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CHAPTER 2

CLOSE ENCOUNTERS WITH ANCESTRAL SPACE:
TRAVEL AND RETURN IN TRANSATLANTIC SOUTH ASIAN WRITING

Introduction

If “return” is a prevalent theme in post-colonial literature,1 South Asian Atlantic narratives certainly present India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh as a powerful force for members of the diaspora. Makarand Paranjape has argued that ‘diasporas and homelands are locked in peculiar, dialectical relationships’;2 and indeed it is difficult for cultural producers to ignore this relationship, however problematic. As Gargi Bhattacharyya has put it, ‘the South Asian diaspora looks to the sub-continent as an anchor for identity formation, however mythical and uncomfortable’.3 But what happens when ethnic South Asians return to the ancestral homeland, or indeed visit it for the first time? Building on the examination of home and nation in Chapter 1, I will now consider the discursive treatment of travel and return within diasporic literary works: an œuvre in which the precarious balance between writers’ critiques of South Asia and the adoptive nation (discussed in the previous chapter) is taken several steps further.

This chapter will begin by briefly addressing return as it is articulated through the notion of a ‘deferred home’, interrogating writers’ use of this trope and asking why it appears more in British Asian than South Asian American writing. I will then analyse at greater length the way in which writers handle ‘return of the native’ moments: actual first-generation encounters with the originary homeland. In a contemporary review of Bharati Mukherjee’s novel The Tiger’s Daughter (1971), J. R. Frakes noted the ‘conventional’ nature of “return of the expatriate” fiction, structured on the familiar pattern of trembling expectation, shock of unrecognition . . . disillusionment, and final sad acceptance of one’s alien position between
two worlds’. One might take issue with the old-fashioned ‘between worlds’ nature of this statement, but it is notable that Frakes should detect a potential for cliche here as early as 1972. South Asian American authors in particular have appeared untroubled by such claims, continuing to achieve originality through the richness of their specific, individualised treatments of what going back means.

Next, in discussing what writers do with the return-of-the-native theme, I will ask how US treatments differ from British ones, before assessing the subject of ‘ethnic return’: namely, when a foreign-born generation seeks to connect with their heritage in the ancestral homeland. Looking first at South Asian American examples before moving on to the British Asian context, I will argue that these ‘roots’ visits represent a rite of passage as much for ‘ethnic’ writers and film-makers, creatively and intellectually, as for their fictionalised characters in an emotional and spiritual sense – and that such journeys occupy complex psychological ground. But whereas British Asian artists opt for an unsentimental, sometimes even comical, treatment of these issues, South Asian American writers and film-makers respond in more sombre fashion, perhaps reflecting the sacred status of the roots search in North American culture. Indeed, in the US – a society whose national self-image has been closely linked to the mythology of immigration, following the ‘ethnic revival’ of the 1960s and 1970s – this tradition remains especially important. For Mukherjee, the ‘roots search’ is ‘that most American of . . . compulsions’, while Sunaina Maira has written of

the American ethnic identity trope of ‘the search for roots’ – the idea that ethnic identity origins need to be recovered and authenticated. Identity politics in the United States encourages this view of ethnic identity as a search for validating origins, as a claim that must have geographic roots elsewhere.

Popular Irish American roots narratives date back more than half a century to John Ford’s classic film *The Quiet Man* (1952), and Stephanie Rains, in her consideration of other Irish American examples of the roots genre, has shown that Alex Haley’s Pulitzer Prize-winning, semi-fictionalised family history *Roots* (1976) – which gave rise to the landmark American television series – was responsible for translating ‘roots’ into a byword for genealogical searching in the American popular consciousness. How, then, do South Asian Atlantic artists handle this wider discourse of ‘return’?

Scholars working in various disciplines have increasingly considered the subject of reverse migration, returnees, and the ‘ethnic return’ experiences of foreign-born generations. They note that studies of diaspora and
migration have traditionally overlooked this issue, often treating migration as a unipolar phenomenon. Recent research on ethnic return has examined permanent, second-generation relocation to Japan and Greece, as well as parts of the Caribbean and the South Pacific. There has also been some attention to particular versions of temporary ‘roots’ visits through academic accounts of ‘homeland trips’ to Ghana, Scotland, China, and Korea. Such research, while fascinating and valuable, generally overlooks the South Asian context. It also takes a social science approach to this material. In other words, the aesthetic treatment of return — particularly in its literary forms — has largely been ignored; and despite the thematic prevalence of travel and return in recent South Asian Atlantic texts, this rich topic has yet to receive proper attention. This chapter will therefore attempt to redress the existing scholarly imbalance.

Deflected Homes and the Myth of Return

Immigrants ensure psychological survival in the new nation through what might be termed the ‘deferred home’, particularly within British Asian literature. Thus in Monica Ali’s novel Brick Lane (2003), Chanu endures the disappointments of life in London by saving up for a house in Dhaka and dreaming of constructing a further home in the Bangladeshi countryside, which will be distinguished, through its ‘simple’, ‘rustic’ qualities, from the ‘mansions . . . these Sylhetis are building’. And Mohammed Manzoor, the immigrant patriarch in Sarfraz Manzoor’s memoir Greetings from Bury Park: Race, Religion, Rock ‘n’ Roll (2007), tells his family, who are permanently resident in 1980s Britain, that

Pakistan was our true home and Britain merely where we happened to live . . . ‘The reason I say to you to speak Urdu and not forget you are Pakistani is that you never know when we might have to leave . . . That’s why I still keep our house in Pakistan . . . the only country that will never deny you . . . that you can always say is your home’. This tendency towards a kind of domestic postponement, through the vision of property-ownership in South Asia, allows immigrants like Chanu and Mohammed to maintain their dignity. It also suggests that little has changed since the sojourner mentality of the postwar period, as considered in Chapter 1. Indeed, one might compare this homing instinct to Amir’s initial obsession with a return to Pakistan in Abdullah Hussein’s novel Émigré Journeys (2000). Writing to his wife, Salma, in the 1960s, Amir impresses ‘upon her to buy land in the village so that by the time I made
my return there were enough acres to my home on which we could live in comfort’.

For some migrants, then, the British experience, from the 1950s right into the twenty-first century, is about saving enough money to fulfil the dream of return: earnings in the here and now are used to buy or maintain a property – or to obtain the land on which to build a dwelling – ‘back home’. Sojourners thus reside far from home in order to make a home, with the ontological experience of one’s ‘true’ home constantly deferred. As Sara Ahmed has argued:

home . . . become[s] a fetish . . . separated from the particular worldly space of living here, through the possibility of some memories and the impossibility of others. In such a narrative journey . . . the space which is most like home . . . most comfortable and familiar, is not the space of inhabitation – I am here – but the very space in which one finds the self as almost, but not quite, at home. In such a space, the subject has a destination, an itinerary, indeed a future, but in having such a destination, has not yet arrived.

Within this framework, South Asia becomes a realm of nostalgia. In Brick Lane, for instance, Nazneen repeatedly romanticises Bangladesh, which is remembered as vast and dreamlike, despite the nation’s relatively small size and high population density. Homesickness and loneliness ensure that the London-based migrants in Manzu Islam’s short story ‘Going home’ (from The Mapmakers of Spitalfields [1997]), also envision Bangladesh in an overtly positive way. Islam draws attention to the contradictions necessary to maintain this exilic position when his narrator admits that:

against our better judgements, and despite what we knew to be the reality, we plunged yet again into talking as if we had grown up in an enchanted garden . . . This was not the end but the beginning of our invariable task: to recreate that fabulous home . . . element by element, paying scrupulous attention to the most minute variations, the infinite odours, and not overlooking even the most transitory of colours, the tactile surfaces of things.

Despite the idea that some migrants do realise their dream of the deferred home – for instance, the Sylhetis whose houses Chanu dismisses as implicitly vulgar – such long-term homing plans are also problematised in British Asian texts. Dr Azad names the phenomenon of endless deferral ‘Going Home Syndrome’ (Brick Lane, 24). He has failed to achieve a permanent return to Bangladesh, following a series of natural and manmade disasters, and Brick Lane implies that the project of successfully securing a
Close Encounters with Ancestral Space

home in South Asia is unlikely to succeed. Moreover, in Atima Srivastava’s novel *Looking for Maya* (1999), Mira’s parents return to India to build a house, but soon discover the complexities of this time-consuming process: ‘land plots couldn’t be abandoned, [and] building work couldn’t be left unsupervised in Delhi, which was lawless these days’.22

In *Émigré Journeys*, the obsession with securing land in one’s birth nation co-exists, paradoxically, with ‘hatching plots to get . . . people into this country [Britain], legally or not’ (100). Similarly, the Bombay bourgeoisie in *Looking for Maya* spend much of their time ‘speculating about Foreign’ (namely, the outside world) but ‘in London . . . [they] constantly talked of India’ (89). This emigrating/homing desire also appears in South Asian American literature. Throughout Mukherjee’s early works, for example, fictional migrants will do anything to leave South Asia, but once they have left, can only think about returning to their original starting-point. Salman Rushdie has famously argued that one can never properly return home: that is, to the point from which one set out. Analysing Victor Fleming’s classic film *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), he contends that

> the truth is that once we have left our childhood places and started out to make up our lives, armed only with what we have and are, we understand that . . . there is no longer any such place as home: except, of course, for the home we make, or the homes that are made for us, in Oz: which is anywhere, and everywhere, except the place from which we began.23

Missing from this discussion is the earlier point that migrants may well see their early home through the sepia tones of nostalgia, as Dorothy does in *Wizard of Oz*: an attitude to home clearly predicated upon belief in an actual return to origins.

The concept of ‘return’ nevertheless implies a problematic time–space relationship. As Ahmed notes

> migration involves not only a spatial . . . but also a temporal dislocation: ‘the past’ becomes associated with a home that . . . is impossible to inhabit, and be inhabited by, in the present . . . it is impossible to return to a place that was lived as home, precisely because the home is not exterior to a self, but implicated in it.24

Mukherjee reinforces these ideas in her non-fiction, yet she creates fictional expatriates for whom the myth of return is a necessary aspiration: indeed, it is a defining aspect of their existence in the US. The reward of returning to India – to the deferred national home embodied by a future,
rather than ancestral, property – is taken for granted by such long-term immigrants as Mrs Chakladar, who claims in the novel *Wife* (1975) that ‘we’re all planning to go home when our husbands retire. I mean, who would want to die in Kansas City?’ In ‘Nostalgia’, a short story from the collection *Darkness* (1985), Manny, a successful New York-based psychiatrist, holds on to the idea that he can ‘always go back to Delhi’, in direct proportion to the guilt he feels about neglecting his parents there. But the stressful, demanding work which enables his moneyed American lifestyle has effectively trapped him in the United States, and the story suggests that a return to India will become less likely with each passing year. Analogously, the colonising Englishmen in Mukherjee’s historical novel *The Holder of the World* (1993) are ‘snared’ by the East India Company in southern India; for them, ‘there was no going back’. Rushdie’s sense that one can never truly return thus becomes a literal reality here.

In Manzu Islam’s ‘Going home’, Zamil plans to establish a community ‘conceived on collective principles’ back in Bangladesh, its deliberately remote location underscoring further the inaccessible nature of the deferred home. Using sensory, natural details to evoke Bangladesh – the ‘sweet smell of jack-fruit . . . the flaming red of cotton-flowers’ – Zamil seeks to involve the unnamed narrator in his project. In a symbolic plot twist, however, Zamil dies the next day, implying that living too much in an imaginary home, located in the past and future rather than the present, can be psychologically treacherous, even fatal. When Kalpana tells the narrator that:

> you came just in the nick of time to take Zamil’s place. We mustn’t stop here, there’s so much to remember and . . . plan, isn’t there? . . . The place that Zamil told us about last night, he is surely about to return there now, I can feel it in my bones. One day we must all return there, we can’t leave Zamil all alone, can we? (23; emphasis in original)

she associates a deferred home in Bangladesh with the afterlife. This marks an attempt to reconcile herself to the bitter realisation that, in a bodily sense, Zamil was unable to return home before he died. It is worth noting that Nadeem Aslam uses a similarly eschatological framework in his novel *Maps for Lost Lovers* (2004), where – during a long spell as a self-styled sojourner in Britain – Kaukab deems ‘England . . . the equivalent of earthly suffering, the return one day to Pakistan entry into Paradise’.

The reluctant compromise made by migrants with their present circumstances in order to serve future needs signals a difference between home in the literal, quotidian sense of a roof over one’s head, as discussed in Chapter 1, and home as an emotional, interior state: the transcendent feeling of security and belonging associated with the ancestral nation.
But beyond the spiritual language of deferred homes deployed in ‘Going home’ and *Maps* – a form of expression which echoes the soteriological connotations of ‘home’ in some negro spirituals – the negotiation of a future return to South Asia is often a masculinist, highly materialist endeavour which hinges on control over the building of one’s own house in a largely patriarchal society where one’s status will not be questioned. *Brick Lane* provides a perfect illustration of this through Chanu, whose carefully preserved memory of cultural recognition and social acceptance, embodied through the image of deferred Bangladeshi homes, compensates for the emasculating effects of professional failure in Britain.

Why, with the exception of Mukherjee, are deferred homes more prevalent in British Asian than in South Asian American writing? One explanation may be that, unlike a largely first-generation cohort of US writers, the 1.5- and second-generation status of such British writers as Ali, Srivastava, and Aslam – the latter two belonging to the so-called ‘1.5 generation’ because they emigrated before reaching adulthood – ensures that attitudes to the originary home are in some sense underdeveloped, even second-hand: inherited, re-imagined, and mediated through parents. But this fails to take into account writers who are first-generation: for instance, Hussein and Islam. Their attention to deferred homes could signal the ongoing sojourner mentality discussed in Chapter 1: ongoing because, as we have seen already, the UK has traditionally provided less space for immigrants in its national imaginary. Indeed, much like the insistence on domesticity charted in Chapter 1, a transnational emphasis on property in South Asia – however unrealistic and fanciful it is to harbour such plans and however much writers themselves question it – undermines the putting down of new national roots in Britain.

*Return-of-the-Native Tropes*

Rather than offering accounts of successful reverse migration, South Asian Atlantic writers generally examine troubling, temporary return-of-the-native moments, perhaps because this trope offers more room for conflict between characters as well as a legitimate means of critiquing the originary homeland. As Heidi Hansson has observed in the context of nineteenth-century Irish literature, the returnee ‘combines an outsider’s view with an insider’s authority and is therefore often used to express critical ideas’. For Sanjukta Dasgupta, meanwhile,

the expatriate’s sense of feeling ‘alien’ in the longed-for home, the sense of loss that grows out of the constructions of selective memory and the . . . shock
Across South Asian American literature, the young Indian woman coming back from the United States to visit her family constitutes a recurrent thematic device. Recalling Balachandra Rajan’s novel *Too Long in the West* (1962), these female protagonists – returning to very different parts of the country, for diverse reasons, and at different ages – attempt to come to terms with their ‘America-returned’ position (to borrow an Indian English phrase). Such novelistic figures include Tara in Mukherjee’s *Tiger’s Daughter*, Mira in Meena Alexander’s *Nampally Road* (1991); Maya in Vineeta Vijayaraghavan’s *Motherland* (2001); Priya in Amulya Malladi’s *The Mango Season* (2003); and Anju in Kavita Daswani’s *For Matrimonial Purposes* (2003). The unnamed first-person narrator of Ginu Kamani’s short story ‘Ciphers’ (*Junglee Girl* [1995]), and Shoba Narayan, recounting her own experiences in her autobiography *Monsoon Diary* (2003), provide further examples, while Shilpi Somaya Gowda’s novel *Secret Daughter* (2010) addresses both first- and second-generation ‘return’ to India.

Return-of-the-native sagas are less common in British Asian literature, possibly for experiential reasons, once again reflecting the reality that fewer British Asian writers were born and raised in South Asia. For Indian-born US writers, on the other hand, there are often compelling autobiographical reasons for exploring such ideas. Their novels usually suggest an India slow to embrace social change and radically different from America in economic terms; and they often take place at a highly charged historical moment. Thus Tara’s return to Calcutta in *Tiger’s Daughter* is marked by tumultuous political events – the siege of the city by the Communist Naxalites in 1970–134 – while Maya’s homecoming in *Motherland* takes place immediately after the Indian prime minister, Rajiv Gandhi, was assassinated by Sri Lankan Tamil terrorists in 1989.35 This latter backdrop is further emphasised by the novel’s South Indian setting in which certain Tamil characters may or may not be complicit in the ongoing terrorist campaign. Such tension sharpens Maya’s experiences of India, rendering the personal political and vice versa: her troubled emotional situation is, to a certain extent, writ large. That novels set in India are explicitly political reflects the notion that South Asia needs to be understood as a site of political upheaval, as we saw in Chapter 1, although it also runs the risk (inadvertently perhaps) of pitting a ‘dangerous’ India against a ‘safe’ US.

In *Tiger’s Daughter*, Tara recoils from much of what she sees in Calcutta, ‘outraged’ because...
there were too many people sprawled in alleys and storefronts and staircases . . . She hated Calcutta because it had given her kids eating yoghurt off dirty sidewalks . . . viruses that stalked the street . . . dogs and cows scrapping in garbage dumps.36

Why such poverty leaves Tara feeling ‘outraged’ is not entirely clear. If her indignation results from a sense of injustice at the extreme social inequality on display in India’s cities, so be it. But the fundamental self-absorption of Tara’s existential confusion suggests otherwise: she appears to be personally affronted by such squalor, which provides the exterior backdrop to her internal disappointment at the gulf between a romantically remembered India and the reality confronting her. Although Mukherjee has claimed that the 1950s city in which she was raised ‘was not the Calcutta of documentary films – not a hell where beggars fought off dying cattle for still-warm garbage’,37 this is precisely the version she reinscribes through the early 1970s Calcutta of the semi-autobiographical Tiger’s Daughter. Perhaps she deems this permissible because she is Calcutta-born and because she perceives the patrician society of Tara’s birth – and, crucially, her own – to be inexorably declining. Tiger’s Daughter places the blame for this firmly at the feet of the Naxalites and, although this political group did shake to its core the city’s socio-economic elite, the world of Tara’s (and Mukherjee’s) youth has arguably become lost as much through the simple passage of time: a process heightened because that time has been spent outside India.

In Mango Season, Malladi’s focus on return-of-the-native tropes is so unremitting that it becomes claustrophobic, as she extracts as much meaning as possible from Priya’s reverse culture shock, particularly on the issue of gender politics. As distinct from Motherland – where the younger, more impressionable Maya reacts with a certain amount of naïveté to the complexities of middle-class Indian society – Priya responds angrily to local mores on her return to the Hyderabad family home after seven years in the United States.38 The anxiety she feels towards this homecoming manifests itself on several levels. It is physical and sensory, as – much like Tara in Tiger’s Daughter or Anju in For Matrimonial Purposes – she worries about food hygiene and suffers problems with heat, noise, and chaos. It is social and cultural, as she struggles with the constraints placed upon women; with a stifling lack of privacy; and with her community’s deep-seated conservatism on matters of marriage and racial difference. Indeed, unmarried at twenty-seven, Priya occupies a socially precarious position. Her discomfort is also emotional, as she experiences guilt about such feelings of impatience and prejudice, while trying to regain her place within the wider family.

By contrast, in Mohsin Hamid’s novel The Reluctant Fundamentalist
(2007), Changez dismisses such misgivings during a brief return visit to Pakistan from the US, recognising that his initial sense of shame at ‘how shabby our house appeared’ means that ‘I was looking about me with the eyes of a foreigner . . . [an] entitled and unsympathetic American’, and then deciding to ‘exorcise the unwelcome sensibility by which I had become possessed’.39 Suitably refamiliarised with the family house – an obvious metonym for his rediscovered connection to the national home (to which he later returns permanently) – Changez takes pride in its ‘enduring grandeur’ and in the historical value of its artefacts, which include ‘Mughal miniatures . . . ancient carpets . . . [and] an excellent library’ (142). That his ancestral culture should contain such ‘ancient’ objects distinguishes it, in Changez’s eyes at least, from the relative newness and thus inferiority of an American heritage: an aspect of South Asian American writers’ critique of the US discussed briefly in the previous chapter. His restored patriotism may also explain why, as Muneeza Shamsie puts it, ‘Changez has very little to say about Pakistan’s social iniquities and political oppression.’40

And gender is significant here. Whereas Changez fails to note the privilege he enjoys as a returning son in a patriarchal society, Priya makes much of the specific difficulties women face during her South Asian homecoming. Her America-returned status also goes beyond such considerations, however, compelling more generalised behaviour and expectations in others: from the obligatory ritual of present-giving to relatives, which creates its own fictions of South Asian American abundance,41 to the hypocrisy of parents (and grandparents) who feel pride about the prestige of (grand)children living in America, and then returning to the fold, but intense prejudice about US culture and society itself.42 Like some other Non-Resident Indians, Priya’s loyalties are to her adoptive country – in this case, America – yet India elicits competing impulses which cannot be so easily dismissed, and Malladi uses Priya’s return-of-the-native position as a point of departure from which to question home linguistically, metaphorically, and materially. The strain of Priya’s return to India expresses itself as an almost out-of-body sensation. Thus in a moment of double consciousness,43 Priya envisages two distinct selves, separated along temporal and national lines: an American self representing her present and future role as lover and potential wife to Nick, her American fiancé; and an Indian self embodying her older position of daughter and granddaughter.

Grappling with such divided loyalties, she attempts to convince herself that America commands greater loyalty:

I had never thought about how . . . the cliché ‘you can never really go back home’ would stand true. This was not home anymore. Home was in San
Francisco with Nick. Home was Whole Foods grocery store... fast food at KFC [Kentucky Fried Chicken]... Pier 1... Wal-Mart... 7-Eleven and Starbucks. Home was familiar, Hyderabad was a stranger; India was as alien, exasperating, and sometimes exotic to me as it would be to a foreigner. (126)

The text confirms this faith in her US home, presented in ostensibly positive terms – after all, the commodified imagery of ‘KFC’ and ‘Starbucks’ is not something everyone would celebrate uncritically – since Priya ultimately returns to San Francisco. Indeed, permanent reverse migration is presented as similarly unviable for Anju in For Matrimonial Purposes; Maya in Motherland; Gita in Kirin Narayan’s novel Love, Stars, and All That (1994); Feroza in Bapsi Sidhwa’s novel An American Brat (1994); and for several of G. S. Sharat Chandra’s characters in the short stories collected in Sari of the Gods (1998). It is almost as though return to South Asia – and the severing of nostalgic links that this compels through a full-on engagement with current local realities – form a necessary stage in making the transition to a more fully fledged American status. But Priya’s obsessive comparisons between India and America actually serve to undercut her putative confidence in her US home. Most importantly, perhaps, it is India, rather than America, which provides the novel’s setting. Echoing Motherland, Priya’s homecoming reinstates the importance, inescapability, and potential dangers of the past as opposed to the apparent normality of an American present.

Within British Asian literature, Prafulla Mohanti’s memoir Through Brown Eyes (1985) explicitly addresses the complexities of return to India, which are framed through particular difficulties: the hostility of Delhi town planners to his professional ideas and overseas education; the sense of frustration evoked by India’s caste system and endemic corruption; and the frightening realities of urban poverty. Rather as Tara recoiled from the degradations suffered by Calcutta’s poor, so Mohanti reacts to Bombay’s horrifying extremes, asking ‘had Bombay changed, or had England changed me?’ In contrast to this urban landscape, he idealises his ancestral village, but tellingly does so only when he is in Britain. Indeed, on his return to the village, he discovers how estranged from it he has become as he encounters what he sees as the locals’ intrusive curiosity.

Through Brown Eyes never discloses Mohanti’s homosexuality and how this might have affected the question of permanent return to India. His autobiography thus recalls the guardedness of an earlier era, even if the issue of sexuality remains pertinent – central even – to his relationship with Britain as home. In view of his direct experiences of British racism, one wonders to what extent his position as a gay man has contributed
to his decision to settle in London. Mohanti surely welcomes the more liberal attitudes towards sexuality within a mid-twentieth-century Western metropolis, and the freedom from family pressure to marry and start a family that emigration confers. Instead, he writes that ‘there were personal problems which I could not discuss with anybody’ (122) and, in an intriguing textual slippage, Indian poverty is cited whenever he feels discomfort over matters of physical intimacy, as though he connects the need to guard his privacy vis-à-vis the reader with an unvoiced shame at withholding his sexuality from his poor, villager parents. His immigrant and sexual status combine to displace Mohanti within both India and Britain, but the UK ultimately represents more of a home for him than India can.

In *Looking for Maya*, Srivastava depicts the straightforward homing desire of Mira’s exilic parents, who return to India after more than fifteen years in London. But their apparent happiness at doing so is unsettled not only by the difficulties of making their deferred home a reality, but also by the ambiguity of earlier return visits which punctuate the narrative. For Ravi, Mira’s father, going back to India is about proving that he has retained his integrity, spirituality, and essential Indianness. In a way that recalls the attitudes of those British Pakistanis in Farhana Sheikh’s novel *The Red Box* (1991) who condemn other members of the community who have sold ‘their souls to make money [and] . . . forgotten who they were’, Ravi is deeply troubled by the idea that Indian friends and family will think he has been ‘swallowed up by the West’ (141). Mortified that his relatives assume he has forgotten traditional practices, he seeks to inculcate into his daughter the need for cultural sensitivity – ‘just because you live abroad . . . doesn’t mean you can go to India and throw your money around’ (76) – although Mira comments wryly that Ravi’s frugality fails to take into account ‘a whole generation of Indians who had grown up . . . in his absence . . . [and] never set foot on public transport’ (86).

The notion that exile entrenches outdated attitudes to the ancestral homeland also informs *Brick Lane*. When Chanu returns to Bangladesh, he discovers, perhaps predictably, that the experience is anticlimactic, telling his wife, Nazneen, that ‘you can’t step in the same river twice’ (409). Despite the frustrations and miseries of his life in Britain, he was at least surrounded by his family there. But Ali presents Chanu’s experiences in Bangladesh at one remove, rather as she does those of Nazneen’s sister, Hasina, through letters from Dhaka written in an estranging form of pidgin English. In other words, we do not go to Bangladesh with either of them, perhaps because, as I have argued already, portrayals of the ancestral nation differ according to the writer’s own subject posi-
tion. Thus Manzu Islam, himself a Bangladeshi émigré, offers a richer and more confident depiction of Bangladesh than does the British-raised Ali.

We saw earlier that, through the figure of Zamil in ‘Going home’, Islam suggests the potentially deadly aspects of becoming obsessed with a return to South Asia. Some writers go further, taking this idea to its logical conclusion. In Aslam’s *Maps for Lost Lovers*, an unnamed book-dealer succeeds in returning to Pakistan from Britain, after sending money to ‘his nephews for over a decade to buy land and property’ (152), only to die shortly after his arrival. In Jhumpa Lahiri’s South Asian American novel *The Namesake* (2003), Mr Ghosh expresses regret about his return from Britain to India in the early 1960s mere hours before he is killed in a train accident. *Tiger’s Daughter* ends with Tara caught up in a riot which has already killed several of her friends although, rather like the ending of *Reluctant Fundamentalist*, as discussed in Chapter 1, Tara’s own fate is not made clear. Mukherjee may even be punishing her for the self-absorption which the novel is unafraid to expose. That she chooses not to spell out what happens next ensures, however, that this conclusion is in some ways more disturbing than a clear, if bloody, finale. It also suggests an ultimately tentative approach to resolving the knotty issues posed by an ‘America return’, and means that Mukherjee reinforces the problematic aspects of Frakes’s critique of the return-of-the-native subgenre by leaving Tara suspended ‘between two worlds’.

The fatal consequences of return reverberate most powerfully in Clark Blaise and Bharati Mukherjee’s *The Sorrow and the Terror* (1987), a work of investigative reportage. Here Sikh terrorists’ obsession with Khalistan, a putative Sikh nation in India, results in the bombing of Air India Flight 182 in June 1985, killing 329 people, almost all from Canada’s Hindu community. In this painstaking, non-fictional account of such tragic events, Blaise and Mukherjee reveal that first-generation parents insisted that their Canadian-raised children come to understand India. This results in a terrifying irony . . . that besets all the victim-families at one time or another ...

These indulgent, doting, fiercely proud parents had wanted the best of both cultures for their children, and now that biculturalism had caused . . . [their] death.50

The high proportion of children killed by the bombing is eerily presaged by the Pied Piper imagery of a poem, ‘The leader of all’, written by one of the young victims, Jyothi Radhakrishnan, ten days before the flight:
Over the bridges, under the walls 
Lead me forth, lead me on, 
Lead me to where the sorrow is gone 
Take me to the promised land 
Come, let us go hand in hand. (109)

Rather than the South Asian motherland, Jyothi’s ‘promised land’ becomes a place beyond the quotidian world, as it does for the doomed children led away by the Pied Piper in the traditional story.

How do US treatments differ from British ones? Whereas South Asian American texts tend to chart women’s returns – invariably to India, since this reflects the ancestral origins of writers themselves – and to offer a broad canvas, sometimes an entire novel, for this, British Asian writers confine such returns to discrete episodes within their fiction and life-writing and, when writing about first-generation return from a second-generation subject position, they sometimes handle such material uncertainly. South Asian American authors shape what appear to be autobiographical experiences into fiction and, perhaps because they are more often women, they betray a degree of anger (greater than that evinced by British Asian writers) about return to a patriarchal society. Concerned with re-establishing connections and often disappointed by the disjuncture between nostalgia and the harsh realities of South Asia itself, returning ‘natives’ – both real and fictionalised, from both the US and the UK – feel entitled to condemn the inequalities of the originary homeland in ways that, as we will see in a moment, roots tourists do not. Gender and sexuality are significant here: returning women have less room than men for social manoeuvre in South Asia and less sexual freedom than in the West, while Mohanti’s decision not to make a permanent return to India can be linked to his own alternative sexuality, even if this remains outside the text.

*Ethnic Return in South Asian American Cultural Production*

South Asian Atlantic artists have repeatedly dramatised ‘ethnic return’ or the encounter on ancestral soil between South Asians and a foreign-born generation, and US works of fiction, autobiography, and cinema, in particular, are powered by such ‘roots’ visits. They include M. Night Shyamalan’s debut feature film, *Praying with Anger* (1992); Ameena Meer’s novel *Bombay Talkie* (1994); Zia Jaffrey’s work of reportage *The Invisibles: A Tale of the Eunuchs of India* (1996); Jhumpa Lahiri’s short story ‘Interpreter of maladies’ (from her eponymous anthology, 1999); Chitra Divakaruni’s
short story ‘The lives of strangers’ (*Unknown Errors of Our Lives*, 2001); Sameer Parekh’s novel *Stealing the Ambassador* (2002); and Anita Jain’s autobiographical text *Marrying Anita: A Quest for Love in the New India* (2008). Through close readings of *Praying with Anger*, ‘Lives of strangers’, ‘Interpreter of maladies’, and *Bombay Talkie* — texts which especially exemplify the problems of second-generation ‘return’ — I will suggest some reasons why South Asian American writers and film-makers engage with this issue, analysing the function of the roots quest and asking how such diasporic tourism interrogates the idea of transnational mobility as utopian.52

In *Praying with Anger*, the year spent by the main character, Dev, as a university exchange student in early 1990s Madras is presented in earnest, ethnographic fashion as a crucial rite of passage. Dev claims that his stay ‘feels like a sort of punishment’; and rather as though this were a traditional quest narrative, he faces a series of tests.53 Discussing what she terms the ‘catalysing visit-to-India narrative’, Sunaina Maira has argued that second-generation Indian Americans often rely upon the language of a ‘culture mission’ to frame such visits. This contains a ritual dimension... The word *mission* evokes the purposefulness of the quest and the importance of the task to be achieved... [and] suggests a fervour associated with this journey to India; indeed, *nostalgia as faith* is at work here — a belief in the authenticity of ‘Indian culture’ as unifying hitherto fragmented lives.54

Dev’s obstacles include being humiliated by older students, thanks to his cultural ignorance; and forced, albeit only briefly, to experience Indian rural pay and working conditions, after he is robbed of his money while travelling outside Madras. And, again in keeping with ideas of the quest, Dev tries to win the love of Sabitha, a beautiful local woman: a potential means of fusing the diaspora with the ancestral homeland, and a prevalent device within ethnic roots narratives.55

Dev’s youth is significant, reflecting real-life aspects of Maira’s ‘visit-to-India narrative’, since ‘transnational ties and travel often spur a rethinking or new interest in ethnic ancestry for second-generation Indian Americans in late adolescence, when they are old enough to travel to India on their own’.56 And a roots journey undertaken by a young person may exert a more life-changing impact than one made at a later stage.57 That Dev is a young man creates a link not only with the quest formula, but also with the coming-of-age elements of the *Bildungsroman* genre, since both rely traditionally on a youthful, male protagonist58 who often comes, like Dev, from outside the immediate community.
Shyamalan’s film also emphasises the gendered aspects of ethnic identity, suggesting that Dev’s stay in India can ‘make a man’ of him and, more precisely, an Indian man. This idea is closely connected to the film’s patrilineal, patrimonial elements, since the key emotional event which underpins Dev’s visit is his father’s recent death. His posthumous need for closeness to his father is a crucial part of what keeps him in India – literally the ‘fatherland’ here – when things go wrong, and it raises the emotional and dramatic stakes of his roots journey. Shyamalan’s narrative turns on the need to locate a paternal home, a theme literally played out when Dev discovers his father’s original village dwelling. Dev’s filial pilgrimage combines with an early indication of Shyamalan’s trademark interest in the supernatural when Dev receives an illusory visitation from his father, ensuring catharsis and a semi-mythical ‘atonement with the father’. This highlights the film’s use of religious symbols, which encompasses the heuristic potential of penance and pilgrimage, and the importance of prayer as a means of finding one’s place in the world (as the film’s title suggests), while signalling that ethnic return evokes the notion of ‘past lives’.

Beyond the spiritual enlightenment he believes he has gained in India, Dev fulfils his heroic potential when he makes the peace during a local Hindu–Muslim riot, a test of bravery and humanity which apparently proves his integration into the community. Dev’s behaviour effectively suggests, however, that only someone from outside the community – an American – can solve India’s problems. His national and cultural identity are, in fact, questioned throughout the film when Indians describe him as ‘an Indian from America’, ‘an American’, and a ‘foreigner’. Similarly, when his would-be relationship with Sabitha fails, the film implies that Dev cannot seriously take the place of a local man. Although the film insists on the intensity of emotion Dev experiences in India – expressed visually through the use of dazzling colours and aurally through its quasi-devotional score – it also vindicates his father’s original decision to emigrate by highlighting the country’s ongoing economic and social problems: poverty, communalism, and limited opportunities for women. And when Dev returns to the US, he symbolically repeats his father’s earlier migration.

Zygmunt Bauman has noted that pilgrimage has always been connected to questions of home and homelessness, and Shyamalan reworks this idea by illustrating that, through a spiritual quest, Dev learns to feel comfortable, on some level at least, in more than one country. Indeed, this option is depicted as preferable for second-generation South Asian Americans. As David Morley has argued, ‘identity is not rooted in one single original homeland, but rather depends on . . . [the] ability to inhabit
different imaginary geographies simultaneously’. The object of Dev’s quest, then, is to assert the Indianness of his identity by establishing spiritual and emotional (rather than professional, political, or economic) ties to his parents’ homeland. This quest allows him to ‘return’ to India in the first place, but then to go back to America, the home which he can reclaim only when, like other quest heroes, he has successfully completed his task.

The denouement of Praying with Anger – regarded as ‘emotionally immature’ by one commentator – is, however, perhaps too neat and celebratory after the bruising impact of Dev’s earlier challenges. In short, Shyamalan’s auteurist insistence on the ethnic authenticity of Dev’s visit – he also wrote and starred in the film – is at odds with his sharp delineation of Dev’s frequent faux pas and persistent unease with Indian society. By implying that the ancestral homeland can provide answers to the complexities of ethnic identity politics, Shyamalan reveals his interest in the possibilities of transnational affiliation. He implies that a hyphenated identity represents the best of both worlds, while gesturing towards a kind of US exceptionalism, since only an Indian American can restore calm during the riot. Dev can, moreover, use the spiritual and sentimental education India has given him in his time as a ‘returning’ son to forge ahead in the more economically advanced United States. Shyamalan’s urge to prove the connections between India and its diaspora through Dev’s impact on the lives of those around him may also relate to Rajini Srikanth’s notion of transnationalism as an ‘insurance policy against rejection’, since ‘Asian Americans . . . never know when their membership in the United States will be called into question’.

The superficially triumphant message of Dev’s roots visit contrasts sharply with the scepticism of ‘Lives of strangers’, where Chitra Divakaruni – Indian-born and raised, but long resident in the United States – imagines how it might feel to experience India for the first time. The immigrant parents of Leela, her protagonist, react with anxiety when she announces her decision to go to India, telling her to avoid crowds, drink boiled water, and keep out of ‘the lives of strangers’: warnings which recall Lahiri’s insistence on the lack of immunity of young South Asian Americans to Indian disease. Like Dev, Leela is struck by India’s intensity, expressed through the warm, intimate manner of her relatives. She spends a month in Calcutta, where her Bengali background allows her to assimilate (ostensibly at least) for a time. But Divakaruni’s third-person narrator cautions that Leela is experiencing the exhilaration of the unknown, ‘a vibrant unreality . . . a Mardi Gras that never ended’ (63): a respite from the depression shrouding her American life, thus suggesting the ‘therapeutic’ possibilities of the motherland.
As in *Praying with Anger*, religion frames and guides Leela’s roots trip. Unlike Dev, however, she actually embarks on a pilgrimage – the idea suggested by her relative, Seema – to Shiva’s shrine in Amarnath, Kashmir. This forces her to negotiate India’s social complexity and sheer physical scale: after an ‘interminable train journey’ from Calcutta, she must walk for three days ‘across treacherous glaciers’ (56) in order to reach the shrine. The attempted pilgrimage raises questions of destiny and mortality, as Leela ponders an earlier suicide bid, while, at a broader level, the story asks whether such spiritual journeys in the ancestral homeland can really transform or ‘redeem’ an American-born generation. Divakaruni’s choice of Amarnath is significant in an intertextual sense, since it is the destination for V. S. Naipaul’s diasporic pilgrimage in *An Area of Darkness* (1964). But whereas Naipaul successfully reaches Shiva’s shrine, Leela never even gets to her destination, thus anticipating the failed transnational links emblematised by this particular roots journey.

India’s dangers are embodied here by Mrs Das, a lonely widow and unwanted pilgrim supposedly born under an ‘unlucky star’ (58). Attempting to dismiss such ‘superstition’, Leela finds her putatively American pragmatism challenged by Indian belief systems, and by the intensity of the pilgrimage itself. In other words, for all the opportunities Leela’s Bengali ancestry has afforded her in Calcutta, it cannot help her to navigate this alien set of rules. The Indianness of Leela’s physical appearance is naturalised through epidermal imagery, her ethnic and racial kinship to Mrs Das revealed through ‘her fingers . . . brown against the matching brown of Mrs Das’s skin’ (69). But just as India appears simultaneously knowable and unknowable to the young American visitor, so too can such racialised ties only ever remain fragile, and Leela’s fraught, ambiguous position is that of neither a full tourist nor a proper local. Indeed, discomfited by the ‘baldness’ of Leela’s questions, Seema considers that ‘a real Indian woman would have known to approach the matter delicately, sideways’ (87; emphasis added) and Leela is thus exposed as an American whose Indianness runs only skin-deep. But India brings out a need for human connection in Leela, and she believes she can help Mrs Das, who stands in for the traditional Indian social system and embodies the effects of its perceived failings. Leela attributes this idealistic desire to inexplicable forces or ‘destiny’ (74), which suggests a version of a neo-colonial American ‘aid mission’, but this quest is as much about proving her own self-worth – by successfully establishing her usefulness in India and therefore her right to belong there – as it is about helping a particular individual.

That this mission fails when Leela abandons Mrs Das is perhaps inevitable. After all, the pessimism of Divakaruni’s conclusion is foreshadowed.
Close Encounters with Ancestral Space

by the precariousness of Leela’s status in India and by the symbolic fact that she does not complete the pilgrimage. Above all, perhaps, her failure is presented in moral terms: her final response to Mrs Das is as selfish and cowardly as that of any of the other pilgrims. For all the story’s apparent essentialising of India and America – India as spiritual centre, America as site of individualism and disinterested practicality – Divakaruni undercuts such simplistic binaries by revealing the problematic behaviour of the outwardly pious Indian pilgrims and the universal nature of Mrs Das’s need for love and respect. Rather like Gish Jen’s short story, ‘Duncan in China’ (1999) – where the eponymous Chinese American protagonist discovers some hard truths about himself during a religious pilgrimage – ‘Lives of strangers’ reveals the underlying self-interest, and critiques the self-indulgence, of ethnic return by exposing the ease with which American attempts at philanthropy in the ancestral nation are thwarted.

In Lahiri’s ‘Interpreter of maladies’, a South Asian American couple, Raj and Mina Das, visit two religious sites in Orissa: the Sun Temple in Konarak and the Jain ‘monastic dwellings’ in ‘the hills at Udayagiri and Khandagiri’. Although the choice of a religious setting recalls Praying with Anger and anticipates ‘The lives of strangers’, Lahiri’s story thematises cultural interaction. Like the other two texts, however, it uses the motherland to explore the degree of Indianess to which Indian Americans can lay claim. Ostensibly at ease in the ancestral homeland – where they regularly visit their respective parents, who have retired to West Bengal – the Dases nevertheless seem displaced by their immediate surroundings, while being strangely oblivious to them. Travelling away from their familiar Bengali base, Raj and Mina are, like Leela, revealingly out of place. Indeed, the idea that they cannot fully transcend their tourist status is underscored by the motif of journeying. Their diasporic vulnerability is represented by their reliance on various objects – guidebook, camera, nail polish, hairbrush – for comfort and support: a consumerist dependence which possibly critiques the materialistic, introspective American society to which they belong.

The Dases’ uncertain position may be why Mr Kapasi, their Indian tour guide, struggles to place them, noticing that they ‘looked Indian but dressed as foreigners did’ (43–4). Indeed, Lahiri contrasts the Dases’ American-style clothes, which expose plenty of flesh, with their guide’s more decorous attire; and Shyamalan uses similar sartorial markers in Praying with Anger. Through Mr Kapasi’s perspective, the story establishes the importance of appearances: not only in a cultural sense, but by implying the disparity between how people seem and how they really are. Simon Lewis has argued that ‘Lahiri . . . moves beyond Eurocentric or Oriental
images of India to those of a contemporary postcolonial nation more concerned with dialogue with its own diaspora than with its former colonisers. But this ‘dialogue’ is as unsatisfactory and doomed as that between Leela and Mrs Das.

Several critics have noted that it is Mina’s carelessness which leads monkeys towards her unsupervised son, Bobby, whom they then attack. And Mr Kapasi notes that Raj and Mina ‘behaved like an older brother and sister, not parents’ (49). In this way, they are made to exemplify the absence of family values Lahiri usually associates with mainstream (namely, white) Americans, the demands of travel in India only illuminating such failings more starkly. Animal imagery is also important here for what it reveals about the uncertainties posed by diasporic tourism. Monkeys, in particular, punctuate the story, initially acting as a source of excitement to Raj and his children, but soon coming to represent more ominous possibilities. Raj and Mina’s differing reactions to the monkeys illuminate crucial fault lines between them. That neither can handle the monkeys, however, while Mr Kapasi can, shows the extent to which these South Asian Americans are out of their depth – and their normal physical habitat – in India.

Anticipating ‘Lives of strangers’, Lahiri’s use of diasporic tourism captures the ways in which imagined transnational bonds can suddenly spring up between strangers. This point is suggested by the gulf between Mina’s romanticised perception of Mr Kapasi’s work as an ‘interpreter of maladies’ and the tragic reality which actually underpins his decision to take on this largely mundane work; and by her sense of an intimate, but fleeting, connection with him which allows her to offload her guilty secret and treat him as a confessor figure, a guru-like repository of Indian wisdom and spirituality. Indeed, the connection between her urge to confess and the story’s religious location is arguably deliberate, while its use of a historic monument as backdrop – and sexual misunderstanding as a narrative catalyst – has led several critics to read ‘Interpreter’ as a rewriting of E. M. Forster’s *A Passage to India* (1924). Much like Shyamalan’s film and Divakaruni’s story, this text actually makes no explicit reference to India’s colonial history, suggesting – as I have argued in the two previous chapters – that for some South Asian Americans, Britain is simply not relevant. Indeed, according to Susanna Ghazvinizadeh, the ‘British Empire has been replaced . . . by [the] American Empire and Mr and Mrs Das might be considered *third millennium imperial travellers*’. At the same time, India’s past remains unavoidable and the employment of pilgrimage and a religious site in Divakaruni’s and Lahiri’s stories respectively manages to reinscribe the image of an unchanging, pre-industrial India, while
Shyamalan’s film is less concerned with Indian modernity, economic or otherwise, than with an emotionally charged diasporic vision of a brightly coloured and only slowly changing ancestral homeland.\textsuperscript{86}

Despite Lahiri’s own recollection that youthful visits to Calcutta proved that she was ‘neither a tourist nor a former resident . . . yet . . . I belonged there in some fundamental way’,\textsuperscript{87} the Dases are denied any similar sense of belonging. And in contrast to Lahiri’s writerly self-presentation and her decision to locate the story in India – thus laying claim to her own authentic Indianness, as Shyamalan does in \textit{Praying with Anger}\textsuperscript{88} – her story exposes just how little common heritage there is between these South Asian Americans and the Indians they meet. Indeed, beyond physical similarities, they occupy little shared ground in cultural or linguistic terms\textsuperscript{89} and none at all in an emotional or psychological sense. Like Divakaruni, Lahiri thus probes the problematic, catch-all concept of ‘Indianness’ and reveals that it can become almost void of meaning.

Written with verve, confidence, and a degree of cynicism, Meer’s \textit{Bombay Talkie} depicts the roots journey of Sabah, its young protagonist, as traumatic and tragic: a radical departure from the three texts already considered, which only hint at tragedy and seem gentle by comparison. Before her trip (and anticipating Leela in ‘Lives of strangers’), Sabah envisages India as a panacea for the problems she has encountered growing up in the United States as the child of Indian Muslim immigrants:

\begin{quote}
maybe in India she’d be able to straighten it all out . . . find a happy medium between what her parents wanted her to do (the good Indian girl) and what she wanted to do (the bad American girl). Maybe she’d figure out what it was she really wanted to be.\textsuperscript{90}
\end{quote}

Even on the aeroplane, however, she regards the trip as ‘a terrible mistake’ and feels ‘overcome with nostalgia for her American youth’ (95). This moment is revealing both as a forewarning of the visit’s dire denouement – a marital dispute which leads to the fatal burning of Rani, her biracial, American-born friend (I will discuss Meer’s handling of miscegenation in the next chapter) – and as a reflection of the greater stability and safety afforded by Sabah’s suburban US (past and present) over her experiences of a decadent, urban India.

Here Sabah is a ‘conceptual anomaly’\textsuperscript{91} to local people in a series of repeatedly emphasised ways: she ‘looks so Indian but speaks Hindi like a \textit{firungi}’ (152), has a capacity for cultural ‘faux-pas’ (153) and little resistance to Indian disease, struggles with the heat, and remains naïve about local prices. Through the turbulent moment of Rani’s death, Sabah’s inability
— through ignorance, idleness, and physical weakness — to become comfortable in a deeply foreign India has almost become justified. As Christine Vogt-William has argued, Rani serves ‘as a projection foil for Sabah... showing her the potential of a returned diasporic’s transcultural life-style in a metropolitan setting’, a doomed potential since ‘Rani is punished severely for her attempts to return to her Indian roots’.92 Suddenly, the antipathy Sabah has felt to the ancestral homeland at some level all along is writ large, since it is a sorrowful place which she must leave as soon as possible. The reader even shares her sense of relief at returning to America, although Meer also problematises the US (if much more briefly) through the ‘innocent abroad’ figure of Adam, Sabah’s privileged Indian cousin, who meets his death in a (stereotypically) heartless New York City.

Meer’s novel — which resembles Praying with Anger in offering an early and sustained look at a homeland visit — essentialises India, then, but in more violent fashion than Shyamalan’s film, ‘Lives of strangers’, or ‘Interpreter’. After all, it portrays a deeply corrupt, hypocritical society, characterised by a particular set of clichés: maharajahs, bride-burning, deep-seated patriarchy, crippling poverty, and sectarian hatred.93 Meer also exposes the presence of sexual abuse through a brief, shocking scene of pederasty. She has argued that, following her own ‘immigrant fantasy of India as... nirvana... [a] place of social purity and perfection... I got there and really had my eyes opened’; and that, after her time as a student there in the late 1980s, she felt moved to ‘talk about... dowry deaths, social inequities, sexual abuse, communalism, sexuality — especially in the way these things relate to women’.94 Recalling Hansson’s point about the special outsider/insider status of the returning ‘native’, Meer’s recent comments suggest that the implicit authenticity conferred by her own ethnic return produced the right to critique India. The problem, perhaps, is that Sabah’s melodramatic experiences in the ancestral homeland — which Brian, a Euro-American character in the novel, refers to as being ‘like an Indian movie’ (214) — are ultimately so negative that she is left in a state of ‘numb coming-to-terms’, in the words of one reviewer.95 Asked by Rob, her white American ex-boyfriend, if she found ‘a new identity in India’, her wry, understated verdict is simply that ‘I gave the old one a coat of fresh paint. And it’s already beginning to peel’ (262–3).

It is the myopia and selfishness of Raj, Mina, Leela, and arguably Sabah, too, which challenge the redemptive possibilities of diasporic travel suggested so forcefully by Praying with Anger. Self-serving and naïve, these characters clash in a troubling and depressing way with native-born Indians — or, in Sabah’s case, form local friendships with an inbuilt expiry date — suggesting that spiritual rebirth and emotional catharsis cannot
be provided by the ancestral nation. Instead, such stories punish an individualistically American second generation for envisaging India in predominantly solipsistic terms as a site of romance, fantasy, and imaginary nostalgia. After all, their journeys are essentially ‘imaginative’ because ‘there is no premade, packaged cultural identity waiting to be revealed’. They imply that such unrealistic, indulgent attitudes – as Maira notes, a form of ‘symbolic ethnicity’ – will inevitably be shaken by the failure to connect properly with local people or to see clearly the harsh realities which confront them in India. Clear narrative closure is not provided in any of these texts, despite Shyamalan’s best efforts to the contrary. Thus – with the exception of Bombay Talkie – we know, at one level, that the Americans in Praying with Anger, ‘Lives of strangers’, and ‘Interpreter of maladies’ will all return to the US, yet each of the narratives leaves them in India, as if to stress the open-endedness of their situation and, as I argued of Hamid’s Reluctant Fundamentalist in Chapter 1, to comment upon the US from a long way off.

**Roots Journeys in British Asian Literature**

Ethnic return has been explored in British Asian cultural production since the 1970s. Examples of this include Farrukh Dhondy’s short story ‘East End at your feet’ (from his eponymous short fiction collection, 1976); Hanif Kureishi’s early autobiographical essay ‘The rainbow sign’ (1986); his short story ‘With your tongue down my throat’ (1987); and more recently his novel Something to Tell You (2008); Shani Grewal’s film Guru in Seven (1997); sketches from the first series of the BBC comedy show Goodness Gracious Me (1998), directed by Nick Wood; Suhayl Saadi’s short story ‘Ninety-nine kiss-o-grams’ (2001); Tariq Mehmood’s novel While There is Light (2003); Manzoor’s Greetings from Bury Park; Nikita Lalwani’s novel Gifted (2007); and Hardeep Singh Kohli’s travelogue Indian Takeaway: A Very British Story (2008). In contrast to the characteristic earnestness of South Asian American heritage tourism, many of these British works take a more satirical approach to the second generation’s ingenuous behaviour and fundamental foreignness in India and, to a larger extent, Pakistan.

Operating on the assumption that the limitations of the roots journey are well understood and that such material has even become clichéd, British Asian writers nevertheless feel the need to engage with it; and ‘return’ to South Asia, especially Pakistan, is pertinent in this body of writing. Perhaps because this encounter with ancestral culture is often imposed by their parents upon the second generation – to a greater degree than it is upon South Asian Americans – such trips are complicated in
multiple ways. For instance, the effects of Partition may mean that one’s relatives live in Pakistan, while the ancestral home is actually in modern-day India; and writers, who are themselves generally second-generation, depict life in Pakistan as unfamiliar, unviable, and distinctly troubling. Thus Saadi is eloquent about the perils of ‘return’, using ‘Ninety-nine kiss-o-grams’ to explore the failed dream of a deferred home, as Sal tries to locate and sell his dead father’s plot of ancestral land. Motivated by a sense of duty, he soon discovers how ill-fated this mission is. Beyond what he perceives to be the chaos of Pakistan, he is assailed by a series of difficult issues surrounding his putative inheritance: the uncertainty of his claim under Pakistani legislation; the potential worthlessness of the ‘wasteland’ he discovers; an unfavourable exchange rate; and the apparent uselessness of the crumpled deeds which he loses, symbolically, in the uninviting brown terrain of what may or may not be his family’s plot. The deeds possessed an enormous emotional weight for his late father, who had ‘worn this piece ae paper like a lover as he’d sweat it thru the . . . soor terraces ae Scola on his way tae makin it’ (3), and the story ends with Sal scrabbling on the ground, attempting to find them, as he realises that ‘he couldnae go hame, empty-handed’ (6). One senses, however, that he will be forced to leave without securing the illusory land transaction, whose very ambiguity is a metaphor for this culturally complex, obligatory mission to actualise a parent’s deferred home.

Sal starts out with the belief that Pakistan is his ‘ane land’ (1) but soon rejects what he sees as its unforgiving desolation, and his homesickness is evoked through the vision of a variegated Caledonian landscape, which stands in direct contrast to that of his parents’ country. Scotland is characterised by ‘aw its shades like the different malts’, whereas Pakistan ‘wis jis wan, scorched broon’ (5).

Angry and disappointed that this ‘real’ Pakistan cannot fulfil the patriotic lyricism implied by ‘the land ae his forefaithers’, Sal refuses to seek out any beauty in Pakistan and gives up on his trip almost as soon as it has begun. Instead he envisages Scotland’s chromatic intensity: a move which
rebuts the dismissal of Britain as colourless by some US-based writers, a point I discussed in Chapter 1. Embodying a ‘diaspora in reverse’, in Sara Upstone’s phrase, Sal’s longing for Scotland is shaped by his second-generation subjectivity, and his misery signals that – like the young South Asian Americans examined above – he is being punished for thinking he can claim ancestral land he barely knows.

Sal’s distaste for Pakistan recalls aspects of Kureishi’s handling of it and anticipates Aslam’s *Maps for Lost Lovers*, where British-born characters refer to the country as ‘a great big toilet’ (45). For Aslam’s second-generation female characters, ‘return’ to Pakistan is also sinister, as they embark upon arranged marriages in a patriarchal society where they must give up their freedoms and where ‘in one . . . province alone, a woman is murdered every thirty-eight hours solely because her virtue is in doubt’ (136). Manzoor also expresses disdain for Pakistan in *Greetings from Bury Park*. He dreads the prospect of his first visit at fourteen, regarding the motherland as ‘a strange place far away from home’ (248); and, once there, the poverty and heat which confront him – and the numerous relatives who ‘referred to me as English’ (251) – underline Pakistan’s essential foreignness, a bitter corrective to Manzoor’s secret fantasy that he ‘might feel a sense of home’ there (251). Despite the adventure of train travel and ‘late-night bazaars’ (249), he clearly feels grateful towards the father who ‘got out’ (251) and he may in fact be internalising his father’s own impatience with Pakistan, specifically its endemic corruption and what Manzoor père sees as locals’ lack of drive. But the gender dynamics outlined earlier – that returning men have more room for manoeuvre than women in India and Pakistan – are reversed here, since Manzoor’s mother appears ‘relaxed, smiling and . . . freer’ (250) than she does in Britain.

Forced to undergo another ‘return’ several years later to attend his brother’s wedding, Manzoor devotes the bare minimum of textual space to the trip, as though he wants to get through the memory as quickly as the original experience. Despite his ‘sense of being part of something bigger than my direct family’ (73), the mandatory nature of the visit – like several of the British Pakistani ‘returns’ already discussed – makes it a clear antithesis to the voluntary nature of the roots tours we witness in South Asian American texts. That said, Manzoor’s youthful sense of relief at flying back to Britain and Sal’s homesickness for Scotland mirror the attitudes of Gogol and Sonia as they gratefully return to their US home from India in Lahiri’s *Namesake*.

Lalwani’s *Gifted* offers an alternative to this model of second-generation British Asian reluctance – and sometimes downright hostility – towards the ancestral homeland, although it is worth noting that India, rather than
Pakistan, is the site of ‘return’ here. For Rumi Vasi, the young protagonist, India is a source of enormous excitement, providing richly formative experiences, which sustain and strengthen her psychologically. Employed as a framing device, but barely mentioned in contemporary reviews of the novel, the two visits – the first made when she is eight, the second at fifteen – take on a dialectical importance, since the pressures and constraints Rumi faces in her British life (stage-managed by her father to a frightening degree) are highlighted by the converse freedoms, both emotional and imaginative, offered by India. This sense of liberation cannot be disentangled from the changed behaviour of her parents, Mahesh and Shreene: as returning Non-Resident Indians, they themselves feel far more relaxed in India than they do in Britain. In other words, Lalwani challenges the myth that emigration to the West signals greater freedom for immigrants and their children, implying that, for the Vasi family, it has come at a heavy emotional price and that they might have fared better had they stayed in India.¹⁰⁵

The homeland of Rumi’s first ‘India trip’ offers a physical and emotional warmth that the UK cannot hope to match. Unsurprisingly, Rumi regards it as ‘the best time she had experienced in her whole life’ and fantasises about moving to India.¹⁰⁶ That the visit is narrated in the present tense reflects the degree to which it breathes new life into Rumi’s otherwise drab existence. Lalwani makes use of some familiar Indian ‘roots’ tropes, particularly of a religious nature, thus recalling the South Asian American narratives discussed earlier. After a Hindu priest’s ceremonial palm-reading, Shreene and Rumi embark on a pilgrimage to Mansadevi, ‘the place of wishes’ (30). The train journey there emphasises divisions between Indians and diasporics, with both mother and daughter shown to be more susceptible to disease than local people. But Rumi is made to feel special in India, where her mathematical gift is recognised. Her relatives accept her unquestioningly and the pilgrimage is treated as a childish adventure, rather than a problem in the manner of Divakaruni’s ‘Lives of strangers’. Hindu India – a place where the wishes of both adults and children can apparently be granted – is made to seem considerably more magical and mysterious than the Islamic Pakistan of ‘Ninety-nine’, Maps, Manzoor’s memoir, or Kureishi’s œuvre.

Such fairy-tale elements – which are also present in Praying with Anger, ‘Lives of strangers’, and ‘Interpreter of maladies’ – result in the idea that a protagonist can make a heuristic quest to a previously unfamiliar place and in the process uncover Indian-based characters and animals which serve an allegorical function, sometimes offer a cautionary dimension, and represent the real importance of myth in Indian culture. Although
these characteristics consciously recall Maira’s earlier point about the essentially interior, imaginative, and indeed imaginary nature of any roots journey – and the largely mythical nature of secure, stable origins awaiting recovery – most of the South Asian Atlantic texts I am considering in this chapter are actually rather conventional in formal and narrative terms. In other words, they lack the inventiveness and sheer creative zest of, for instance, Jonathan Safran Foer’s ethnic return novel *Everything is Illuminated* (2002), whose use of polyphony, detective elements, and a more sustained intertextuality to discuss a journey from America to the Ukraine makes it aesthetically more ambitious than any of these works. Indeed, its imaginative verve reflects Foer’s desire to go beyond the potentially predictable nature of roots material in Western culture. At the end of this chapter, I will posit some reasons for the formal conservatism displayed, in contrast, by South Asian American and British Asian writers when examining issues of return.

In *Gifted*, Rumi’s second, teenaged trip to India once again allows for escapism, reinvention, and a break from routine. Her ‘warm sense of her own instant belonging in a world of brown faces’ (156) contests Divakaruni’s ‘Lives of strangers’ by suggesting quite how heady the sensation of epidermal similarity can be. Seen through Indian men’s eyes in new ways, Rumi’s blossoming womanhood shapes this visit and she, too, views the country differently: as a simultaneously innocent and worldly place and as a site of erotic intrigue. After a male cousin’s attempted seduction of her, Rumi’s conversations with other relatives reveal ‘the love and lust fighting for breath in each pocket of the country of her origin’ (171) and, her Hindi improving at the same time, she experiences a more intimate connection to the ancestral nation. Rejecting a ‘between worlds’ paradigm and recalling the treatment of Indian American identity in *Praying with Anger*, Lalwani allows her protagonist to celebrate the transnational possibilities of being both ‘Angrezi’ (or British) and Indian (166).

In contrast to two such positive experiences, India fares considerably worse in Dhondy’s ‘East End at your feet’ through a humorously unsentimental exploration of a permanent ethnic returnee. Born and raised in London’s East End, Kash is forced to move to Bombay following the sudden death of his father. His white, paternalistic teachers claim that Indians are ‘your own people. All this confusion of the East End will disappear’, although, for Kash, ‘there was no confusion before. My dad was no big shot . . . and the confusion only started when he kicked it.’ Anticipating the reactions of such later writers as Mohanti, Dhondy highlights the toughness of Bombay life, as Kash observes the extent of the city’s poverty. Noting that ‘there isn’t any dole here. They just let you die
in the street, them loving Indians . . . I’ve seen it, I tell you’ (54), his macho, laconic tone only partially masks his fear, shock, and homesickness for London. As in the British Pakistani narratives considered earlier, ‘return’ to the ancestral country is enforced, but this time it is for good: no amount of comedy can disguise either its dystopian aspects or the anxiety Kash feels at this apparently irreversible relocation.

As Manzoor does in Greetings, Kohli uses life-writing in Indian Takeaway to examine his place as a British Asian in the ancestral homeland. Unlike in Greetings, however, this is the sole focus of his memoir, which is, more specifically, gastronomically themed travel writing. (I will return to Kohli’s consideration of food in Chapter 4.) Although its subtitle – ‘a very British story’ – foregrounds the text’s claims to national UK representativeness, Indian Takeaway uses Kohli’s tour of India to prove his Scottishness and Punjabiness as well. The book’s humorous chapter headings (for instance, ‘Of Mysore men’ and ‘Valley of the dals’) are indicative, meanwhile, of the light-heartedness of a quintessentially British Asian approach to roots material. As distinct from Kash or Rumi, Leela or Dev, Kohli has visited India – and, more precisely, the family home in Punjab – on countless occasions. Thus, rather than recounting the shock of the new, this journey overlays many previous ones, resulting in a more layered and palimpsestic, if less dramatic, treatment than those of first-time ethnic return.

The difference for Kohli is that this time he wishes to see much more of India – from Kerala to Kashmir – and to be a ‘tourist’, who experiences ‘the magical and mystical India’ his white friends have seen: a journey also framed as a ‘quest’. With this comes a fundamental ambivalence, which he is quick to acknowledge:

I always dislike British Indians who go to India and act like they’re white tourists, speaking English loudly and slowly. They seem to lack any empathy or . . . humility. I’m worried that I might come over like this. Yet, I realise that I am effectively a tourist; I’m from Glasgow . . . There is no economic imperative to what I am doing . . . I am simply indulging the desire of a westerner . . . travelling India in search of myself. (40, 160–1; emphasis added)

Implicit in this statement is the idea that, unlike ‘white tourists’ – bedazzled by a ‘magical . . . mystical’ India and presumably suffering from a similar lack of ‘humility’ or ‘empathy’ to those ‘British Indians’ he critiques here – diasporic Indians should be held to higher standards of behaviour and understanding in the ancestral nation than other (inferior) visitors. Thus, when Kohli attacks Jeremy – a solipsistic Filipino American yoga instructor and latter-day ‘colonist’ (119) in Mysore, who is handled in a similarly
dismissive manner to white tourists – he claims in a somewhat self-justification way that, unlike Jeremy:

I am not a magical, mystical tourist who can choose to leave the country and break my links. My links are lines of heritage. Even in Mysore (a place none of my Punjabi forbears are ever likely to have visited), I feel an innate sense of India and Indianness. (114, 119)

At the same time, Kohli is fully aware of how problematic his own position is through its complicity with the cliché of going to India to ‘find’ himself. His ‘innate . . . Indianness’ nevertheless allows him a kind of undercover status at times. His Indian authenticity wins out, for instance, in a flight from Cochin to Kovalam where he is charged ‘the Indian price . . . I suspect the . . . airline . . . has mistaken me for . . . a proper Indian rather than a British Indian interloper’ (37). But he makes some erroneous claims – for instance, that Punjab is ‘the most northerly point in India’ (24) and that the language of Kerala is ‘Keralan’ (37) – and his foreignness and lack of local knowledge are clearly evident, particularly in South India. On the other hand, in his ancestral home – Ferozepure in Punjab – Kohli feels a sense of ‘shared history’ (277) and easily blends in with the ‘tens, maybe hundreds of thousands of other turban-wearing Sikhs’ (279). In other words – as we saw when the Dases in ‘Interpreter of maladies’ and Leela in ‘Lives of strangers’ ventured outside West Bengal – it is Indian travel outside one’s ethnic (and, in Kohli’s case, religious) centre which really tests the limits of diasporic belonging. This may also explain why when talking about Hindus, Kohli refers to Indians at a remove – ‘their polytheistic deities’ (34; emphasis added) – but employs a collective voice to talk about the family home in Punjab.

Towards the end of the text, he remains simultaneously comfortable and perplexed by his dual identity, asking ‘why did I feel the need to apologise for being British when in India, and . . . for being Indian when in Britain?’ (155) – a deeply personal, yet familiar, question to many British Asians growing up between the 1960s and the 1980s – but also noting that ‘I am a Punjabi Sikh Glaswegian who also feels some empathy with being British . . . a complex blend . . . that changes depending on who I am with, where I am and how I feel on any given day’ (193). Such moments are typical of a recursive narrative, where his examinations of his own national and cultural identity can seem rambling, heavy-handed, and repetitive; and it may be that the text could simply have been better edited. But it is these very repetitions which show how few answers his journey through India can give him: the country is so varied, complex, and confusing that
the individual visitor, especially from the diaspora, can arrive at a dizzying number of conclusions. As he puts it, ‘no one tells you how to feel about your ancestry. There’s no manual, no almanac that guides you’ (282).

His journey is an attempt, then, to devise his own manual or guide to belonging. The complexities and unanswered, indeed unanswerable, questions it poses might account for the strange blend of intimacy and silence which informs Indian Takeaway. Adopting an ostensibly amiable position of familiarity, Kohli addresses the reader as ‘you’ (51, 159, 176, 269) and ‘my friends’ (215), asking the audience (presumed to be either non-Sikh and/or non-South Asian) at one point if they are ‘still with me?’ (280). This companionable tone recalls eighteenth-century English fiction – which is perhaps fitting, given the picaresque nature of the narrative – while underlining a sense of performance: Kohli clearly takes on different roles and, as a self-confessed extrovert, plays to the gallery. The text’s performative elements also point to the ways in which it relies on the author’s public persona. Thus, while it stresses Kohli’s natal family, especially his father, Indian Takeaway remains elliptical on the subject of his career and, above all, his wife and children and how they might feel about his voyage of discovery. This latter omission is reflected in the family photographs Kohli chooses to include, which depict only his Glaswegian boyhood, as though he is stuck there in some psychological sense. Like Manzoor in Greetings and Sathnam Sanghera in his autobiography The Boy with the Topknot: A Memoir of Love, Secrets and Lies in Wolverhampton (2008), Kohli’s voice is that of the exceptional, yet self-deprecating, ‘I’ narrator, which implies that while the reader can identify with his story, it is nonetheless sufficiently unusual to compel wider attention and thus publication. In this rather old-fashioned autobiography, then, Kohli’s voice appears to reveal information, while actually remaining rather non-confessional. Like these other British Asian memoirs, however, Indian Takeaway is a work of filial tribute. Indeed India appears to bring out Kohli’s inner child. Thus, when he admits that a large motivation for touring India is as a ‘homage’ to his father (234), seen as a pioneering, adventurous figure, he repeats the patrilineal/fatherland connection so central to Praying with Anger and the important parent–child dynamics which underpin and explain much second-generation ‘return’.

Conclusion

The South Asian Atlantic works discussed in this chapter reach some remarkably similar conclusions to academic studies of ethnic return. To be precise, such scholarly accounts – which do not generally examine the South Asian diasporic context – contend that ethnic returnees enter into
such trips with overly romanticised images of the ancestral homeland, which are bound to be destroyed by the tough realities of these often poor, traditional, socially stratified, and culturally homogeneous countries.\textsuperscript{112} These works also show that those who have ‘stayed behind’ do not always welcome – and may even resent – diasporic subjects even as they identify the personal (and especially material) opportunities of such visits;\textsuperscript{113} and that both parties (local and diasporic) have contradictory, even mutually exclusive, perceptions of these trips.\textsuperscript{114} Finally, such studies argue that return trips ultimately confirm the strength of national and cultural over ethno-racial identity: namely, how British or American rather than, say, Bajan or Korean the returnee is,\textsuperscript{115} which can lead to a strengthened bond with other members of the same ethnic community back in the US or UK.\textsuperscript{116} Returning to transatlantic South Asian literature, a sense of American or British belonging is enforced by perceived rejection in South Asia (as, for instance, in Manzoor’s case), yet local people are mostly depicted as curious, rather than hostile, about diasporic visitors who, in their eyes, do not really belong in India or Pakistan.

The thematic use of travel and return by these artists uncovers a range of oppositions: India versus Pakistan (Bangladesh occupying a relatively minor position), America versus Britain, male versus female, rich versus poor, and first versus second generation. Return-of-the-native narratives are more common in South Asian American than in British Asian literature, and they generally follow America-returned, first-generation women, most often going back to India. That country emerges less positively in such accounts than it does in second-generation US ‘roots’ texts, where, with the exception of Meer, writers and film-makers are more likely to critique South Asian Americans than Indians. Pakistan, by contrast, emerges more prominently in British Asian writing where male authors, usually recounting ethnic return, reinscribe a stereotypical image of the ancestral homeland as poverty-stricken, corrupt, and misogynist. A degree of pessimism informs the transatlantic treatment of both return-of-the-native and roots visits, but British Asian artists are more likely to deploy comic strategies as a response to the feelings of disappointment and unwelcome surprise that such ‘close encounters’ with ancestral origins can evoke.

Diasporic inscriptions of the ancestral nation have excited strong reactions in South Asia itself. Addressing the representation of India specifically, Makarand Paranjape has contended, for example, that writers portray

an India of poverty, violence, urban chaos, rural exploitation, caste conflict, political instability and insurmountable corruption. India automatically
becomes a ‘problem’ the solution to which . . . is . . . emigration . . . Considering that most of the contemporary writers . . . left India largely to better their material prospects, such writing becomes self-validating . . . The dirty job of India bashing need no longer be performed by a white man; non-resident Indians will do it equally well, if not better . . . From being . . . insecure, marginalised, denationalised and faceless, such diasporics have suddenly begun to loom large over us [non-diasporic Indians], clouding our own independent access to the world and the world’s unhampered assessment of our lives . . . This coup on the part of diasporic writers might be something worth celebrating if there were an accompanying humility, an acknowledgement of the limitations of diasporic representations of the homeland.\textsuperscript{117}

This eloquent attack rightly challenges an uncritical acceptance of such diasporic accounts, but it also implies that readers outside India automatically assume the authenticity of these accounts. This is no more true than the idea that a benighted India is the only version of ancestral space available in South Asian Atlantic writing.

Return-of-the-native tropes – and the planned return embodied through the deferred home – are presented as altogether more complex and self-reflexive than Paranjape’s critique implies, while the representations of ethnic return by both South Asian American and British Asian creative artists often do exhibit ‘an accompanying humility’ and a necessary and serious recognition of ‘the limitations of diasporic representations of the homeland’. Perhaps this is why foreign-born characters often struggle to negotiate their ancestral country, are sometimes punished for their preconceptions and failure to make a material difference to local lives, and regularly feel a mixture of relief and dread about returning to the United States or Britain. The punitive aspects of these narratives could reflect the unease of South Asian Atlantic artists, both first- and second-generation, in India and Pakistan, as they tacitly acknowledge that their own belonging in South Asia is tenuous at best. Indeed, the often privileged lives of British Asians and South Asian Americans allow them to travel to the motherland, but do not equip them for its challenges, either fresh or remembered; and they can, in any case, turn around and leave. In other words, they lack the toughness of those forced to remain in a harsher South Asian environment. This is especially true of the second generation, who have not suffered the rigours of migration either. Paranjape has also claimed that diasporic writers commodify the motherland;\textsuperscript{118} and, beyond autobiographical imperatives, the notion that India and Pakistan ‘sell’ may, of course, inform the decision by writers and film-makers to deploy South Asian settings.\textsuperscript{119}
Despite making ample use of India in her own work, Bharati Mukherjee has provocatively dismissed the handling by second-generation writers of so-called ‘third-world material’ as

hokey concoctions composed of family memory and brief visits to ancestral villages. Here they are . . . turning their backs on some of the richest material [namely, the ethnic diversity of the contemporary United States] ever conferred on a writer, for the fugitive attraction of something dead and ‘charming’.120

By suggesting that multi-ethnic America provides ‘some of the richest material’, while roots journeys are ‘dead’, Mukherjee overlooks the idea that India and Pakistan might open up a new frame of reference – and fresh imaginative possibilities and freedoms – for diasporic writers.121 Not only does South Asia offer an exotic, escapist alternative to Britain or the United States, but it also allows a sense of simultaneous belonging and outsider-ness which results in rich dramatic opportunities. Adventures in any ethnic motherland are likely to throw up surprise, confusion, and puzzlement but India, in particular – with its notable religious, linguistic, and social heterogeneity – proves to be especially bewildering: a dazzling source of intrigue and surprise. South Asian Atlantic writers and film-makers can also draw on its well-known cultural and historical status as a site of religious pilgrimage and popular travel writing. And tropes of return allow artists to investigate, in a particularly urgent fashion, ideas about transnational mobility – and the search for tradition evoked by ‘the uncertainties of modern life’122 – by testing the limits of their protagonists’ South Asian and American or British identities. Although such texts reflect, then, what Anders H. Stefansson has called ‘the often rather pessimistic accounts of homecoming found in . . . return migration research’, they also exhibit the concomitant ‘complexity and ambivalence’ of such accounts.123

Jennifer Bess has argued of Lahiri’s stories that they ‘embody the author’s timely lament over the failure of global living to bridge the gaps between cultures and . . . individuals’;124 and indeed, these narratives relate to an increasingly globalised world, while demonstrating, once again, that questions of national identity and difference continue to be powerful, unsettling, and difficult to resolve.125 As Mita Banerjee has put it, ‘while theorists increasingly herald the obsolescence of things national in the era of globalisation, discourses of popular culture seem to attest to the fact that what is negotiated continues to be national representativeness’.126 Despite gesturing towards transnationalism, many of these texts foreground such ‘national representativeness’. Thus, as we saw in Chapter
the global nature of the South Asian diaspora and the importance of ethnic similarity do not cancel out the significance of national identity and the cultural difference it embodies, and this means that ‘return’ to the ancestral homeland can still embody a major step. But if the limits of Indian or Pakistani inclusion are tested, then so too are the US and the UK critiqued, as I argued about much of the South Asian Atlantic writing considered in the previous chapter. Americaness or Britishness come at the expense of South Asian affiliation; and since the right to belong in South Asia is far from guaranteed, it must be earned through the successful completion of a spiritual and emotional quest.

In the US context, in particular, roots narratives allow artists to re-craft a well-recognised form of Americana: a strategy which – while not derivative exactly – may arise from the desire to draw on existing ethno-cultural traditions. In other words, if national representativeness underpins these transnational journeys, then this claiming of familiar roots terrain is, ironically, as much about artists proving their American authenticity as it is about confirming the strength of their Indian heritage. The ‘American’ part of ‘South Asian American’ remains politically and culturally contested territory, after all, and, as Matthew Frye Jacobson has argued in a 1970s Euro-American context: ‘the roots trip was as much a national phenomenon as a familial or personal one’. That roots journeys also make their way into British Asian works – whether consciously depicted in this way or not – attests to broader transatlantic currents within popular culture, rather than specifically South Asian ‘anxieties of influence’, as I argued in the Introduction. What is striking is that creative artists from both sides of the Atlantic choose to narrate a similar tension between local and global for both the first and second generation.

Paranjape’s critique converges with Frakes’s assessment of diasporic representations of the motherland many years earlier because both spot the potential for cliché and the recycling of particular ideas at work in the ‘return’ subgenre. This subject, which is not in itself particularly radical, is traditionally underpinned by an assimilationist, coming-to-America/Britain message, which essentialises the ancestral homeland as a rather atrophied place. Perhaps Mukherjee’s negative evaluation can be applied to transatlantic South Asian writing after all, although not in the way she intends. To paraphrase her claim, the subject of travel and return is neither ‘dead’ nor ‘charming’ – as her own *Tiger’s Daughter* richly illustrates – but, as I argued earlier, its treatment remains rather flat, even conservative at times: not only in second-generation ‘roots’ narratives, but also in those recounting the first generation’s experiences. This mirrors in formal ways an uncertainty, even an emotional and intellectual exhaustion,
towards the ancestral homeland, as opposed to the US or Britain, and a persistent, arguably old-fashioned, emphasis on national boundaries. Beyond tonal differences, then, these ostensibly transnational narratives are intriguing for the thematic questions and ambiguities they present, but they are not especially oppositional or subversive artistically. With the possible exceptions of Gifted and Indian Takeaway – and for all their individual interest and illuminating transatlantic overlaps and crossovers – they end up essentialising ancestral space, reinscribing ‘the notion of the “impossible homecoming”’¹²⁹ and implicitly supporting past and future migration.

NOTES

1. Stein, Black British, p. 57.
7. Mukherjee, Desirable, p. 17; Maira, Desis, p. 114.
8. The existence of a specific term, ‘returned Yank’, suggests the degree to which ‘return’ has informed discussions – and artistic representations – of the Irish diaspora. That the phrase is ‘returned Yank’ reveals not only the primacy of roots searching in US culture, but also the idea that the returnee’s claim to the motherland is provisional. ‘Plastic Paddy’, a derogatory term of UK origin for those outside Ireland whose claims to Irishness are seen as dubious, reflects a characteristically British scepticism towards roots searching; for further discussion of the term, see Hickman, ‘Locating’, pp. 8–26.
9. Rains, ‘Irish roots’, pp. 131–2; see also Halter, Shopping, pp. 83–4; and Jacobson, Roots Too, pp. 31, 42–8, for a consideration of the impact of Haley’s text.
10. See Levitt and Waters, Changing Face, Harper, Emigrant Homecomings,
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Markowitz and Stefansson, Homecomings; Conway and Potter, Return Migration; and Tsuda, Diasporic Homecomings.


14. Levitt, ‘Ties that change’, pp. 131–4, 137–43, and Maira, Desis, pp. 107–17, are exceptions. India does not appear to operate an official version of heritage tourism (as, for example, Ireland, Scotland, and Ghana do) and, despite any number of public traumas, most notably Partition, there is no unifying tragic narrative (such as the Irish potato famine, the Highland Clearances, the Jewish Holocaust, or transatlantic slavery) which is seen to underpin South Asian migration. The voluntary nature of much of that movement out of the Indian subcontinent is arguably reflected in returns to it, as we will see in South Asian Atlantic works charting return of the native and ethnic return visits.


16. Critics have analysed Ameena Meer’s novel Bombay Talkie (1994) and – to a far greater extent – Jhumpa Lahiri’s short story ‘Interpreter of maladies’ (1999), both of which concern South Asian American diasporic tourism; see, for example, Lewis, ‘Lahiri’s “Interpreter”’, pp. 219–21; Ghazvinizadeh, ‘E. M. Forster’, pp. 1–9; Rajan, ‘Ethical responsibility’, pp. 129–33; Annesley, Fictions, pp. 128–30; and Vogt-William, ‘Routes’, pp. 309–22. The recurring importance of this subject in South Asian Atlantic writing as a whole, however, has yet to be interpreted – and that is my aim in this chapter.

17. Ali, Brick Lane, p. 299.


27. Mukherjee, Holder, pp. 127, 182.


29. For instance, the paradisal sense taken on by ‘home’ in such well-known
spiritals as ‘Swing low sweet chariot’, which includes the line ‘coming for to carry me home’. In a South Asian context, compare the discussion of Anglo-Indians in Haslam, ‘Queenie’, where he writes that ‘given their subservient position within the colonial system, and their father’s and forefather’s talk of “Home”, it is understandable that [Anglo-Indians] . . . would internalise this desire in a way that would paralleled the hope of their Christian faith for a “promised land”’.  

30. In Lahiri’s work, the first generation’s reverse migration to India is presented, by contrast, as relatively straightforward: especially in the short story, ‘Interpreter of maladies’ (1999), which I consider later in this chapter; her novel The Namesake (2003); and the more recent short story cycle ‘Hema and Kaushik’ from her collection Unaccustomed Earth (2008). See also Rai, ‘Indians’, which examines return to India from the US on professional grounds. Class privilege and educational background clearly assist such returns, which are often characterised by ‘the “soft landing” that many returning Indians seek by living in gated communities’, ibid.; and compare Manzoor, ‘Brits’.


33. Exceptions to this gender emphasis are G. S. Chandra’s short story ‘Bhat’s return’, from his anthology Sari of the Gods (1998), which satirically recounts the visit to India of Bhat and his white American wife, Becky; Mohsin Hamid’s novel The Reluctant Fundamentalist (2007); and Nagesh Kukunoor’s popular Indian film Hyderabad Blues (1998).


38. The choice of seven seems deliberate since it is traditionally significant across cultural traditions. Priya travels ‘across seven seas to the land of opportunities’, a reference to the phrase, ‘across seven seas’, which is used throughout South Asia to refer to the idea of faraway places; see Malladi, Mango Season, p. 126. In Tiger’s Daughter, Tara also returns after seven years; in each case, the use of the number seven emphasises cultural dislocation and personal transformation in a more symbolic way.


40. Shamsie, ‘Reluctant Fundamentalist’.

41. Compare Blaise and Mukherjee, Sorrow and Terror, pp. 29, 129, where they suggest that for Canada’s South Asian communities, short return visits to India are fraught with pressure through the need to prove to those ‘back home’ that one has triumphed abroad, since it is the ultimate disgrace to return home empty-handed. Such return visits thus carry a heavy emotional, cultural, and material cost, framed by financial abandon (in terms of
present-buying) and cultural conservatism (not forgetting one’s Indianness). See also Kalita, Suburban, pp. 49, 55, 66, 135; and Kohli, Indian Takeaway, p. 63.

42. Compare Mrs Dutta’s ‘uneasy pride’ about the ability of her daughter-in-law, Shyamoli, to ‘pass for an American’ in Chitra Divakaruni’s short story ‘Mrs Dutta writes a letter’, anthologised in Divakaruni, Unknown Errors, p. 3; and the mixture of anxiety and self-importance about Feroza’s American life exhibited by her mother and grandmother in Pakistan in Bapsi Sidhwa’s novel An American Brat (1994).

43. I refer here to W. E. B. DuBois’s famous concept of black American ‘double consciousness’: namely, the experience of ‘always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others . . . [and] ever feel[ing a] . . . twoness . . . two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body’; see DuBois, Souls, p. 11.

44. Compare Kuortti, Writing, p. 141.

45. Mohanti, Through Brown Eyes, p. 120.

46. See Nelson, ‘Prafulla Mohanti’.

47. Sheikh, Red Box, p. 61, emphasis added.


49. For further discussion of this, see Maxey, ‘Representative’, p. 225.

50. Blaise and Mukherjee, Sorrow and Terror, p. 117.


52. See Rushdie, Imaginary, p. 394; Bhabha, Location, pp. 37–8, 112; and also Morley, Home Territories, pp. 205–13, 225–42.

53. Shyamalan, Praying with Anger.

54. Maira, Desis, pp. 110–11, emphasis in original; and see Halter, Shopping, p. 86.

55. Compare its use in Jen’s ‘Duncan in China’, Ren and Konwiser’s Shanghai Kiss, and several Irish American roots dramas, including Ford’s The Quiet Man and Eugene Brady’s The Nephew (1998).


58. Suleiman, Authoritarian.

59. Compare Chu, ‘Asian American’, p. 204. In her short story ‘A temporary matter’ (1999), Lahiri also links an increased second-generation interest in the ancestral nation to paternal death; see Lahiri, Interpreter, p. 12. In other ethnic roots narratives, it is the maternal death and ancestral nation as ‘motherland’ which are more significant – see The Nephew and Shanghai Kiss; while sometimes the journey to the originary homeland is driven by the protagonist’s orphaned status: consider, for example, The Quiet Man and Tony Gatlif (dir.), Exiles (2004).

60. The discovery or acquisition of a familial property – again, home as house/nation – is another key trope within roots narratives; see, for instance, The Quiet Man, The Nephew, Exiles, and Shanghai Kiss. By contrast, in Suhayl
Saadi’s British Asian short story ‘Ninety-nine kiss-o-grams’ (2001), discussed later in this chapter, Sal’s roots journey is doomed when he cannot find his family’s ancestral land in Pakistan.

63. Compare the function of the ‘donnybrook’ finale in *The Quiet Man*; and see Gibbons, *Quiet Man*, pp. 17, 55, 61.
69. Compare Campbell, *Hero*, p. 10n: ‘rites of passage are intended to touch not only the candidate but also every member of his circle’.
73. Compare Gibbons, *Quiet Man*, p. 16, where he notes that in *The Quiet Man*, the American roots journey to Ireland is ‘motivated by . . . a therapeutic quest to undo the effects of trauma’.
75. Studies of ethnic return in diverse locations note that racial similarity – so reassuring initially to ‘visible minorities’ with histories of racial exclusion within such white majority societies as the US and UK – does not correspond to cultural belonging and that this point is quickly driven home to the overseas visitor; see Potter and Phillips, ‘Bajan-Brit’, pp. 83, 87; Kim, ‘Finding our way’, pp. 305–7, 317; Macpherson and Macpherson, ‘It was not’, p. 35; and compare Holsey, ‘Transatlantic dreaming’, pp. 166–7.
76. Compare Jen’s ‘Duncan in China’, where locals tell Duncan, a Chinese American, that ‘a Chinese man’ would ‘figure out’ the metaphors used by Chinese people; Jen, *Who’s Irish?*, p. 55. As with both Leela and Dev, Duncan’s ‘foreign’ status and helplessness in the ancestral homeland are continually stressed.
77. In discussion of the story, however, Divakaruni accounts for (and arguably excuses) Leela’s actions on the grounds that she finally acknowledges ‘the genetic memory’ of Indian ‘superstition’; see Johnson, *Conversations*, p. 65.
83. Ibid. p. 6; Rajan, ‘Ethical responsibility’, p. 130.
86. This largely depoliticised, unthreatening vision recalls Ford’s technicolour, socially monolithic Ireland in *The Quiet Man*.
87. Quoted in Mandal, ‘Oh Calcutta!’, p. 19.
88. Some critics have questioned the ‘authenticity’ of these creative artists, arguing that the representation of India is static and Orientalist in ‘The lives of strangers’ and ‘Interpreter of maladies’; see, for example, Majithia, ‘Of foreigners’. For a critique of Lahiri’s Indian-based stories more generally, see Narayan, ‘India’, p. 49; for a counter-position, see Chaudhury, ‘Debutante’, p. 19; and for Lahiri’s own response to such criticisms, see Lahiri, ‘My intimate alien’, pp. 117–18.
89. These characters literally cannot speak the language – Dev does not understand Tamil, Leela is soon lost in Bengali (‘Lives’, 57), and Mina fails to comprehend Hindi (‘Interpreter’, 46). By contrast, the latter story emphasises Mr Kapasi’s polyglot work; see Annesley, *Fictions*, p. 130. On the relationship between language and second-generation ‘return’, see Kibria, ‘Of blood’, pp. 305–6.
91. I refer to Dorinne Kondo’s notion of local people’s struggle with the ‘conceptual anomaly’ of a visitor who is racially similar, but culturally other; quoted in Chu, ‘Asian American’, p. 209.
93. Compare Subramanyam, review of *Bombay Talkie*.
94. Quoted in *ibid*.
95. Ibid.
98. It is worth noting that some US works (although none South Asian) have punctured the roots journey’s traditionally serious status within American culture: for instance, Jen’s ‘Duncan in China’ and Ren and Konwiser’s *Shanghai Kiss*, both of which use humour to defuse the harshness of diasporic experiences in China. See also Tim Van Patten’s ‘Commendatori’ (2000), episode 4 from season 2 of the hit HBO television series *The Sopranos*, where Italian American gangsters in Naples are made to seem comically out of place and out of their depth; and Junot Díaz’s 1.5-generation return to the Dominican Republic in Diaz, ‘Homecoming’.
99. The fact that, with the exception of *Gifted* and parts of Wood, *Goodness Gracious Me*, these texts are all male-authored may also account for their reliance on comic strategies, since men’s confidence is arguably more
connected with the pressure to be funny than that of women, hence the male-dominated world of stand-up comedy in both the US and the UK.

100. For more varied, real-life perspectives, see Dwyer, ‘Where are you from?’, pp. 192–7.
109. Kohli, *Indian Takeaway*, pp. 33, 40, 43, 46, 50; and compare Alibhai-Brown, *Settler’s Cookbook*, p. 13, where she refers to roots journeys in India as ‘futile quests by people nervous about their own condition’.
110. See also Iyer, ‘Words’.
111. Compare Naish, ‘Hardeep Singh Kohli’.
120. Mukherjee, ‘Immigrant’, p. 29.
121. Compare Salgado, ‘Writing home’, p. 28, where she writes that ‘Sri Lanka is . . . the land of my imaginative life, and therefore where I would claim I truly live; I merely reside in England.’
122. Shah, ‘Hooray’.
123. Stefansson, ‘Homecomings to the future’, p. 5.
125. Compare Annesley, Fictions, p. 130.
126. Banerjee, ‘Traveling barbies’, p. 449; and see also Stefansson, ‘Homecomings to the future’, p. 3. In a sense, this point about the ongoing importance of national belonging in a globalised age has itself become a critical commonplace.
129. Stefansson, ‘Homecomings to the future’, p. 11.