

A Review of the Impossible Return: Post-Migratory Narratives and the Reconstruction of Identity in Contemporary Latin American Literature

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Abstract

Return migration, traditionally conceived as the closure of the migratory cycle, is represented in contemporary Latin American literature as a complex and unstable process marked by estrangement, nostalgia, and fractured identity. This article analyzes the notion of the “impossible return” through a comparative reading of works by Valeria Luiselli, Cristina Rivera Garza, Edwidge Danticat, and Selva Almada. Drawing on postcolonial theory, diaspora studies, and transnational approaches, the study demonstrates that return does not allow for a harmonious recovery of the subject’s former identity, but rather produces a conflictive superposition of memories, cultural practices, and divergent temporalities. The article argues that post-migratory literature redefines “home” as a mobile, discontinuous, and permanently negotiated space. Through close textual analysis, this study reveals how return becomes not an act of restoration, but one of crisis and revelation, exposing the irreversible transformations produced by displacement. Ultimately, the article positions the “impossible return” as a key narrative device for understanding identity reconstruction in transnational Latin American writing.

Keywords: *Return Migration; Post-Migratory Identity; Latin American Diaspora; Cultural Memory; Transnational Literature*

Introduction

Migration has been one of the most decisive historical forces shaping Latin American subjectivity. From the mass displacements caused by dictatorships, civil wars, and economic crises to recent migrations driven by structural violence, labor precariousness, and political persecution, the movement of bodies and cultures across borders has profoundly redefined notions of identity, belonging, and community. Within this context, narratives of return occupy a privileged position for understanding the complexity of contemporary migration, as they question the widespread assumption that returning to the homeland necessarily restores continuity of the self or recovers “home” as a stable and protective space.

Contemporary Latin American literature does not depict return as a linear or reparative process. On the contrary, return is represented as a liminal experience where conflicting memories, fractured identities, and cultural tensions converge. This perspective aligns with diaspora studies, which understand transnationality as a permanent condition rather than a temporary stage (Brah 182; Hall 235). The “impossible return,” a term used here to define the impossibility of restoring a pre-migratory sense of belonging, emerges from the recognition that migration irreversibly transforms both the subject and the abandoned territory.

This article examines the literary configuration of this return marked by estrangement by focusing on works by Valeria Luiselli, Cristina Rivera Garza, Edwidge Danticat, and Selva Almada. Through a comparative approach, the article analyzes how these authors employ return as a narrative device that exposes the loss of home in its traditional sense while opening new forms of subjectivity within transnational space.

Theoretical Framework

To understand return migration as a problematic space, it is essential to turn to the concepts of diaspora, hybridity, and cultural memory. Avtar Brah defines diaspora not as a singular journey but as “multiple journeys” intersected by subjective experience, cultural practices, structures of power, and transnational politics (Brah 183). Within this framework, “home” is not a fixed location but an affective and symbolic construction that is continually reconfigured. Paul Gilroy has likewise argued that diasporic identity is relational and mobile rather than rooted in a single national territory (Gilroy 15). This notion is central to understanding why literary representations of return often result in disillusion rather than reconciliation. From postcolonial theory, Homi Bhabha introduces the concept of “unhomeliness” to describe the sense of dislocation experienced by the migrant subject when the space once considered home becomes unfamiliar (Bhabha 13). This condition intensifies upon return, as the migrant encounters a homeland transformed by time, violence, or social change. Svetlana Boym’s distinction between restorative and reflective nostalgia also proves fundamental. While restorative nostalgia seeks to rebuild an idealized past, reflective nostalgia acknowledges the irreversibility of time and the impossibility of full return (Boym 41). In the works analyzed here, reflective nostalgia dominates memory does not restore the past but exposes its fractures.

Transnational studies further complicate the notion of return. Basch, Glick-Schiller, and Szanton Blanc demonstrate that migrants build identities across multiple sociocultural spaces simultaneously (Basch et al. 7). As a result, return does not reestablish linear belonging but reveals the tension between divergent networks, expectations, and experiences. Within this framework, the “impossible return” functions as an interpretive category that captures the emotional, political, and cultural complexity of return in contemporary literature.

Return Narratives in Latin American Literature

In Latin American literature, return often appears as an ambivalent movement: it expresses longing, necessity, and belonging, but also pain, rupture, and alienation. Three primary modalities of return can be identified: voluntary return, forced return, and symbolic return. Voluntary return involves the subject’s attempt to reconnect with origins only to encounter symbolic distance. Forced return results from deportation, family crisis, or political violence. Symbolic return, meanwhile, takes place through memory, imagination, or mourning when physical return is no longer possible.

In many narratives, these modalities coexist, producing representations of return as an unfinished and unstable process. The returning migrant is shaped by multiple identities that the homeland often cannot assimilate. At the same time, the homeland itself appears transformed by inequality, urbanization, violence, and historical trauma, intensifying the sense of estrangement.

Valeria Luiselli: Displacement and the Fracture of Belonging

Valeria Luiselli has explored the consequences of displacement in works such as *Lost Children* and *Lost Children Archive*. While these texts do not center explicitly on physical return, they engage deeply with the impossibility of returning to a stable identity or an intact homeland. Home becomes a fragmented and temporary experience. The characters' attempts to rebuild affective ties with their places of origin reveal the irreversibility of diasporic transformation. Return in Luiselli functions as a narrative mirage. Characters pursue a version of home that grows increasingly abstract. Migration, especially in its childhood form, exposes the fragility of identity when it depends on unstable political and social contexts. Return does not repair loss but confronts the subject with absence.

Cristina Rivera Garza: Return, Mourning, and the Wounded Nation

Cristina Rivera Garza offers one of the most profound representations of impossible return in works such as *The Invincible Summer of Liliana* and *Dolerse*. Here, return is not simply geographic but emotional and political. Returning to Mexico means returning to the open wound of feminicidal violence. The homeland appears to be a space of unresolved trauma. Rivera Garza's writing situates return within the tension between Mexico and the United States, revealing how transnational movement conditions subjectivity, language, and memory. Return becomes a destabilizing process that confirms home as a space where belonging may be unbearable.

Edwidge Danticat: Caribbean Return and Diasporic Memory

Although born in Haiti and residing in the United States, Edwidge Danticat extends the Latin American framework into the Caribbean experience. In *Brother, I'm Dying* and *The Dew Breaker*, return is marked by dictatorship, exile, and political terror. Return operates less as geographical movement than as ritual memory. Home in Danticat is reconstructed through storytelling rather than territory. The return is always haunted by loss and political violence. The desire for belonging clashes with the necessity of distance for survival.

Selva Almada: Internal Displacement and the Non-Return of Origin

In works such as *Dead Girls* and *The Disattachment Is a Way of Loving*, Selva Almada explores internal displacement and symbolic return. While her narratives are not centered on international migration, they address the violence embedded within national territories. Home becomes a space that cannot be safely inhabited even without crossing borders.

Return as Failure and Revelation

Across all four authors, return activates a process of disillusion. The migrant no longer belongs fully to the homeland yet remains partially foreign in the host country. This liminal condition produces a transnational subjectivity without geographic resolution.

Conclusion

The works of Luiselli, Rivera Garza, Danticat, and Almada reveal that contemporary Latin American literature understands return migration as an experience of rupture rather than repair. Return does not close the migratory cycle but extends it into new forms of displacement and

transformation. Home emerges as an affective and symbolic space constantly negotiated across multiple geographies.

In a world marked by intensified mobility, the literature of impossible return invites a rethinking of belonging through hybridity, memory, and transnational subjectivity.

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