no real distinction between Singapore and Malaysia—instead, the overriding and important identification is Tamil. This may be an irrelevant point, particularly if we imagine that the story is set before Singapore became independent. Given the fact that
depicts the act of returning as a longer, more gradual and also more unconscious process rather than one that climaxes in a single dramatic moment of arrival. In Krishna's case, this process of returning entails a period of days, if not weeks, and can therefore be seen as a series of arrivals. First is his arrival in Singapore and re-entry into family life (which are only alluded to as background to the main story); then he travels to his uncle's home and re-enters a larger Malaysian society; next, he arrives at the wedding; and, lastly, he gradually returns to his "Tamil" identity during the course of the night. As with "Welcome", however, one important aspect of these series of arrivals is the fact that they are actually returns to what Krishna has known before (though has, in some cases, "forgotten") and also what he has very consciously and willingly left behind. He therefore knows, to a large extent, what he fears, what he dislikes and how he sees himself as different from these people and this culture that he comes from.

Though "Wedding Night" focuses primarily on Krishna's relationship to his family, the early part of the story depicting his two-hundred mile journey by car from Singapore introduces a more general context for his alienation which also, to a large extent, foreshadows the narrative's outcome in which he reiterates his "difference" from his family. The car journey also indicates a deferred arrival, as it would seem that he has managed to avoid confronting the people and landscape of Singapore during the days or perhaps weeks he has already spent there. When his car breaks down, the reader is acutely aware of his suspicion and also his fear of both the larger society and also the land itself:

He got out and tried to hail passing cars. His attempts turned out to be near-disasters, for each of their drivers seemed unswerving in a determination to run him down. Quite suddenly the sun dropped behind the trees that lined the road, then disappeared altogether. The surrounding jungle, monotonous by daylight, became sinister when filled with the sounds of invisible animals. He was alone and afraid. The country and people he had tried to disown were taking revenge. Filled with fear and its inseparable accomplice, humiliation, he decided to abandon the wedding altogether. He would lock himself up in the car for the night, head for Singapore in the morning and get back to Britain at the earliest possible opportunity. (49-50)
We observe that, in a situation in which Krishna is no longer in control of or comfortable with his surroundings, he immediately becomes fearful and feels the only solution is to flee "back to Britain at the earliest possible opportunity" (50). Later, when he does arrive at the wedding, he is quickly cast into a setting, this time a social and cultural one, in which again he is not comfortable. Here, he wishes but is unable to flee the setting, and eventually finds himself at its mercy.

Another dimension of Krishna's experience is that, without an "English" family to introduce to his "Tamil" family, or vice versa, Krishna's worries and difficulties are thoroughly focused on his own self. This focus highlights the particular nature of his return as one in which his conflicting identities are negotiated internally and without the presence of anyone that can sympathise with or share in his experience. As a result, he can remain privately smug and self-assured about his own "English" superiority while tolerating his family members, who are repeatedly described in exaggerated orientalist stereotypes. "Krishna had often heard the Tamils described as a vociferous and colourful people. The description does them a grave injustice. The Tamils can, using the simple elements of light, colour and the human voice, create a kaleidoscopic babel of unimaginable proportions" (51). In contrast, we recall that Krishna, who has thoroughly internalized a colonial British perspective about both his family and himself, thinks of himself as having "cultivated a belief in the sanctity of privacy and developed an abhorrence for demonstrativeness" (48), an attitude that serves to set him apart from his Tamil family. In addition, Baratham also adds that this quality "had significantly contributed towards his acceptability in Britain" (48), a detail which points to his awareness of orientalist discourse and its functions, and which would suggest a critical reading of the protagonist's perspective.

Krishna's contemptuous anti-Tamilness and pro-Englishness is extensively expressed and developed in "Wedding Night" in that his character is drawn out slowly as he goes through the process of acting increasingly Tamil. Hence, his experience is not confined to a brief span of time, a single location or a conclusive, climactic moment.
Like Bala, Krishna's arrival at the scene of the wedding "fulfilled his worst expectations", but the story does not end there. Rather, this initiates the most interesting part of the story as he becomes more and more "Tamil" over the course of the night, a progression which highlights the way in which identity is necessarily "a construction, a process never completed--always 'in process'" (Hall 1996: 2).

Krishna's shift into "Tamilness" over the course of the night is due largely to the fact that he is so convinced of his "Englishness" and his "difference" from his family that he cannot recognize himself as part of this community. Therefore, although he participates in the wedding festivities, he continues to maintain to himself that he only does so because the occasion requires it of him, and not because he relates to, identifies with or even enjoys such "uncivilised" behaviour. He appropriates a notion of identity as something that "can always be 'won' or 'lost', sustained or abandoned" (Hall 1996: 2) and therefore, his identification with his Tamil identity entails a loss of his "English" identity in which he has heavily invested. Identifying himself as "Tamil" would require him to do the "impossible" of either rethinking the essentialised characteristics he has assigned to his relatives and to himself and, as a result, he continues to maintain his strict and contrasting notions of who he is and who his family is, even in the face of increasingly obvious evidence that identity is "in the end conditional, lodged in contingency" (Hall 1996: 3).

One of the excuses that Krishna gives for his increasingly "Tamil" behaviour is that he imbibes more and more alcohol as the evening progresses: "Asian guests, Krishna remembered, are obliged to display an uninhibited appreciation of the food and drink provided" (51). As a result of his drinking, which may be a strategy for allowing the transgression of identity, he loses more and more of his superior, uninvolved attitude and the reader observes how it is completely impossible for him to participate in this wedding in even the most cursory manner while attempting to maintain his "English" identity. In spite of the fact that during the course of the night he clings repeatedly to an air of indifference that he believes to be "the only basis for a civilised society" (48), his
individual resolve is powerless in the face of the society and culture that surrounds him. For Krishna, this gradual process of becoming more involved in the wedding festivities is attributed to the alcohol that he is being "forced" to drink and, to some degree, this explanation is believable. However, the reader is also aware that this is hardly the entire reason for what is happening, but this factor expedites what is clearly inevitable--the loss of what Krishna considers his reserved and private English individuality and the return to a demonstrative and public Tamil community.

While Krishna lounges with his uncle during the wedding festivities, the authority of the "Tamil" view (given additional weight by the fact that it is voiced by a patriarchal figure) clearly overpowers Krishna's attempts at asserting his "English" views and identity:

"What does it feel like to be home after ten years? I hear you took all that time to fail your medical examinations?"
"I did not actually fail, uncle. I just changed my course to microbiology which I am still . . ."
"All right, all right," the old man guffawed, "no need to be ashamed of failure when you're with your own flesh and blood. Ten years gone," he mused, shaking his head sadly.
"Only seven, uncle . . ."
"No need to be clever with me, young man. I was around when you were still swimming in your father's balls." (54)

Clearly, it is not only a case of Krishna's "English" identity not being given the respect he feels it should be accorded, but his uncle is completely uninterested in considering a different narrative or scenario than the one he has created for his nephew, one in which forgiveness is readily offered and "failures", no matter how large, immediately overlooked. What this in part indicates is the uncle's privileging of the family relationships over individual achievement or failure and an overriding willingness to claim Krishna as one of their own, an obvious contrast to his nephew's view of human relationships.

In this scene, Krishna's near-complete loss of resolve, as indicated by the whisky he is "forced" to drink and the version of his studies in England he is "forced" to accept, is also apparent when he is discussing the bride (who is already pregnant) with his
uncle. Here Krishna not only drinks without being told to, but also begins to speak like "those strange people", namely, his relatives.

"She has a good degree and is a worthy daughter. Worthy to bear the grandchildren of someone as revered as you." Even as he spoke Krishna realised that he was slipping into the jargon of those strange people, some of whom he had, alas, to acknowledge as relatives. It must be the heat and the drink. Then much to his surprise and to his uncle's delight he took a large sip from his glass. (55)

As Krishna loses more and more of his resolve to remain detached and uninvolved, his manner of relating to his relatives also begins to change. Rather than contempt, irritation or even horror, he begins to sense some unintended affection and relationship to the "strange people, some of whom he had, alas, to acknowledge as relatives". There is a hint of this in his support of the bride who has recently become part of the family, but it is even more apparent when he is observing his aunt.

All this while Krishna was vaguely aware of his aunt who had been moving in and out of the group. She had not said anything and the purpose of her movements was not clear. He remembered her as one who, in the teeth of hopeless odds, persevered in the old ways. While he had little sympathy for her beliefs, he admired her tenacity and was rather drawn to the old girl because of this. Whatever he might feel about her, she had a definite role in the family and community. At home she provided stability and continuity; at funerals she organised and comforted; at weddings she advised and rejoiced. As he watched her more closely, he noticed something peculiar about her gait. The old lady was stumbling a bit and tended to waver. She must have had a stroke, he thought. Misery touched him. Soon she would be unable to perform the functions for which she felt herself to be designated. What on earth would she do then? He thought of offering her his arm but his body seemed unable to make the effort the gesture demanded. Instead, he finished his drink, the bulk of which appeared to have evaporated in the heat. (55-6)

The "misery" which "touches" Krishna stems from his conviction that his aunt will feel she has no identity or worth if she cannot "perform the function for which she felt herself to be designated". This kind of pity is only possible because Krishna sees his aunt as a victim, one who is powerless over the inevitability of old age and social expectations. Conversely, he is protected from such a fate because he occupies, he believes, a more superior position.
However, Krishna's assumptions of his aunt's loss of agency really reflect his own loss of control over his identity. It is he who imagines himself to have a certain fixed and decidedly non-Tamil identity that is unshakable whereas, in reality, this identity is extremely weak and easily overpowered by his Tamil culture. This fact is further driven home when Krishna's assumptions about his aunt prove to be decidedly inaccurate. For whatever reason she stumbles and wavers (and, the reader must wonder if alcohol is the reason for him seeing her in this way), the aunt clearly demonstrates that she is still very much in control of her social role and that her age has seemingly increased rather than decreased her agency.

Towards the end of the narrative, the unpredictable, yet inevitable emotional outburst that Krishna dreads all night finally occurs. His aunt comments that the bride is not of their caste and, when Krishna defends Kumari by arguing, "But she becomes one of us by marriage. . . . You have a beautiful new daughter. A girl who has a degree and will soon give you a grandson", his uncle retorts, "I'm sure she got her degree the same way that we will get our grandson" (56). As a result, a fight breaks out and Krishna's aunt takes the opportunity to air her own grievances. Her outburst undermines assumptions about her dutiful, emasculated and victimised status:

"I'll show you where you came from!" she cried, spreading her legs and lifting up the folds of her sari. "Two of her daughters rushed forward to restrain her. "And he," she screamed, "put you there." She collapsed into the arms of her girls, sobbing, "And for what you have all done to my body this is the reward I get." (56)

The scene prompts Krishna into a momentary sobriety of sorts as he recalls that he "was not, whatever happened, prepared to get involved in this drunken family brawl" (56) and he attempts to escape the same way the bride does, that is, by "quietly backpedal[ing]" (57) into the garden. Being unsuccessful in his attempt to bodily move himself outdoors, however, Krishna remains part of the scene, becoming more drunk until someone notices that the bride is nowhere to be found.

"Kumari!"
"Kumari!"
Everyone rose to look for the bride.
"My bride, my new bride," Gopal wailed. "what about our wedding night?"

"I thought that was long over and done with," said Uncle flatly. Gopal threw a punch at his father's head. He was so drunk that he missed completely and his elbow curled round his father's neck. What had begun as an assault culminated in an embrace and, clasping each other they fell on the couch. (57)

The assault and the embrace graphically demonstrate the confusion of the entire scene, not only for the groom and his father, but also for Krishna and the rest of the party. The supposedly clear lines between binaries become increasingly blurred and, all conflict--whether between people or, in Krishna's case, between his own two opposing identities--is rapidly assimilated into the happy chaos of the festivities. However, the "fresh explosion" seems to jolt Krishna into remembering who he thinks he is and how he should be acting. With the little bit of resolve he has left, a very curious (and entertaining) shift takes place in his character. No longer concerned about himself, he suddenly becomes outraged on Kumari's behalf "and felt he must communicate this to her. She must know that there was at least one normal person in the family into which she was being married. Above all she must not feel alone" (58). Kumari, however, does not respond to Krishna's plight, but instead fully enacts the role of the dutiful daughter-in-law when she prostrates herself at her new father-in-law's feet. In addition, the next morning when her mother-in-law says she is "a lovely girl", Kumari responds: "When duty is obvious, compliments are unnecessary, mother" (59). Nevertheless, Krishna seems to think of Kumari as the only one who, by virtue of her not being a family member, would be able to confirm his own "normalcy" which he can no longer recognize in himself. When she cannot be found, however, he is suddenly overcome by fatigue. Still clinging to excuses which are, at most, only marginally applicable in comparison to the influence of the alcohol he has drunk--"He had driven over two hundred miles. He was unaccustomed to the heat. It had been a long and exhausting day" (58)--Krishna makes a bed for himself beneath the staircase. "There was a sheet and a half-full sack of rice. This he placed on its side and patted into the shape of a pillow. He then spread out the sheet and lay on it. He felt he should take off his shoes but he was very sleepy. In his present environment that kind of delicacy was unnecessary" (58).
Early the next morning, Krishna confronts the scene with a renewed resolve that "escape"—physical, psychological and emotional—is still possible: "The best thing to do would be to sneak out before they discovered he had gone. A quick silent dash out of the house, a tedious drive to Singapore, then a blissful flight to London" (58). Yet, once again, he is enticed back into the family fold and, in the closest thing to a recognition of what has been happening to him during the previous night, we read that "He was unwilling to concede, especially to himself, that the restraint he had espoused was unequal to the challenge of confronting them" (59). The conclusion of the story drives home the contrasting identities that have been in conflict with each other for the entire narrative and that have been forced together. The scene the following morning clearly indicates the way in which Krishna continues to think of himself as "English" even while he acts fully "Tamil". As he sits at the kitchen table, nursing his coffee, he still insists on imagining himself as a self-contained individual "very much on his own" (59), and yet still participates quite fully in the role his family has assigned him—he teases the bride, shares breakfast with his relatives, takes pride in observing a "secure" family and plays the role of guest of honour.

Conclusion

"Welcome" and "Wedding Night" humorously and accurately dramatise the "in-between space" of the singular and communal identities that are embodied/enacted in the characters of Bala and Krishna. For both of these characters, the experience of returning home forces them to confront their notions of themselves as "English", a dilemma which results primarily because they are claimed so willingly and thoroughly as "Tamil" by their respective families. These two characters' largely failed attempts to resist being assimilated into this "Tamilness" also indicate the inherent instability of essentialised, static concepts of identity and the more accurate, but also more uncomfortable and troubling, notion of identity as fluid, ambiguous and ambivalent. These two stories show how the social "hailing into place" of a person overpowers even
the most dedicated and seemingly well-ensconced individual identity, clearly indicating that who one "is" cannot be defined only or even primarily by one's own self, but instead is also determined by others who claim you as their own. In this treatment of identity which calls into question the "objectivity" and "truth" of an orientalist perspective, Baratham presents the unique experiences of characters who formed the first generation of overseas-educated Singaporeans and Malaysians. Their struggles with the issues of identity, humorous as they are, can also perhaps be seen as a precursor to the issues that confront more recent generations. Already these early diasporic individuals must learn to come to terms with the "migrant's double vision" (Bhabha 1998: 5) to see and be both insider and outsider.