

**RECLAIMING TERRITORY: HOME, WORLD, AND THE
TRAVELLING SUBJECT IN CARIBBEAN AMERICAN
WOMEN'S FICTION**

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RAJASHREE DUTTA

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SCHOOL OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

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CONCLUSION

This thesis shows that unlike other stories of migration, Caribbean American fiction extends the trajectory of migration to include a return to the homeland to reclaim home and territory. Like all migration narratives, Caribbean American fiction focuses on issues of displacement—both cultural, emotional and physical—as well as problems of competition in the job sector and questions of identity. For the Caribbean migrants in the U.S.A., there is a tendency which in fact becomes a defining factor, of maintaining links with the former homeland through family and property, and at times through business interests. The relationship with the Caribbean homeland does not cease with the migrant's move to the U.S.A. Moreover, because of proximity, those who have set up home in the U.S.A. can make regular or annual trips to their erstwhile homes. There is also the habit amongst the Caribbean Americans to send gift hampers/packets to their relatives back in the Caribbean around Christmas time. As seen in some of the chapters, characters also send money home from the U.S.A. to support poor or old relatives. This ensures that the Caribbean remains a major presence in the minds and the lives of Caribbean Americans.

Further, Caribbean Americans continue to practice their cultural habits including their religious practices and food habits. This sets them apart from the other Americans especially African Americans. Their accents as they speak also mark them as people of Caribbean origin. While Caribbean Americans because of their dark skin colour may identify with the African Americans and their shared history of slavery, this identification is seen to be need based as in protest against racial discrimination in the U.S.A., and disavowed at other times. The Caribbeans feel that with their common roots in Africa and their involuntary passage across the Atlantic, African Americans would be happy to embrace them as part of a larger community in America. However, they are made to recognise the territorial rights of the African Americans who had been there for some time, against their own fluid migrant status or at best their hyphenated identities. This hyphenation unlike other migrants—Asian Americans, for example—is not necessarily a case of cultural assertion, but an acceptance of their ties elsewhere or the degrees of their acceptability in America.

Chapter 2 shows that migrants have to face and negotiate different kinds of displacement in the new country. However, different individuals tackle displacement which is mainly cultural, physical as well as emotional in different ways. Even within families, individual members as in *Brown Girl, Brownstones* are seen reacting in different

ways to this problem. For some it is not so much a problem as opening up of options after the initial round of dislocation. Sometimes the memories of past hardship and trauma are so severe that characters like Silla would try anything, legal or illegal to stay on in the place migrated to. She has no qualms about defrauding her husband and reporting him to the police as an undocumented migrant just to save herself from facing the question of return to Barbados at home. Unlike her however, the daughter wants to pursue her dreams beyond her mother's control and the father, Deighton perishes while trying to avoid the police. Most of the characters in the novels discussed in this chapter find some support from their own Caribbean American community or from some other source like the church or the convent or friends and neighbours. Their grit as they try to grip down and settle in this new place reflects their tenacity and their flexibility as they adjust to various challenging situations. Celiane and Moy in *Behind the Mountains* rally around all the dislocation in their lives to find a path of positivity for their future.

Gabi's family in *Try to Remember* face problems of displacement despite being documented immigrants because of cultural differences and their father's increasing issues of mental health. It is because of cultural problems that their mother would not accept their father's problems as a serious psychiatric illness. Consequently, problems escalate for the family at home and outside through her father's unhinged behavior and they struggle to avoid deportation. Again in this family the three teenage children and the parents adopt different approaches or measures for all displacement related problems. Their father lapses into more and more uncontrolled behavior verging on absolute craziness. While their mother lives in denial of the real problem by dosing her husband with sleeping tablets. Their father's wrath which turns to violence of the children puts a strain on all their young lives. The youngest tries drugs-in fact all three do to some extent but are able to come out of it because of the seriousness of their father's crazy behavior. As the eldest Gabi has to put up with extra pressures from her father, manage her studies and help around at home. When things get bad, she and her brothers all take on odd jobs unknown to their father. Their mother too has to secretly work as a cleaner. This novel shows that the consequences of displacement of the La Paz family centers on their father's inability to find and stick to a steady job. His delusional behavior only adds to their problems. Thus the children do not get much of a chance to enjoy their adolescent years. The novel documents their struggle throughout and their final reprieve when their father is diagnosed as a schizophrenic and is treated accordingly. While the family has to live with their day to day problems, they

can at least look forward to some kind of progress once they know their father's problems.

While the La Paz family has to live with displacement problems, *Dominicana* shows Ana's initial struggle with displacement as she tries to adjust to urban life in Brooklyn from a rural life in the Dominican Republic. In this novel, issues of displacement are faced by multiple characters and addressed in different ways. All migrants documented or otherwise work hard to earn money for their own survival and to send home to their poor relatives. Ana's life follows the trajectory of an experience novel as she is catapulted from life as a school girl to that of a migrant wife at the age of fifteen and a new life in a New York apartment, six storey above the ground. The height of the apartment allows Ana to see things in perspective as she learns of the complexities of everyday life in New York. Her story is that of resilience as she manages to live with her much older violent husband, take care of their home and also his clothes business which he runs from the apartment. Because she is good in figures, Ana manages to save something for herself and when she gets the opportunity earns money by selling food on the streets. Bit by bit she manages to learn English from the sisters in the convent and with the help of a dictionary. Her brother-in-law Cesar encourages her to think and look on herself and this finally helps her to think ahead after coming out of hospital where she had been recovering from the severe beating she had received at the hands of her husband. Ana's story also draws attention to the plight of some of her acquaintances who work at factories but are often not paid by their employers. Her life is surrounded by issues of migration and settlement as she has to look out for her family members who hope to and finally join her in New York. That becomes Ana's rallying point as she decides to train herself in accountancy and begin a business so that in future all her suffering relatives could be brought out of the poverty and political turmoil of the Dominican Republic. Thus, the chapter shows that displacement can be difficult even traumatic at times as the migrants have to struggle with language, culture and a means of livelihood. At others, displacement challenges the individuals to test their mettle and survive through constant striving.

Chapter 3 shows how these various women characters have negotiated their trauma and troubles, fled/escaped from violent scenes to seek their self-respect elsewhere. Their futures remain uncertain in most cases as they struggle to survive dicing the law and their luck. The motif for migration in most of these cases was flight or a move to a better life which does not materialize the way they expect it to. Most of these people face racism and

discrimination, apart from harassment from official agencies which does not quite succeed in crushing their spirits as they decide to make America their home. As they embrace the idea of success through hard work, their resilience and endurance stands out as yet another dimension of American grit. Their sense of family values and of community helps to consolidate the foundations of American life and society.

Chapter 4 shows that identity, especially for migrants and in this case Caribbean Americans, cannot be taken for granted as a stable entity. Rather it remains fluid and mutant, always in a state of becoming as individuals and communities are pushed to fall back on the past as they try to redefine their positions and affinities. The Caribbeans are hybrids by origin as their island cultures embrace multiple locations both geographic and cultural. That they are not allowed to forget their difference even as they seek to assimilate in mainstream American society and culture, is something they have to accept and fall back on a further hybridized Caribbean American identity or identities as the case may be.

Chapter 5 shows the manner and degree of resistance put up by Caribbean Americans as they negotiate colonial or patriarchal dominion or hegemonic practices by the dominant sector in different locations. The characters in all the novels are seen as striking out on their own. In Kincaid's novel of the same name, Lucy wants to chart her own path in life by looking for an in-between space. In *Free Enterprise*, both Mary Ellen Pleasant and Anne Christmas prove to be great survivors despite the violence they are subjected to. Although they are separated by circumstances they continue their earlier project in different locations and on their own terms. In *Soledad*, the character by that name continues to resist complete immersion in her native Dominican culture despite the efforts of her aunt and grandmother to draw her interest. Cruz in this novel brings out the reactions of three different characters—Soledad, Richie and Flaca—as they negotiate a line between American and Dominican culture. Soledad takes her mother to her homeland and is happy to note some positive changes in her mother's bearings as she appears to respond to her daughter. However, Soledad is not willing to completely embrace Dominican tradition. In *Let it Rain Coffee*, the author allows the resistance put up by characters to American or Caribbean life to control their futures. Esperanza is all for New York whereas, her husband and father-in-law are committed to the Caribbean. In the case of all the women characters their resistance to Caribbean colonialism and patriarchy or

American hegemony is seen in gendered terms as they set out to define themselves and the lives of those around them.

Chapter 6 completes the trajectory of migration with a return to the Caribbean by some of the migrants on a permanent or temporary basis. Unlike other migrants, Caribbean Americans who retain ties with their Caribbean homeland infrequently think of going back after working in America for a long period. They make retirement plans to settle back in the Caribbean. Apart from older people, individuals and families in their prime reconnect with their relatives who have stayed back in the Caribbean. Return trips are made by younger descendants of Caribbean migrants to reconnect with their roots—familial and cultural—and refresh their sense of history. Such trips are not always permanent, but not a one-time return either. Return migration is popular among Caribbean Americans because of the climate conditions and the slower pace of life compared to New York or one of the other major U.S. cities. Amongst some families who return to settle in their Caribbean homeland, the younger generation may return to the U.S.A. for studies and job opportunities and stay away for a long period.

In *Dreaming in Cuban* the mother and daughter, Lourdes and Pilar make their return journey to Cuba after a long interval in response to calls by spirits, dead and alive. Lourdes' is urged by her late father's spirit (who talks to her from time to time) to return to Cuba and explain things to her mother who was still living there. Pilar on the other hand, had maintained a distant relationship with her grandmother (whom she had not seen ever since their migration to New York, when she was a child). The teenage Pilar manages to communicate mostly in spirit with her grandmother who urges her to return to Cuba. While Pilar is happy to return to Cuba to reconnect with her grandmother and her cultural and historical roots, her mother Lourdes looks upon her journey as a painful necessity occasioned by the death of her younger sister and to try and sort out some of her family matters. In Henriquez's *The World in Half*, Miraflores goes to Panama to connect with her absent father about whom she learns from some letters in her mother's closet. They present the story of a caring and loving man, quite contrary to what she had assumed about her father. While Miraflores does not meet her father whom, she learns after a long search had been dead for almost ten years, she learns enough to make up her memories. She meets her father's sister who gives her some of his papers and photographs. This shows that the return could also be an attempt to reconnect with one's memories and the culture of one's parents. In the process of looking for her father she also makes friends and learns about

life in Panama. Her return in this sense is fruitful as it exposes her to life and culture in her father's country and she can go back and hope to return, at a more convenient time to reconnect with her friends.

In *Finding Miracles* by Alvarez, a young girl Miley (Milagros) accompanies her friends when they return to their homeland after a period of extreme political turmoil. Miley who is adopted by loving American parents wants to find out about her birth parents in that same place, her friend hail from. In fact, her friend Pablo tells her that her eyes are found in women of a particular place called, Los Luceros. On this visit, Miley manages to find out some information although, the recent violence had razed the convent from where she was adopted. With Pablo's help she manages to visit an old lady who remembered the history of that period including births and deaths and finally after some unravelling of stories learns that her parents had been a pair of young revolutionaries who had disappeared around that time. It is believed that they were killed by the military forces of the dictator and sensing the danger stalking their lives they had placed her in the convent to at least save her life. It turns out that instead of being rejected by her birth parents, their dissociation from her was an attempt to save her life. In this sense, the search is complete and Milagros can return with her family who had joined her there to the U.S.A.

In Alvarez's *Return to Sender* a family of undocumented migrants is deported to Mexico but despite the official procedure, this return is not against their wishes. The Cruz family had to weather numerous storms in the shape of constant fears from the immigration authorities as well as the disappearance of the children's mother on a return trip from Mexico to North Carolina. While they meet good and supportive people who even help to bring their mother home, a raid by the immigration authorities following a false trail leads to their arrest of the adults in the family. After numerous rounds of official procedure including court trails and deportation hearings which result in some members being sent back sooner than the others, the family is able to reunite on their return to Mexico. For the time being they are happy to try and rebuild their lives on their ancestral land. Thus, return migration even when forced can have a positive outcome.

This thesis shows how the numerous issues of migration, displacement/settlement, identity and return are addressed in different Caribbean American novels by women writers. Each of the chapters individually and together examines the peculiar dynamics of Caribbean American fiction in its varied aspects.