

CHAPTER SIX
RECLAIMING HOME AND TERRITORY

[M]igration is understood as a circular process....“Return” is seen as tied to a yearning for reconnection with family, friends and all that is familiar (Plaza, *Returning to the Source* xi)

Facing economic hardships, racism and general social exclusion in the new country, the migrants often find it comforting to think of “home” as a paradise that is free from the social malaises of their adopted countries....[I]t is common for such immigrants to develop and propagate myths of the Caribbean as a place with economic and racial equality... a...sense of community....(ibid)

Meantime, periodic returns, of varying duration, are part of transnational life for many migrants and, hence, it is often more appropriate to speak of return mobilities (King and Christou 7).

Following the transnational turn of the 1990s and then the mobilities turn of the 2000s, the conceptualisation of migration has loosened accommodate more short-term, circular and sequential types of human spatial movement. Short-term visiting mobilities are temporally enfolded within longer-term migrations and relocations. This is explicitly depicted in the return side of the migration coin. (Md Farid Miah in King et al 96)

I was trying to reclaim a past I never knew until recently that I had, and I was trying to reclaim for my mother a past that too soon she would never be able to find her way back to again. (Cristina Henriquez, *The World in Half* 202)

This chapter deals with the power of cultural memory and family ties which make the migrants and their children reconnect with what they had left behind in the Caribbean. Sometimes individuals decide to visit and stay back or return to their place of origin, the Caribbean. In fact, Caribbean Americans are seen retaining links with their country of origin through family ties and financial investments. Often such families return to the Caribbean on periodic visits, on business ventures, on fact finding missions and amongst later generations, to try and retrace their roots. Some families not only reconnect with their erstwhile homeland, they also return after spending the greater part of their working lives elsewhere, to spend their remaining days in the Caribbean.

Return migration, especially from the U.S.A, to the Caribbean is undertaken by different age groups for different reasons. Class and gender, as well as race affect return migration in different ways. Young people return to discover and connect with the land and culture of their parents and grandparents. The aim of this chapter is to examine the underlying complexities in narratives of return in Caribbean American fiction. Return is neither simple nor unidimensional. The novels included in this chapter are Cristina Garcia's *Dreaming in Cuban*, Cristina Henriquez' *The World in Half*, Julia Alvarez' *Finding Miracles* and *Return to Sender*.

It is seen that problems faced by the migrants in the new country make them look back at what they left behind in a new light. As they justify their migration for education and better prospects, what they left behind or what necessitated their flight looks less daunting, even benign with time. Added to that, family ties and nostalgia for the past, lead the migrant settlers to idealize conditions in the erstwhile homeland. King draws attention to the following positions:

Bilgili points out that return migration is not just about physical return moves but also about myths, ideologies and imaginaries of return. Cassarino (2004, p.262) suggests that migrants use return visits to prepare for their more definitive return and reintegration at home, although this is only one type of link between transnational behaviour and return migration. (*Handbook of Return Migration* 6)

Transnational migration holds that the process of migration does not stop with the return of the migrants to their place of origin. Rather that may be a temporary stop leading to newer migrations by the returnees themselves or their children. In the case of Caribbean Americans, memories are idealized from a distant land and return is never ruled out completely. As Plaza points out, "Return is seen as tied to a yearning for reconnection with family, friends and all that is familiar and suggests comfort" (xiii). However, problems arise when "they seek to return with new baggage" and "with new ideas and...hopes of reclaiming a "home" that is no longer there" (x). This leads to disillusionment as the comfort zone does not match their expectations.

At other times, a sense of alienation amidst the impersonality of a big city pushes the Caribbean Americans to consider returning to their homelands. As Plaza observes:

[I]mpersonal, fast-paced...megalopolises have served to isolate people from traditional communities of meaning and acceptance. These are the motivating forces behind the modern search for, maybe even preoccupation with, identity and belonging (identity politics of race, ethnicity, sex, sexual orientation, nationalism and so on), which also speak to the Caribbean immigrant and her or his urge to “return to the source”. (xiii)

A need for some kind of moorings, some sense of identity or belonging within a community drive the migrant to seek familiar or common counters of exchange or interaction. In the case of Caribbean migrants, who are used to island hopping, the possibility of return to the homeland can be seen as part of the circular trajectory of migration. Moreover, some of these returnees retain transnational identities or links with both countries. The determining factors for return migration may be personal—like family ties, retirement or a wish for a life away from the pressures of a big city; or economic—like returning to settle in the country of origin after earning enough or on retirement, or reclaiming property; or political—determined by the political climate in both countries.

Some of the reasons and trajectories of return migration have been identified and examined by various social scientists and thinkers:

[U]nder the new economics of labour migration (NELM), return migration is the norm – the expected outcome of a successfully implemented strategy of migrating, earning, remitting, saving and, finally, returning back to a more secure and comfortable life....the NELM approach conceptualises migration and return as a family-level strategy to both maximise and diversify income and resources and hedge against the failure of one of them (Stark, 1991; Taylor, 1999) (*Handbook of Return Migration*, 5)

Often Caribbean migrants in the U.S.A. send money home to their families or for investment in some project. Some members of the family stay back to look after their property, however small, in the Caribbean while others leave for the U.S. to try and earn money in some job or in small business. They send their savings home either through money orders or through personal deposits during annual trips home.

As pointed out by King, migration is triggered by economic need and inequality

amongst different regions:

[P]eriphery-to-core migration and core-to-periphery return are elements of the reproduction of global spatial inequality and of the subservient dependency of the peripheral, less-developed countries on the economic hegemony of the global North (6)

It is natural for people from less developed countries to look to the advanced countries for direction and scope for pursuit of their own careers and businesses. Further, according to Miah:

Return visits can be viewed as an important characteristic of the phenomenon of migration....The visits are always in the making. There are moral and cultural obligations that constantly remind migrants of their duty to return to their hometown and provide care for their relatives by being physically co-present. Cultural obligations are also reciprocated by the visitors and hosts. (*Handbook of Return Migration* 97)

Sometimes people return temporarily to attend to family obligations and to contribute to their upliftment. Sometimes they return to attend to sick or dying relatives and spend some months in their homeland. This is voluntary and yet to some extent forced (not by law), because of family ties. Migrants have to leave their work and other commitments in the new place, like the U.S.A. to return to their earlier homes to address some problem including threats to their families and family property because of political change.

Apart from calls from the homeland for return, migrants also have to go through forced returns of the official kind that is deportation for lack of proper papers or inadequate papers. Although such returns are monitored by the immigration authorities like the ICE in the U.S.A., friends and family members are allowed to assist in some way or other through counselling, funds and other material support. This is what some countries call “assisted return” (110). This is a reality pointed out by Kuschminder (ibid). As pointed out by King et al:

Forced return imposes extra layers of compulsion and vulnerability...about the return move. As the literature reviewed...suggests, expected performances of

masculinity in migration are compromised, female exploitation deepened, and ongoing quests for a new identity ruptured and reshaped. (60)

While this is often the outcome of forced returns where people have to begin again, sometimes there may be a wry acceptance of the issue and people consider the return move before the interception of migration authorities. This kind of return/deportation sometimes hastens the process and at others delays it through criminal charges brought on by some wing of the authorities. However, as pointed out by Lietaert, in King et al, “pre-return assistance (i.e. information provision, counselling regarding the return decision, administrative and financial support to enable the physical return, skills training or the preparation of reintegration projects)” is offered in developed countries (111). It,

balances between the logics of support and control....This return policy is implemented through return counselling via ‘case managers’ – government employees who have regular meetings with rejected asylum applicants to discuss and prepare their return. (ibid)

Between support and control, voluntary and involuntary returnees, return migration assumes multiple forms and layers, including different time frames.

1

In Cristina Garcia’s *Dreaming in Cuban*, a young girl, Pilar Puente returns temporarily to Cuba to see the grandmother she had not seen since she was two years old. The novel devotes more space to the spiritual conversations/connections between various characters than their real time interactions. Pilar, a teenage artist, has had such messages and interactions with her grandmother Celia all her life and is sustained by them. Her mother Lourdes, who is an aggressive woman running a bakery in Brooklyn, starts receiving communication from her recently dead father who tries to explain to her some of his past life. As she leaves after work or is in a minute of repose, Lourdes gets the smell of her father’s cigar signaling his presence and then hears his voice. Her father Jorge had died in New York where he had been undergoing treatment for stomach cancer. Lourdes’ daughter Pilar, unlike her mother, had been carrying on a spiritual conversation with Celia, her grandmother who was still living in Cuba. Although she wrote to her grandmother sometimes, she mostly hears “her speaking at night just before I fall asleep” (29). Not only

does her grandmother appear to know all about her, she also lets her know that she loves her and wants to see her again.

Pilar appears to be a disgruntled teenager at odds with her domineering mother who refuses to allow her to spend time on her art. Pilar and her father Rufino share a warehouse that he has divided partly as a studio for her and as a workshop for himself. Together father and daughter try to avoid the mother Lourdes as far as possible. When her mother forces Pilar to work part time at the bakery and takes her to a psychiatrist about her abstract painting, Pilar realises that she has to leave home:

Even though I've been living in Brooklyn all my life, it doesn't feel like home to me. I'm not sure Cuba is, but I want to find out. If I could only see Abuela Celia again, I'd know where I belonged. (*Dreaming in Cuban* 58)

A return to Cuba and her grandmother appears to her like a return to her origins. She was born there but more than that she feels that her grandmother, Celia, would help her to see things clearly and give her the right advice. Pilar had had issues at school and the nurse had suggested the name of the psychiatrist Dr. Price. Pilar is surprised at the question he puts to her:

“Tell me about your urge to mutilate the human form,” he asked me..... Mom must have told him about my paintings. But what could I say? That my mother is driving me crazy? That I miss my grandmother and wish I'd never left Cuba? That I want to be a famous artist someday? That a paintbrush is better than a gun so why doesn't everybody just leave me alone? (59)

Pilar realises that they do not understand her commitment to her art nor its particular style. The sight of her father with another woman convinces her about the rightness of her decision and she decides to leave for Florida to contact her relatives staying there. She hopes one of her uncles would help her to take a boat to Cuba.

Having made up her mind, she takes out all her savings of \$120 that she had earned from working at the bakery to buy a bus ticket to Miami:

I figure if I can just get there, I'll be able to make my way to Cuba, maybe rent a boat or get a fisherman to take me. I imagine Abuela Celia's surprise as I sneak

up behind her. She'll be sitting in her wicker swing overlooking the sea....She'll stroke my cheek with her cool hands, sing quietly in my ear. (25-26)

Apart from her mother's hostility to her art, Pilar finds her invasive surveillance hard to take: My mother reads my diary....She says it is her responsibility to know my private thoughts" (26). Her mother's answer is work at the bakery to "teach me responsibility....Like I'll get pure pushing her donuts around" (27). Pilar reflects that her grandmother had encouraged her to attend painting classes. If Pilar's grandmother offers her gentle spiritual support, her mother's aggression makes Pilar wonder how Lourdes could be Celia's daughter.

Pilar does not make it to Cuba that time and has to return to New York after meeting some of her older relatives. The cousin she had sought, Blanquito, was not there to help her execute her travel plans. After that she attends college and only at twenty-one decides to go to Cuba again with her mother. By this time her mother Lourdes has been talking to the spirit of Jorge, her father and Pilar's grandfather, who has been urging her to return to Cuba to explain things to her mother. She is told by the spirit that her sister Felicia was dead and she had to go back to attend to things. Around this time, the now grown-up Pilar feels her grandmother calling out to her and she tells her mother that they should make that trip to Cuba. She had been battling her thoughts of return for sometime:

Most days Cuba is kind of dead to me. But every once in a while a wave of longing will hit me.... I resent the hell out of the politicians and the generals who force events on us that structure our lives, that dictate the memories we'll have when we're old....And there's only my imagination where our history should be. (138)

Pilar learns from her father about the changes in Cuba over the years, and all the property they had lost. Her mother does not talk about that and wants to continue her life in New York. Unknown to them, Lourdes had been violently attacked and raped by two soldiers on their farm in Cuba. She had been pregnant at that time and had lost her baby. Once she recovers from that trauma, she closes her mind to Cuba completely. Her mother, Celia, on the other hand, devotes her services to the political movement after her husband's death, and even becomes a justice, trying numerous cases and disputes.

The writer informs that Pilar and her parents migrated to New York when she was

two years old and had to settle there as the revolution which they thought was temporary, took root and changed everybody's life and freedom in Cuba. Pilar still remembers her grandmother's comforting company when she was two and over the years that relationship was sustained through spiritual communication and some correspondence between them. Because of a communication gap between Lourdes and Pilar each failed to understand the other's position or even their dilemmas. As Pilar sees it:

This is a constant struggle around my mother, who systematically rewrites history to suit her views of the world. This reshaping of events happens in a dozen ways every day, contesting reality. It's not a matter of premeditated deception. Mom truly believes that her version of events is correct, down to details that I know, for a fact, are wrong. (176)

She is left to wonder if her mother is schizoid or plain delusional, given the fact that they both communicate with souls dead or alive. Pilar sees a further problem in her mother:

It's not just our personal history that gets mangled. Mom filters other people's lives through her distorting lens. Maybe it's that wandering eye of hers. It makes her see only what she wants to see instead of what's really there. (176)

Pilar is disturbed by her mother's insistence on seeing things her way, not realizing that she had had to live through a lot of violence, beyond rape, on her person. Further, Pilar does not understand why her mother does not want to talk about her mother or Cuba. When the spirit of Jorge insists that Lourdes goes back to see her mother and explain things to her about him, she is reluctant to do so despite loving her father and his memory. Finally, when her father's spirit tells Lourdes about her sister's death and her daughter also tells her that they should visit her grandmother, they make the trip to Cuba. Thus both mother and daughter make the trip to Cuba in response to appeals by spirits— one dead and one alive, but of touch.

In Havana when they go to the family home once occupied by her sister, Lourdes takes stock of the neglect all around and then turns away. As Pilar records:

Mom doesn't bother to get out of the car or ask the neighbors what happened to her sister. She says she's expected this since Abuelo Jorge spoke to her on the Brooklyn

Bridge. As for me, I'm not sure what to expect, only that I'll see Abuela Celia again.... (193)

As they see the deserted house, Lourdes tells the driver:

“Take us to Santa Teresa del Mar”.... She closes her eyes. I think it's less painful for her than looking out the window. We take the coastal highway to my grandmother's house. I look at the sea I once planned to cross by fishing boat. (216)

While travelling by car, Pilar has strange presentiments about all that happened on the stretch of water they were crossing. She sees shipwrecks from the past as well as the bodies of four young men who had drowned that morning after taking off on a stolen boat. She also visualizes the boatload of migrants leaving Haiti for the U.S.A. in the following week. Pilar comes out of her distant vision to concentrate on her immediate surroundings and declare her intention to paint her grandmother.

On arrival at Celia's house, they go in but she is not inside. Finally, after touring through the house, mother and daughter find Celia on her swing outside, “wearing a worn bathing suit, her hair stuck haphazardly to her skull, her feet strangely lacerated” (217). They wash her down with warm water and take her inside to a freshly made bed. While Lourdes clears some of the things and throws out the photograph of the Leader of the revolution, Pilar reflects that “Cuba is a peculiar exile...an island-colony. We can reach it by a thirty-minute charter flight from Miami, yet never reach it at all” (219). Cuba appears to be a world and an age away from the U.S.A.

Lourdes looks at her mother and realizes that she was “a complete stranger...Some things never change” (223). Pilar, however, manages to connect with her grandmother and when she offers to do a painting of her, Celia responds gaily about her wishes: “I've always envisioned myself in a flared red skirt like the flamenco dancers wear. Maybe with a few carnations” (232). When Pilar asks her if she wants red carnations, she answers “Many red ones” (ibid). So Pilar paints her grandmother “the way she wants—dancing flamenco with whirling red skirts and castanets and a tight satin bodice” (233). Her grandmother not only likes her paintings but asks her if she could darken her hair and make the waist look smaller in the painting.

They talk as Pilar paints and her grandmother tells her of Cuba's past:

She tells me that before the revolution Cuba was a pathetic place, a parody of a country. There was one product, sugar, and all the profits went to a few Cubans, and, of course, to the Americans....Abuela says her great-aunt in Havana...raised her with progressive ideas. Freedom, Abuela tells me, is nothing more than the right to a decent life. (233)

While they enjoy each other's company, Pilar realizes that she cannot stay there forever.

I have to admit it's much tougher here than I expected, but at least everyone seems to have the bare necessities. I wonder how different my life would have been if I'd stayed with my grandmother....I'm afraid to lose all this, to lose Abuela Celia again. But sooner or later I'd have to return to New York. I know now it's where I belong.... (235-36)

When Lourdes leaves and ensures that her sister Felicia's thirteen year-old son Ivanito can seek asylum at the Peruvian embassy so that she can later take him to the U.S.A., Celia only learns that they are both gone. One day she walks into the sea as she had done so many times before, but this time she throws her pearl earrings into the water and allows herself to drift in the water.

Thus, Lourdes and Pilar complete their journey to Cuba. Lourdes leaves without doing what her father wanted her to do—explain his past actions to her mother. Lourdes had gone there on an errand and only partially accomplishes what she thought of doing. Her anger against the Communist regime continues to drive her till she finally manages to pluck herself from it and take the plane home. Pilar does not tell her grandmother that she had met Ivanito near the Peruvian embassy. She allows her to think that he had already left. Since Pilar had already made up her mind not to linger in Cuba, it is expected that she would leave after sorting out her grandmother's affairs. She had done what she had wanted to do before coming to Cuba—get to know her grandmother as an adult. Her emotional and spiritual pilgrimage is complete.

2

Cristina Henríquez's *The World in Half* deals with the story of Miraflores and her journey

to Panama to look for her father. Years ago, she was conceived when her father was working at the site of the canal and her mother, married to another man, an American, was stationed at the base. All her life Mira, as her mother calls her, has believed that her father had no interest in her. When she attends university as a student of Geophysics, she learns that her mother has been diagnosed with early stage Alzheimer's. As they try to address the problems and the treatment for the disease, Mira notices that her mother's moods keep changing. One day while looking for something for her mother in her chest of drawers, she notices a file containing a bundle of letters in Spanish. Seeing her father's name, Gatún Gallardo, at the bottom of the letters, she takes them to see if she can find his whereabouts.

As there were never any discussions in the house about her father, Mira had assumed that he was not interested in them:

[T]he sum of my information about him consisted of knowing that he was a man my mother had an affair with while she was stationed with her husband in Panama. I always thought of him as a man who, upon learning she was pregnant, decided he didn't have much interest in raising a child, so he let her, and me, go. (*The World in Half* 19)

As Mira admits this was what she had gathered over the years from bits of information:

My father, after all, had never contacted me, and on the few occasions I brought him up, my mother usually told me not to worry about him or else just gazed at me with the kind of excruciating sorrow that would shut anyone down. (ibid)

From her mother's reticence, she had assumed that it had been an unhappy affair and had not wished to give her mother further pain by asking questions. But going through the letters Mira learns that her father had deeply loved her mother and it was she who had told him not to come to America to see them. Reading through the letters Mira decides to look for him. Her mother was no longer in a position to tell her everything as her mind kept wandering due to the disease making its impact.

Mira explains her hasty decision to go looking for her father in Panama:

[E]verything about this trip was so last-minute that there wasn't much I could do

about the accelerated timing. I found the letters and I made a reservation. I was afraid that if I thought about it all for too long, I wouldn't go through with it at all. (23)

She has to make arrangements for someone to look after her mother and then she goes looking for her father. She tells her mother that she is leaving on a trip to Washington for three weeks, that she had been invited on a Geophysical Sciences Department trip to the Cascades Volcano Observatory in Vancouver, Washington. That is the time she gives herself to visit Panama.

She flies to Panama city, and once there, finds that people mistake her for a Panamanian for her complexion and her ability to speak Spanish. She picks up accommodation and observes:

Hotel Centro is the cheapest lodging listed in the guidebook that also advertises air-conditioning. I'm paying for this trip with money I've saved from my scholarship stipends and from the little bit that I have in the bank from odd jobs I had throughout high school, so there isn't a lot of wiggle room as far as my budget is concerned. (35)

The narrative is mainly in the first person as Miraflores documents her experiences in this new place. She makes friends with a young man called Danilo and Hernan, his uncle who works at the hotel. She says: "It doesn't matter who helps me or how it happens, but I want to find my father. I spent so long believing that he was someone who didn't want to know me" (65). After reading those old letters, Mira is convinced that that is not the case: "My father cared about me. He cared about my mother. At least he did when he wrote them. But I believe that he still does. If I can find him, if he saw me..." (ibid). Mira believes that her father would be happy to see her after all this time and sets out with Danilo, the young man she meets at the hotel to look for her father in an older part of the city. Further, when Danilo's uncle Hernan, who worked at the hotel learns of her mission, he invites her stay with him and Danilo in their apartment to cut down her expenses. She accepts and stays with them during her time in Panama.

Mira is buoyant with the feeling of finding something and mulls over possibilities if she finds her father:

I could tell him that I think my mother never stopped loving him....I could have him call her. She might tell him things she's been holding on to for decades....I could give her back that bit of her past, even though I'm not sure she deserves it since she's the one who exiled that bit of her past....And of mine. (ibid)

She cannot get over the fact that her mother who had claimed to love her father, should have been the one to cut him off from her and her daughter's lives, asked him not to come to the U.S. to meet them. Somewhere questions of race and class must have impinged themselves on her mother's brain. She might have allowed her parents to convince her that there could be little place for such a son in law in their lives. It may be mentioned that they had pushed her to marry her army officer husband who turned out to be gay as Mira learns much later from her father's sister. It also hints at the social pressures which could have influenced a gay man to enter a marriage with a young woman to avoid social stigma. From Mira's accounts, the marriage did not last: her mother came home pregnant from Panama and divorced her husband. She sent pictures of her baby daughter to her Panamanian lover, but after some time told him to not follow her to the U.S.A.

As Mira or Miraflores, her full name which she starts using in Panama, thinks about her mother's past decisions, she is pained by the realization that her mother could have been responsible for such a cruel decision affecting all three of them. Her mother's cutting off one part of her life appears to fall in line with her present sickness which makes patients forget even familiar moments from their lives. Despite her unhappiness over her mother's past decisions, Miraflores hopes that if she could find her father and get him to contact her mother, the advancing memory loss could be temporarily averted. She feels that "with everything that she's going through, hearing from him again might make her feel better. After all these years, I think she would finally talk to him again if the opportunity to talk existed" (ibid). Apart from her need to connect personally with the father she has never known, Miraflores believes that hearing from her old lover might be good for her mother. Both these ideas appear to be the driving force behind Miraflores' trip to Panama. With her limited funds it was an adventure into the unknown but it was also a leap of faith, a need to connect with her roots.

That is why Miraflores decides that she would not behave like an ordinary tourist but as someone with claims of her own in that place:

I'm not sure why, but I want them to know that I'm not just any tourist visiting their country, that I have a claim to this place and a reason for being here, that I belong to them, at least a little bit. (33)

The knowledge of her father hailing from that place gives her the courage and the faith to be in Panama. At the same time she knows that her father could be anywhere without her being able to identify him: "I could be looking at him that very second and not know it" (93). She had not done enough homework before coming to Panama and it makes her rue that:

What made me think that I could come here, to a country I knew almost nothing about, and find one person among millions? I wasn't prepared enough. There must have been more I could have done. I never had any sort of real plan. I was an idiot. (ibid)

Her initial looking up of telephone numbers and addresses does not offer anything positive in her search for her father. No one appears to have heard of her father. She learns from Hernan that her father had worked at the Panama canal but had left his job after a couple of years without any forwarding address. Hernan does not tell her about his suspicions; just that there was no further information about him.

Her friend Danilo teasing remark that she lacks the fire of a Panamanian disturbs her. She feels that maybe, her desire to connect with her father's homeland is not sufficient for her to fit in:

Where's your fire, Miraflores? Panamanians have fire. I mean, how sure are you that this man is really your father? I'm not convinced." He's teasing now, although the intimation that perhaps I don't act as a Panamanian would ignites a certain, grazing pain. I wanted to believe that I was doing a good job of fitting in here. (88)

She can only tamely assure him that the man she was looking for was her father. Encouraged by Danilo, they go to the library to look for records and when they do not turn up anything, even look at the obituaries in the old newspapers.

As the days go by and Miraflores fails to come up with any kind of clear cut information, she thinks back to the phone calls she made to numbers with the name

Gallardo, she recalls one woman responding in a strange way and tells Danilo about it. She feels that: “The key to finding lost things...is knowing where to look. And when you don’t know that, sometimes you just have to hope that something will break wide open.” (97)

She recalls all that she had learnt about Panama’s history, how the United States intervened in the separation of Panama from Colombia so that they could go ahead with their plans for the Canal connecting two oceans:

Panama at the time was still part of Colombia, and Colombia didn’t want to let the United States build a canal on its land. So Theodore Roosevelt came up with a solution to that minor inconvenience. If Panama was no longer part of Colombia, Colombia would no longer have a say in the matter, and the United States could build their canal. (97)

Thinking of America’s relentless pursuit of its goals, Miraflores resolves to continue with her search. After the U.S.A. helped Panama to gain independence, they were given permission to go ahead with their digging of the Canal and in 1914 it was inaugurated. She offers this bit of historical information because she had been gathering all she could over the years about Panama. “Maybe it’s more than the average person knows. It’s just that anytime Panama came up in any context of my life, I paid attention more than the average person” (98). Moreover, her father had worked for some time in the 1980s at the Canal.

As she goes around various parts of the old city with Danilo, she is thrilled to find a building with her name pasted on it:

At the top of the hill is the visitors’ center, a modernist concrete building with the word “Miraflores” on the front. For a girl who was never able to find a key chain with her name on it... it’s a shock. But a welcome shock. My name is familiar here. If it belongs here, maybe I could, too. (99)

Miraflores’ uncertainty is typical of the anxiety shared by second or third generation migrants whose return visit to the country of their parents’ origin is fraught with moments of delight and despair. She looks at the signboard as a positive mooring point, somewhere she could connect with in her onward search for her father.

She feels guilty about misleading her mother about her trip, but knows how

important her visit to Panama is for herself. She learns more and more about her father's homeland and its people and culture, even when anything positive or concrete about her father proves to be elusive. She notes that:

The next few days are a blur, a pinwheel spinning in the wind. Danilo and I spend our waking hours together, devising plans over breakfast each morning for places where we can search for my father, teasing out any lead that seems even halfway viable, poring over maps and Internet printouts and my father's old letters over and over again. (127)

Danilo is sensitive enough to draw her attention to other things of interest whenever their search appears to lead nowhere:

Every day, we start out serious in our mission, though we're rarely able to sustain our determination for more than a few hours. We abandon our plans in favor of going to places or doing things that Danilo suddenly decides I need to experience instead. (ibid)

As the search goes on day after day, Miraflores feels guilty about appropriating Danilo's time and attention. She feels close to him as someone who understands her dilemma:

He still has his own life to attend to, a life that was going on before I got here and that will go on after I leave. Even so, when we're together I talk to him in a way I've never talked to anyone. Not even my friends at home. He doesn't ask anything of me, and yet I find myself telling him everything. (128)

Normally, with returnees or new visitors with family ties to a place, the cultural obligations of hospitality and social support are offered by family members. Since Miraflores knows nobody except her missing father in Panama, the hospitality and help offered by Hernan and Danilo, can be seen as the support of friends acting as surrogate family members for such returnees/ visitors.

While she is in Panama, Miraflores mulls over her mother's condition and her strange conduct earlier on in her life:

I think, maybe my mother is an exception. She tried so hard to bury the past and

erase her own history—moving from New York, keeping undone the ties she was forced to sever, relegating my father to one brief episode in her life. Now, in a strange way, she's getting exactly what she wished for. (130)

She wonders at the irony of her mother, Catherine, who had wilfully severed and buried parts of her life at one time. She has to struggle with memory lapses in the present because of her advancing disease and Miraflores can only try and offer her all the support she can. Added to the fear of her mother's condition, there is the underlying fear in Miraflores that she may inherit from her mother, the same ailment—Alzheimer's—later on in life.

Thoughts of her mother make her question her own position in Panama, about her spending time elsewhere when she could be around her mother:

I'm sitting here cross-legged in an armchair, in someone else's house, in someone else's country. Belonging halfway doesn't make it mine. Belonging to someone who belongs to it all the way doesn't make it mine. I feel like a fraud. And like a failure. And like I'm in everybody's way. (151)

Miraflores tries to recharge herself with her purpose as she knows that it had to be then or never. If she found her father alive at a later date, it may be too late for him to connect with her mother:

But the heart is a stubborn thing, I think now....I should call the airline and book a return ticket back to Chicago. Because I'm tired of looking for people—of looking...for my father, and for my mother underneath everything, and for myself. But something won't let me stop. (164)

She realizes that her search for her father has several sub-texts like the search for roots, for her identity and a sense of self. It is this that keeps her going on till Danilo comes to her with the information that he has found something—he had called up the same woman she had called up early in her search.

Miraflores is excited at the news but Danilo tells her that he could talk to her after ringing a couple of times. He has learnt that the lady is in possession of a box of her father's things. Danilo informs her that despite sounding a little "like her head was cracked," she had agreed to see them later in the day. As they reach the address, they realize that it is a

house in a rich locality: “a wide, two-story structure faced with vanilla-colored stucco in a gated neighborhood filled with wide, two-story structures” (179). Before they can note the details, the door opens and a heavily made-up woman beckons them inside. She points to the box on the floor and offers it to them without saying anything. After much quizzing she answers that she is Ilsa, Gatun Gallardo’s sister. When Miraflores asks for her father’s contact number so that she could meet him, her aunt’s reply is shocking:

“I’m sorry,” Ilsa says. “He’s dead. He died ten years ago.” “I’m sorry,” Ilsa says.

“Is he really dead?” I whisper.

“I got what’s in the box when I went to his house to clean out his things. I didn’t keep much. But when the boy said it was you, I told him what I had. I put it in a box and taped it shut for you. I hoped perhaps you would simply come here and take it. I’m sorry. I didn’t want to tell you.” (184)

As Miraflores allows the news to sink in, she notes: “as I sit there taking everything in, it’s as though the moon has made an unscheduled move into the path of the sun. For a moment, the world feels lost in darkness” (189). She realizes that there was no more to build with her father being dead for so long. She wonders at her mother’s conduct and how she stuck to her decision to keep them separate:

How furious I am with her.... About what she did to him. My father! And at what she had done to me, denying me him for the few years we shared on this earth.... It’s amazing that she didn’t let him. (204)

Gradually however, she gathers herself to go through the items—photographs and letters—in the box.

After she reads the letters that her father had written but not sent because there was no address to send them to, Ilsa relents a little to answer some of her questions about him. Ilsa tells her that she resembled her father:

“To see you now! Here! In his country! He would have been overjoyed. Very astonished and very pleased. You look like him. The roundness of your nose. The

way your mouth curves.” (201-2)

While she is pleased to hear that, she learns that Ilsa blamed her mother for ruining her brother’s life, even breaking him, for his illness stemmed from depression and drinking and smoking in excess. Reading through her mother’s letters Miraflores realizes that her mother must have written under duress, it was not like her to be cruel. That the underlying factor must have been race is clear to Miraflores:

The words on those sheets of paper weren’t her. They were the words of someone who had become hardened, her emotional selfcalcified, by the kind of heartbreak that happens when someone—not you or the person you love— forces your heart to break. It was her parents. They got to her. (202)

She understands that it must have been her mother’s parents who had weighed in on her decision. Her mother must have been weak and uncertain at the time and had decided to cut out that part of her life under pressure. The parents’ attitude points to the social and family pressures people in relationships with partners of another race were subjected to in America.

Miraflores feels that she understands her mother’s giving in to pressure although she is not happy about the fallout. In an attempt to resolve the issue, she says:

I came here because I wanted to deliver him back to her. I wanted to give her back the best part of her life before she forgot she ever had it in the first place. (202)

She was doing it for her mother’s sake as well as for her own, given the fact that soon the Alzheimer’s her mother was suffering from would make it impossible for her to connect with anything:

I was trying to reclaim a past I never knew until recently that I had, and I was trying to reclaim for my mother a past that too soon she would never be able to find her way back to again. (ibid)

She looks at her mission to find her father as also an attempt to understand her mother, how she continued with her decision to separate father and daughter. She will never meet her father, but the photographs and letters tell her of a gentle, kind and loving person she

would have enjoyed knowing. This will replace her old impression of an uncaring father, give her a connection to him and his homeland where she has made friends and could return one day.

3

Julia Alvarez's *Finding Miracles* tells the story of a young American girl named Milagros (Miley) Kaufmann, who knows that she is adopted by loving parents but is still curious about her birth parents from a Caribbean country and the reasons behind her adoption. When a new classmate joins them and she learns that his parents are refugees from that same place from where her parents adopted her, she is disturbed enough to try and figure out what must have happened in the past. The new boy Pablo Bolivar appears to be fascinated by her looks as if he can connect her with people who look like her. Soon Miley's father engages Pablo Bolivar's father in his furniture business and the two families become friends. Pablo starts spending time at the Kaufmann house when his parents are working.

As they get to know each other, Pablo surprises her by saying: "Your eyes . . . they are eyes from Los Luceros" (*Finding Miracles* 58). He explains that her eyes are typical of the people of a remote mountain area called Los Luceros in his country. Learning that his grandmother still lived in that area where Pablo and his brothers had spent their summers, Miley tells him that she would "like to visit it some day" (60). Soon she tells him of her parents getting married there, giving birth to their eldest daughter Kate there and not long after, her adoption from a convent. At that Pablo welcomes her as "Somos patriotas," meaning fellow patriots and one of them (*ibid*). Miley learns of the political turmoil which had driven the Bolivars out of their country, with some members killed, others in prison and some more in hiding. She feels bad about not being friendly with Pablo when he first joined her class.

Gradually as things change in the Bolivar's home country—elections are held under monitoring by UN agencies and the dictator is defeated at the polls despite efforts to reject the results—and a new government works towards making things better. The dictator leaves the country and commissions are set up for truth and justice. As the healing process begins, the Bolivars plan a trip home to see their family members and mourn the dead. Without knowing the tragedies in their lives, Miley who had received a casual

invitation from Mrs. Bolivar at one time, decides to go with them. Soon other people are involved: Miley's family is not happy with her decision and worried about the fragile peace process in that country. However, after much persuasion, Miley is allowed to go with the Bolivar's to the land of her birth, with her adopted grandmother providing the money for her plane ticket.

While Miley had set off to "see if it would feel like the place where I belonged" the Bolivar's excitement as they see the land from the plane surprises her: "You'd think the Bolívars had just sighted Treasure Island" (99). Mr. Bolivar points to the ground and asks her: "Beautiful country, no?" and Miley feeling homesick, can only smile and nod (ibid). She thinks of the unhappy people she had left behind—all except her mother who decided that she should go and see the country of her birth. What her mother did not know was that Mrs. Bolivar had told her that she had the same eyes as her recently widowed sister-in-law Dulcie or she would have thought that Miley was planning to try and trace her birth parents. Miley believes that she had "thought of this trip as a chance to get acquainted with the country where I accidentally happened to be born. That was all. Anything more than that would have been scary to think about" (100). She had refused her family's offer to accompany her on the trip because she did not want her parents hovering over her on this trip to a possible discovery.

As Pablo tells her about his uncle whom he had loved but who had been a cruel general, Miley starts wondering if her birth father might be one such cruel military man. "I felt totally confused. Maybe the truth was more than I wanted to know, too" ? (105) She turns to Pablo and asks what happened to his uncle and Pablo replies:

"My uncle is dead...He punished the bad general himself. He shot himself a few weeks after the dictator left." (106)

Miley had heard of other relatives but not the general earlier. She had heard of Daniel, the journalist brother writing against the regime:

One night, about a month after the Bolívars had left the country, Daniel disappeared. Days later, his body was found in a ditch with those of other journalists from the same paper. Daniel's widow, Dulce, and daughter, Esperanza, were now living in the Bolívars' house with...Pablo's brothers. Suddenly, it struck me that

this was probably a bad time to be visiting a family grieving so many deaths. (ibid)

When Miley mentions the timing of her visit, Pablo sets out to reassure her:

“It is a happy time as well as a sad time in our history,...Our nation is a cradle and a grave.” Our nation, he called it. It didn’t feel like mine. My country was the U.S. (107)

Despite the warmth of the family around her, Miley takes time to absorb some of the strangeness of that country.

Miley’s reactions as they enter the airport building are interesting:

I could not stop staring. The guidebook was right: this sure was a country of mixtures—brown people with straight brown hair, white people with jet-black hair and high cheekbones, black people with Asian eyes. A white woman carrying a brown baby stood by a black man who was holding the hand of a pale boy with kinky hair. Talk about melded families! (107)

Even as she is struck by the rich variety in the multi-ethnic crowd, Miley wonders about her own unknown family:

What did they all look like? I kept glancing around, hoping to find someone who looked like me....My head was spinning...People here didn’t seem to be able to make lines. One thing that spooked me was all the soldiers hanging around in camouflage with machine guns. (ibid)

Pablo again has to reassure her that the soldiers were there to monitor the passengers and not to start a revolution. For Miley the culture shock is great but not unpleasant as she tries to follow her mother’s advice along with Pablo’s.

Another culture shock awaits Miley at the Bolivar home where Pablo’s aunt Dulce serves a heavy meal of roast pork common to that area:

My mostly vegetarian diet was going to have a hard time in the next two weeks. Mom had already warned me. “Don’t ever refuse a dish. People take it as a personal insult. Unless you say you’re allergic to something, you better eat it and ask for

seconds.” Maybe I could be allergic to meat for the next two weeks?(112)

Without offending her hosts, she piles her plate with vegetables. Despite her husband’s violent death, Dulce keeps her grief to herself and goes out of her way to make her welcome. Her loud prayers as she knelt by her bed, again remind Miley of the contrast between these people and her parents.

The crowds jostling about on the streets are something else she notes:

What crowds! Not just cars but mules and carts, bicycles and motorcycles and people jammed the narrow streets. The sidewalks were blocked with chairs and stands and small tables with big boom boxes blaring salsa and American rock music. People were hanging out like this was a block party, except it went on, block after block after block. (113)

Pablo’s elder brother tells her that people were celebrating their freedom by coming out of their homes after living in suppression for a long time. The other brother, Camilio, reminds them that they may have secured freedom from tyranny but “The tyranny of poverty is still with us” (ibid). Struck by his comment Miley notes the poverty—people trying to rebuild their lives after years of oppression.

One reason for the Bolivar’s return to their island was to attend a memorial service for their brother Daniel who as mentioned earlier, had been killed by the dictator’s men some months ago and bury him in his village. Earlier, the family had secretly buried him after finding his body in the town. Miley persuades the Bolivars to let her accompany them to their mountain village as it is near Los Luceros, the place Dulce hailed from which she was told was known for the yellow eyes shared by many of the people there. As she gets to know Dulce, Miley tells her of her hopes of tracing her birth parents in that area and how the sister at their local orphanage had told her that she had worked at the orphanage where Miley had been left. “According to Sor Arabia, I looked about four months old when I was left there in August. But she couldn’t be sure. There was no birth certificate, nothing” (149). In fact, Dulce herself tells her: “Those eyes are your birth certificate,” followed by “You might have been adopted from la capital, but your eyes tell me you are from here” (ibid). Miley tells Dulce of the mahogany box that had been found with her with a coin and intertwined locks of light brown and black hair inside. Dulce, who

had not been in the village at that time, takes her to meet an old lady by the name of Dona Gloria who knew everybody and might remember the people who had given birth at that time.

Dona Gloria, they find had had to live through a lot of personal tragedy during the dictator's rule. Her family members had been killed just as Dulce's brother, apart from her husband, had been killed. In fact, most of the men in that area had been killed by the dictator's army: "Dulce had said that hardly any males over ten and under sixty were left in Los Luceros" (147). After listening to their story, Dona Gloria recalls goes over the young couples who had given birth at that time. Finally, at her great granddaughter's prompting, she recalls the two young revolutionaries, Dolores Alba and Javier Estrella who had fallen in love and had had a child, a daughter. She had known them well and tells her that they were killed in the capital long ago. She learns that Dolores came from a family of freedom fighters, that her father and three brothers had been killed at various times. Dona Gloria adds:

On both sides, she was related to Estrella, the founder of our nation." "That was why the family had the custom to carry a peso with their ancestor's picture on it—you've seen those old coins?" (166)

Miley is left to wonder: "My coin! It must have come from Dolores!" as she tries to latch on to what she had heard: Dolores was brave....I wanted her for my birth mother" (ibid). Dona Gloria goes on: "Like all of the Estrellas, Dolores had a fire burning inside her" (ibid). She recalls: "When Javier went down to the capital to organize the urban guerrilla, Dolores went with him. That's where they were captured" (169). When asked what happened to them, Dona Gloria tells them that it is believed that they were killed: "every story one tells these days marks a grave" (170). With sadness for the unfortunate couple, and the satisfaction of having found what she was looking for, they take their farewell from Dona Gloria.

Miley is too excited to keep it to herself and when she rings her parents they are a little unhappy that she had gone looking for her birth parents. It takes some reassuring for her father to understand. Her mother realizes that she was not cutting ties with anyone or striking out on her own. When her father tells her that he had bought tickets for all of them to visit her, she welcomes that and convinces them that she is still their daughter. She

just had to know where she came from, what kinds of people were responsible for her birth and why they had given her up. Learning of the desperate circumstances that had driven her birth parents to leave her in the convent to save her life, understand the reality of her existence with a sense of gratitude and sadness. She had not been rejected by anyone. Moreover, her parents who had adopted her from the convent and brought her up, loved her.

Since Miley's parents had got married there and had their first daughter there, it was a homecoming of sorts for them as much as Miley who could reconnect with her original roots. Pablo and his parents, the Bolivars and the other relatives including his aunt Dulce had all contributed to the happy outcome of Miley's return to the land of her birth. She would go back to the U.S.A. for the time being to continue her life there, but this country of her birth would remain an important part of her.

4

Julia Alvarez's *Return to Sender*, like its title, refers to deportations and forced migrations of people who try to make their lives in the U.S.A. without proper documentation. The novel deals with the travails of families separated and dicing danger every day as they try to make their way to their loved ones. The migrants retain links with their home countries—in this case Mexico—and when an old parent is dying, the children's mother makes her painful way back to her homeland. On her return, she goes missing and it is fourteen months before the husband and children—three daughters—hear from her. The husband receives a call from someone offering to return the wife for a ransom. The husband manages to pay the amount with a lot of assistance from friends and get his broken wife back with them but soon after there is a crackdown by the immigration authorities and they are arrested to face charges leading to imprisonment and deportation. There are other family members in that group. One brother was arrested, jailed and on his release, deported. Another brother, who was separated from his wife and child back home, was arrested with the elder brother and his wife and deported.

Finally, all the family members, including two minor daughters who were U.S. citizens all return to Mexico where they plan to stay for the next ten years before they hope to apply legally for entry into the U.S.A. The novel documents their struggles amidst friendly people who try to mitigate some of the problems. Because of the government

policies, the parents of the young girls were already planning to go back home when the authorities arrest them. Finally, the novel shows that they are not unhappy about their return to their homeland and are trying their best to make a life for themselves. This novel is included in this chapter to show that return migration, if not completely voluntary, may entail hardships of resettlement. However, the emotional bonding with family members—immediate and distant—as well as the sense of community and actual support makes up for the physical problems. Added to that, there is no longer the fear of living on the edge—of the law and of brigands—in their own land.

The novel opens in Vermont on a farm that has engaged three men of Mexican origin to do the milking and looking after the two hundred cows as the owner is recovering from a tractor accident and unable to work. The men stay in a trailer with three young girls, daughters of the elder Cruz, whose mother is not with them. Although the farm owners have doubts about the validity of their papers, the fact that they have been in the U.S. for close to ten years and that they desperately needed help on their farm to take care of the animals, convinces them to engage them. This starts a debate in the family when their young son finds them and decides that his parents are indulging in anti-government activities.

The farm owners by the name of Paquette had settled in that area of Vermont several generations ago with their parents and brother and sister scattered in that area. Their father who had recently died had told them when the question of migrants came up for discussion:

‘We Paquettes came down from Canada back in the 1800s. Nobody but nobody in America got here—excepting the Indians—without somebody giving them a chance.’ That’s what he said. ‘Course, he would have preferred that Uncle Larry wait till it was legal. But the cows can’t wait for their milking till the politicians get the laws changed. They’d still be waiting.’ (70)

Given the sense behind that and their needs, some of the people had started engaging migrant labourers on their properties. The Cruz brothers had come up from North Carolina where they had been staying and working for years when they heard of better work opportunities in Vermont. Tyler’s parents had been contemplating selling the farm and staying in a nearby piece of land by building a house there. When their sons especially

Tyler, did not want to give up the farm they had to engage the Cruz brothers.

While the three Cruz men and the three young girls settled down in the new place, the worry over their missing mother continued to haunt them. All their searches had proved unproductive. Finally, they had left their employers' phone number with friends in Durham, in case their mother managed to at least make contact if she were alive. In her earlier school the eldest girl Mari was called an illegal alien by some boys and wonders what that means:

What is illegal about me? Only that I was born on the wrong side of a border? As for "alien," I asked the teacher's helper, and she explained that an alien is a creature from outer space who does not even belong on this earth! So, where am I supposed to go? (22)

Mari cannot tell her father or her sisters about her predicament as she does not want to hurt anybody or add to further trouble. She can only record her thoughts in a letter to her mother which she cannot post as she does not know her whereabouts:

And how could any of them understand why I feel so lonely? I am not like my sisters, who are little American girls as they were born here and don't know anything else. I was born in México, but I don't feel Mexican, not like Papá and my uncles with all their memories and stories and missing it all the time. (23)

Mari has few memories of Mexico as her parents brought her to the U.S. when she was a small child. However, because of her birth in another country, she stands the risk of being separated from her younger sisters who were born in the U.S.A. and so, American citizens. With their mother missing, their father's main worry is that if he should be picked up by the immigration authorities and deported, the three girls would have no parent to look after them.

As they continue to live with their worries, excerpts from Mari's classroom assignment, a letter to the U.S. president, offers insights into their plight:

Esteemed Mr. President,

My name is María Dolores, but I can't give you my last name or anybody's last name

or where we live because I am not supposed to be in your wonderful country. I apologize that I am here without permission, but I think I can explain....

I am too afraid to call attention to our family being from Mexico because my classmates might turn us in. And it is not as simple as all going back to our homeland, because there is a division right down the center of our family. My parents and I are Mexicans and my two little sisters...are Americans.

Mari explains their need to be in the U.S.A. so that they could earn a little money to send home to their grandparents:

Please, Mr. President, let it be okay for my father and uncles to stay here helping this nice family and helping our own family back home buy the things they need. Every week, my father and his brothers each contribute forty dollars to send to our family in Mexico. This total is more than their father used to make in a whole month.... (51)

Their grandfather was old and poor because, he had not got a good price for his produce. Mari hints at the traders and middlemen who deprive farmers from getting the right price for their goods. Without using the words, she talks about equitable distribution of wealth so that people at least get paid for their hard work everywhere. If they could have managed to earn enough to feed themselves in their homeland, they might not have made the dangerous trip across the border. She also voices her fear for themselves and for the kind American family which treats them like relatives. Mari's letter in sum brings out the plight of young children caught in complicated political battles nobody understood. It also explains why people take risks to their persons to try and reach a place where despite being unwelcome, they can earn some money with their labour and sweat.

Mari points to the plight of individuals who would otherwise be friends but because of government policies and regulations, feel their loyalty to their country would be challenged if they behave decently. Even her friend Tyler tells her he would rather lose the farm than appear disloyal to his country (after friends tell him that his parents could be arrested for harbouring aliens).

Tyler who had distanced himself from Mari after the incident in the school bus

when some boys had called Mari a Mexican like it was a dirty word, reflects on the situation himself:

[I]t's not Mari's fault that her parents snuck her into this country. He doesn't like being mean to her, but he also doesn't want to be friends with someone who is breaking the law, even though that law, according to his dad, needs changing. (61)

Tyler hopes that his father would recover enough to do the work with local help: "Then his dad will be able to send the Mexicans away before he gets into trouble" (63). When he meets the three girls at his grandmother's house and the girls sing a sad song, without understanding the words he understands their feelings:

"It's 'La Golondrina,' "Mari explains.... "You sing it when you are far away from your homeland and the people you love." And then she begins to sing and her sisters join in. Tyler doesn't understand all the Spanish words, something about a swallow looking for something. But for once, not knowing the words doesn't matter.

He is ashamed at his own behaviour, at making them feel more alienated with his unfriendliness. "He wishes he had words that would let them know he is sorry, that they do belong here. Thankfully, his grandmother speaks up. 'I know it's not your homeland, but you're here with people who love you'" (73).

On Thanksgiving at their grandmother's house, Tyler hears his uncle Larry talking about possible raids by the immigration authorities. He had been informed by a friend from the Sheriff's office that: "things are heating up for Mexicans.... Three were picked up just last week walking down the road to a milking barn. Two more were taken away after a trooper stopped them for speeding and the driver didn't have a license" (87). As they discuss the problem and its fallout Larry warns them:

"Any day now, Homeland Security is going to pay us all a visit. I don't put it beyond them to just come on our property and haul them off."

Tyler is shocked that his uncle, a reasonable adult, would think this is possible. But if he's shocked, it's nothing compared to Mari, who has just appeared at the door, the cleanup over. (88)

If Tyler is shocked, Mari is devastated and later on asks Tyler if it was true. He can only think of a plan as in any emergency, and suggests a nearby cave where they could hide from the agents from Homeland Security. Tyler also observes the confusion amongst the girls about their mother's whereabouts, even about her being alive: "It's clear the girls have no idea where their mom is. But how can you misplace your own mother, for heaven's sake?" (93)

The novel continually addresses the plight, the fears and the trauma experienced by migrants, in this case mostly by members of the Cruz family. Their younger uncle Felipe was arrested by the Immigration officials when he panicked and fled during a traffic stop with the elder Paquette son Ben, who was home from University. For more than a week they did not even know where they had taken him. By running Felipe had resisted the law and would have to face criminal charges apart from deportation. It was left to the Paquettes to arrange a lawyer and try to help Felipe. This is treated as a warning call by the remaining two Cruz brothers and they do not accept Mrs. Paquette's reassurances:

Papá was sure it was just a matter of time before la migra came for him and Tío Armando. He stuffed his Mexican passport and some phone cards and cash in his pockets and packed a small bag with a few clothes. Tío Armando did the same. Then Papá told us to pack our most important things into the big suitcase we bought for coming to Vermont. (95)

When the younger girls demand to know why they should pack and where they should go, all their father can tell them is that they should be ready. To Mari's question her father replies: "You will ask the patrona to send you back to México, to Abuelota and Abuelote. You wait for us there" (96). When her sister protests that she does not want to go to Mexico, Mari sees the hurt in her father's eyes: "I think it was the first time he realized what it really means that two of his daughters are American. It isn't just that they are legal in this country. They belong here. This is their home" (ibid). Along with fears of legal action by the Homeland Security agents, his missing wife, her father had to consider the legal rights as well as the future of his two minor daughters, born in America, if there were to be a forced rift.

In the meantime, the novel draws attention to the complications of American justice system. Because of criminal charges against him for running from the Police, Felipe would

have to be tried for that and spend time in jail. Only after the period in jail would he be handed over to Homeland Security for deportation. Over the weeks leading up to Christmas and through the new year some of the prohibitions by the jail authorities were lifted and Felipe was allowed to receive books and clothes sent through helpful friends. His parents in Mexico when they finally got to hear of his being in jail were in a panic about tortures and had to be reassured about the American prison system. When the judge trying his case decides that he had suffered enough and does not require further imprisonment, Felipe's case is handed over to the Homeland Security Department for his deportation hearing to commence. It is not a matter of arrest and immediate transfer to the homeland. Every case is brought to court for hearings which are carried out over a period of time. This fact is there in the minds of the adults as they try to factor in the plight of the children in the eventuality of the adults being put through arrests and the rest of the formalities of Homeland Security.

Even as they hear that Felipe had reached his home in Las Margaritas, Mexico, some people in the Vermont area continue to show hostility towards migrants. One old person called Rosetti speaks out at a town committee meeting:

“We got laws in this nation and anyone hiring illegals ought to be put behind bars. And I can start naming names if the sheriff's ready to write them down.” (14)

In the discussion that ensues, Tyler is afraid his mother would get up and argue and “call attention to the fact that the Paquettes are harboring Mexicans” (142). Instead his favourite school teacher Mr. Bicknell speaks up:

“I know, I know. Your family's been here forever, since the 1880s, when Vermont needed cheap labor to work on the marble and granite quarries in Proctor and Barre. In 1850 there were seven Italians in Vermont, seven, Mr. Rosetti. By 1910 there were four thousand five hundred and ninety- four. What if Vermonters had raised an outcry about these foreigners endangering our sovereign state and nation? Many of us wouldn't be here.” (143)

Having pointed out the history of Italian settlers in Vermont, Bicknell continues:

“But the bottom line is that this country, and particularly this state, were built by

people who gave up everything in search of a better life, not just for themselves, but for their children. Their blood, sweat, and tears formed this great nation.” (144)

What the novel and the author indicate through Bicknell’s rational argument is that rabid racism, prejudice and chauvinism have never helped America’s cause despite the political rhetoric of opportunists. This brings to mind the attacks on the earlier Chinese settlers in California by none other than Irish settlers. As the motion is defeated, the people of Vermont decide to help whoever is in need of their support. Tyler feels that he “has been part of the making of history...because he has seen democracy in action” (144). Finally, Tyler’s grandmother manages to convince the unhappy Mr. Rossetti to join the town to help the migrants.

The novel throws up another complication in the shape of a ransom demand for the missing Mrs. Cruz. Tyler hears his mother suggesting that they approach Homeland Security for help, only to be dismissed by her husband. He learns from his grandmother that some traffickers were holding her hostage and demanding \$3000 as payment. Mr. Cruz manages to bargain for a cut and finally the payment amount is cut down a little. With the help of funds from friends as well as physical support of Tyler’s aunt and uncle, Mari is sent with the money to collect her mother from a bus stop in Durham, North Carolina. Tyler and his sister accompany her and they succeed in collecting Mari’s mother, Mrs. Cruz as she is pushed out of a van. Mari is shocked to see her battered mother and they gradually learn of her trauma as she was forced to act as a servant for a trafficker who beat her up often. After a couple of days rest at the home of Tyler’s aunt and uncle, they bring her mother to Vermont.

Despite the happiness over his wife’s return, Mr. Cruz is furious at the horrors of his wife’s troubles. She is mentally and physically shattered and disturbed to the extent of not being able to sleep. Her trauma, the uncertainty of their existence in the midst of increasingly aggressive government publicity about banning all migrants convince the parents (Mr. and Mrs. Cruz) that they should all go back to their home in Mexico. Mari tells Tyler of their plan:

“The president ...was just on TV saying he’s sending the National Guard troops down to the border. They’re going to build a huge wall. My parents are talking

about going back before that happens.” (190)

When Tyler asks her if she wanted to go back, Mari answers: “I always thought I would,” although she assures him that she loved living on their farm on Vermont (191). Even as they try to sort out their problems, the immigration officials descend one night to arrest Mr. and Mrs. Cruz and their uncle.

After several days Tyler learns that the raid on the farm happened on account of their mother’s bag that the immigration officers found when they raided the smugglers’ house in North Carolina. Unfortunately, the agents assumed that she was one of the traffickers instead of a victim of those coyotes. Her parents were being treated as criminals. Only her uncle who had put up no resistance would be sent back to Mexico soon. Realizing that her parents would have to spend several months in jail, Mari appeals to her teacher, Ms. Ramirez who had been helping her, to take her to meet the immigration authorities, so that she could tell them their true story:

Having la migra see that my parents were not criminals but hardworking parents with kids might help. She was almost one hundred percent sure that my sisters and I would not be taken away to some foster home, since we were being well taken care of. (208)

After consultation with their lawyer who agreed to accompany them, an appointment was set up in the Homeland Security Office at St. Albans. Mari asks Tyler to go with them and on the way the lawyer tells them that their parents “had been seized during a national sweep called Operation Return to Sender” (209). When Ms Ramirez’s friend asks about the mission, the lawyer, Calhoun explains:

“Actually, the target was undocumented immigrants with a criminal record. That’s probably why they flushed out your mother’s smugglers down in Durham, where they found evidence linking your mother to them.” (ibid)

When Tyler reacts in shock: “But isn’t that what they stamp on a letter, Return to Sender?” and follows it up with “When there aren’t enough stamps on it?” Calhoun agrees: “People as excess baggage.” He assures Mari: “Anyhow, your parents hardly fit the bill. Now we’ve got to convince Homeland Security” (ibid).

As they enter the building Mari compares her fear to when she had gone to pay money to the smugglers for her mother's release: "Now I was going to try to do the same, but instead of money, I was going to offer a story. The story Mamá had told me about what had happened to her" (ibid). With Tyler's encouragement Mari begins her account in front of an officer called O'Goody and her statement is recorded:

The whole story of what had happened to Mamá, of how she'd been gone for a year and four months. How my father couldn't go to the police because he wasn't allowed to be in this country in the first place. How we had moved to a farm so he didn't have to leave his kids all alone for weeks at a time now that we didn't have our mother. (211)

Mari tells him about her sisters being American citizens; about paying a ransom for her mother and finally about not being a citizen herself. She also informs him of:

[H]ow we had come back from North Carolina with my mother always jumpy and screaming in the middle of the night. How instead of my father being overjoyed to have her back, he was angry all the time, losing his temper, mostly because he blamed himself that he hadn't been able to protect his wife. (212)

She continues her statement with the following explanation:

"That's why when la migra—I mean the ICE agents—came to the door, he just wasn't thinking. He would never ever have hit anybody in the world before all this happened. It's like he's turned into someone else with the bitterness and the hurt inside him." (ibid)

Finally, she says:

"I'm not an American citizen...just my sisters. So I'm turning myself in. I hope you'll take me instead of my mother, as she will go crazy if you keep her in prison. She's not going to run off, I promise, if you've got me in your jail." (ibid)

At the end of her testimony, she receives a compliment from Mr. O'Goody who assures her:

“I can't make any promises, but I'm sending this information down to our regional office in Boston, along with my recommendation that your mother be released pending her hearing. I'm also going to add a personal note, commending your exemplary behavior.” (ibid)

Mari is happy to learn that she could leave the office without being put in jail. After a few days Mari's mother is released into the care of Tyler's aunt and uncle in Boston and they go to join her with whatever belongings they can carry with them. They will stay there till her father's case comes up and then hope to leave for Mexico. Their mother would act as an official witness against the coyotes who had held her captive for all that time. That would help her were she to apply for legal entry into the country at a later date.

When Mari and her teacher Ms Ramirez discuss plans for their return to Mexico, her sister indicates that she does not want to leave her own country. That is when Mari decides to have a serious talk with her sisters:

“I want us to try really hard when Mamá and Papá get out. So many sad things have happened to them,” I explained. “And wherever we end up, the important thing is we'll all be together as a family. And remember, the two of you can always come back because you are American citizens. So this is just for now. Okay?” (213)

She has to press upon them the importance of family ties. Not knowing the ramifications, the older of the two sisters was declaring her rights as a U.S. citizen without thinking of being put in foster care. It is left to Mari, the non-citizen to explain what would be good for them. As her sisters agree to go with the family, Mari notices the sadness in Tyler's eyes and knows that her memories of their friendship would be cherished:

Tyler would never know how much I was going to miss him, no matter how much fun we ended up having in Mexico. I would never find such a special friend again, one who would even name a star after me! (214)

There was so much Mari was leaving behind, the place and her friend but as she tells her sisters, for their parents' sake they had to be together, to unite, to heal and to grow.

As Mari looks forward to healing in Mexico, she notes that her father had recovered some of his emotional balance. The goodwill extended by numerous friends had opened

her father's eyes to the goodness in some people, despite the misfortune that had shadowed them over the last year and a half. If there were coyotes and unscrupulous traffickers amongst their own people, there were others, including those of other races, who were kind and good. As they settle into their new lives in Mexico, where they have to work harder without household gadgets, Mari notes that her parents look happier than they had, in a long time. Surrounded by family in their own homeland they are willing to try and make things better for themselves and their people. They may someday go to the United States but for the time being—at least ten years—Mexico will be their home.

Thus, the chapter shows through all the cases of return in the above novels that return migration can be seen as a vital part of an individual's or family's life. Whether made out of curiosity or under duress, a return to the original homeland offers comfort, emotional sustenance and peace of mind. At a social level it helps to connect with family and friends, one's culture and the landscape. Unless it is a return to extreme hardship, a return to the erstwhile homeland always offers something at different levels to the individuals concerned. Returns can be temporary or permanent to settle down and begin again or periodic visits to refresh one's ties. Returns can be trips of discovery on the part of younger people as they search for history both personal and cultural. As reiterated elsewhere in the thesis, return migration for Caribbean Americans is a natural process and is not limited to one visit.