Home and Identity at Crossroads: A Selective Study of V. S. Naipaul's Narratives in Postcolonial Perspective

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Abstract

V. S. Naipaul is a prominent postcolonial writer and a Nobel Laureate. He was born in Trinidad in a family of Indian descent as his grandparents migrated from India to British Trinidad in the late nineteenth century as indentured labourers. Like other expatriate writers, Naipaul too can be put in the category of a cultural traveller or an extra-territorial man bearing transnational identities. Most migrant writers including V. S. Naipaul and as a part of their self-exile, have settled in metropolitan centres of the world in order to attract Western audience. The homeless and unsettled life of his father had great impact on young Naipaul. As they were settling in the New World, they constantly struggled to maintain their cultural, religious and linguistic identity. Thus, migration brought in them a sense of alienation and homelessness and an identity that remained a prime concern for V. S. Naipaul throughout his life and which is reflected in most of his writings. This write-up aims to analyse V. S. Naipaul's select narratives to showcase the migrants' including the postcolonial peoples' search and at times crises for home and identity.

Keywords: V. S. Naipaul, postcolonial, migrant, indenture, homelessness, alienation, identity, ambivalence, civilization.

INTRODUCTION

Since last few decades, postcolonial studies have gained much popularity among the academia. It is said that notable cultural critic and scholar Edward Said's Orientalism (1978) is the pioneering text in laying the foundation of postcolonial theory and discourse. This book has not only made a revolutionary impact on intellectual lives and formations in the West but also in the peripheral postcolonial non-West. It is believed that postcolonial literature is academically privileged due to its projection of British imperialism and its aftermath and, is well "informed by recent critical attempts to postulate the colonial encounter primarily as a textual contest between oppressive and subversive books" (L. Gandhi 141). Scholars believe that the term 'postcolonial is problematic because postcolonial studies are becoming more and more institutionalized in the Western academe. Therefore, it is more helpful to consider postcolonialism not just coming literally after colonialism but "more flexibly as the contestation of colonial domination and the legacies of colonialism" (A Loomba 16). Such a situation will include people geographically displaced by colonialism as 'postcolonial' subjects even though they live and stay within the metropolitan cultures or centres. Critics like Arif Dirlik, however, facetiously state that postcolonialism happens "when Third world intellectuals have arrived in the First world" (Dirlik 329).

Bill Ashcroft et al use the term 'postcolonial' however, to cover "all the cultures affected by the imperial

process from the moment of colonization to the present day" (Ashcroft et al 2). It is pointed out that there is a continuity of preoccupations throughout the historical process initiated by European imperial aggression. On the other hand, Robert C. Young sees 'postcolonialism' as "a body of writing that attempts to shift the dominant ways in which the relations between Western and non-Western people and their worlds are viewed" (Young 2). Young opines that postcolonialism claims the right of all the people on the globe equally, but due to the colonization and expansion of European Empires, the world today is based on two unequal divisions as the West and the rest. For Young, postcolonialism "seeks to intervene, to force its alternative knowledge into the power structures of the West as well as the non-West. It seeks to change the way people think, the way they behave . . . It threatens privilege and power. It refuses to acknowledge the superiority of Western cultures" (Young 7).

With the fall of the European Empires post-World War II, the process of decolonization and independence started in the former colonies in Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean. The independence brought the colonizer and the colonized at par and the once-colonized masters have been de-centered and the hegemonic power paradigm is subverted. This subversion eventually produced a kind of cultural and intellectual vacuum which resulted in political and voluntary exiles to metropolitan centers of the world as mentioned before. Like many other postcolonial writers such as Derek Walcott, Jean Rhys, Chinua Achebe, Salman Rushdie, Amitabh Ghosh etc., V. S. Naipaul too became an expatriate writer. Elleke Boehmer rightly designates a postcolonial writer as "a cultural traveller or an 'extra-territorial' than a national. Ex-colonial by birth; 'Third World' in cultural interest, cosmopolitan in almost every other way, she or he works within the precincts of the Western metropolis" (Boehmer 227). Boehmer opines that the migrant writers have been producing distinct and definitive form of postcolonial writings with their 'extra-territorial' or 'transnational' identities. The techniques and strategies of these writers have potentially been appealing the Western audience and readers. For example, Naipaul's mingling of different genres and writing styles: fictional narratives, memoirs, travel narratives, non-fictional narratives populated with fictional characters etc. have made him an exceptionally successful postcolonial writer. His success earned him the most prestigious Nobel Prize in 2001.

This study is an attempt to locate V. S. Naipaul as a postcolonial writer and his unending quest for home and identity in a postcolonial world through the lens of postcolonialism. An attempt has been made here for a selective study of his narratives comprising of his books of different genres namely fiction, non-fiction, travelogues, memoir etc. It is said that Naipaul has blurred the generic boundaries in his works which may rightly be categorized as narratives. Naipaul's works are narratives in the sense that they are often fictionalized journalistic reports for Western audience. Naipaul, therefore, in most of his narratives, can be seen as a kind of intellectual/social commentator with an authorial voice particularly in his travel narratives. This study includes Naipaul's narratives comprising of both fiction and non-fiction and hence, a thematic selection of his books has been made to negotiate the postcolonial man's quest for home and identity. His major fictional and non-fictional narratives such as The Mystic Masseur (1957), A House for Mr. Biswas (1961), The Middle Passage (1962), An Area of Darkness (1964), The Mimic Men (1967), In A Free State (1971), India: A Wounded Civilization (1977), A Bend in the River (1979), The Enigma of Arrival (1987), India: A Million Mutinies Now (1990) and Half a Life (2001) have been negotiated here to underline not only the problem of identity but also the issue of Naipaul's inability to accommodate himself in societies including his ancestral one where he is in constant search for his roots, home and identity. In his Caribbean and particularly Indian travelogues, Naipaul talks about underdevelopment, corruption and hypocrisy, dirt and defecation which made him feel alienated, detached and homeless.

The term 'identity' can be defined and located in many ways. It is generally defined as a state of being whom or what a person is, and his/her distinctiveness that separates him/her from others. It is, in other words, the sense of being or of becoming that distinguishes one from the others. Identity is never fixed or static; it is fluid and always in process. In his most acclaimed work, Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny (2006), Nobel laureate Amartya Sen defines human identity as fluid, multidimensional or pluralistic that cannot be confined to a singular identity. The problem of identity is one of the burning issues of our postcolonial and globalized world. Due to the movement/transfer of labour and capital, people all over the globe since the time of colonization, became the victims through manpower transplantation and voluntary or forced migration across the geo-political boundaries. These victims, who have been designated here in this study as migrants, have no other alternative but to suffer from identity crisis and non-belonging.

Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul was born in Chaguanas, near Port of Spain, Trinidad on August 17, 1932 in a family of Indian Brahmin immigrants. His grandfather migrated from eastern Uttar Pradesh to Trinidad as an indentured labourer. His father had no house of his own and was largely dependent on his wife and her parents' family and had to move from place to place. One of those moves took him to Port of Spain where he attended the prestigious Queen's Royal College and subsequently at the age of 18, Naipaul moved to London in 1950 on a government scholarship to study literature at the University College, Oxford. Thereafter, he married a British lady namely Patricia Hale in 1955 and took British citizenship and lived in England till his death in London in August, 2018. However, he had lived a life, at times 'half a life' constantly negotiating with his new-found (British) identity and ancestral roots that led to uncertainty and crisis for home or location and identity. The homeless and unsettled life of his father, the religious orthodoxy of his grandmother's extended family had great impact on him during his early life in Trinidad. Like many other indentured labourers from India, as mentioned before, Naipaul's grandparents too had left their homeland to obliterate poverty and explore possibilities of success in an alien land. The journey across the seas was not only a traumatic break from their origin but also, they had to remain in constant struggle to lay claim on the new land as home on the one hand and maintain their own culture and identity on the other. Naipaul's grandparents were Brahmins and the migration across the seas to the New World is said to had brought a stigma on their 'purity' and identity, and from where they could neither return to India nor completely assimilate in a creolized society in Trinidad. They had to remain in the 'void' as he mentioned in his first Indian travelogue An Area of Darkness. Therefore, Naipaul as a child born into this 'void' desired only to leave and his subsequent departure from Trinidad in 1950 and arrival in London had only aggravated his sense of alienation, homelessness and crisis of identity.

The opening line of Naipaul's A Bend in the River reads like this: "The world is what it is; men who are nothing, who allow themselves to become nothing, have no place in it" (3). It expresses the postcolonial writer's idea of the individual, his role and position in a postcolonial world. Men who are nothing, who allow themselves to become nothing, have no place in this world. Salim, the major character in the narrative, may not find a place in the bend in the river to call his own and may not consider his flat as a house of his own but he comes to this destroyed town in the bend in the river, leaving his family and community behind in the coast to make a fresh start. He cannot 'carry on' like Mahesh nor does he have the mathematical formula of Nazruddin; he becomes a victim of postcolonial disorder and violence that subsequently compel him to surrender to his fate. However, it may be difficult to put Naipaul in this category; his 'escape' from the postcolonial world of Trinidad, his Western education and sensibility, his longing for the vocation of a writer have made him a distinguished diasporic and metropolitan writer. As

a postcolonial intellectual he has tried push the boundaries of 'half-made societies,' yet his works convey a hard truth: a destabilized and uprooted man's quest for order, home and identity.

Naipaul's homelessness and lack of roots take him to extensive travels to explore distant, strange and often chaotic, unaccommodating worlds. Most of his works display his concern about the problems of the so-called postcolonial Third World and his characters seem to be uprooted like himself and remain constant movers and homeless wanderers. Though Mr. Biswas in A House for Mr. Biswas ultimately succeeds in acquiring a house of his own, but, in the process, he is so exhausted that he dies soon after owning the house. The possession of a house, thus, makes no sense. The narrative deals with man's struggle for existence in a turbulent world that the quest for a house stands as a metaphor for the quest for identity of a postcolonial man. It is a struggle of a man to achieve individual freedom and identity in a chaotic society symbolized by the Hanuman House, an 'imperialistic' organization headed by Mrs. Tulsi, the unquestionable authority, often referred to as 'imperial queen' and Seth, the head of servants. At the Hanuman House, the husbands of Tulsi daughters are taken in; they work for the Tulsis and in return, are given food and shelter. Their children are looked after in an extended family way whereby in consequence, their identity is lost. Mr. Biswas rebels against this system and quests for a house of his own:

How terrible it would have been, at this time to be without it [house], to have died among the Tulsis, amid the squalor of that large, disintegrating and indifferent family; to have left Shama and the children among them, in one room; worse, to have lived without attempting to lay claim to one's portion of the earth; to have lived without attempting to lay claim to one's portion of the earth; to have lived and died as one who had been born, unnecessary and unaccommodated (8).

Naipaul's narrative presents here a man's struggle to survive in a postcolonial world and his claim for a share on his 'portion of the earth' and it is a universal problem as observed by Landeg White: "Naipaul deals not with a single society but with human problems of universal application . . . open to all whose identity is at odds with their society, who understand homelessness and the threat of disorder. . . (White 126).

In The Mystic Masseur, Naipaul has tried to show how self-government and colonial politicians shamefully mimic the West. Ganesh Ramsumair, the protagonist, ashamed of his Indian indentured background pretends to be 'Gareth' instead of Ganesh which can be seen as an immigrant's sense of alienation and identity crisis in the New World. Naipaul's The Mimic Men depicts the postcolonial man's potential dilemma: his quest for order and identity in a society which is chaotic, violently prejudiced in a postcolonial self-governed situation. The protagonist Ralph Singh's longing for identity and order in the chaotic and antagonistic world of his 'shipwrecked' island resulted from colonialism and frustration is described like this: "To be born on an island like Isabella, an obscure New World transplantation, second-hand and barbarous, was to be born to disorder" (127) from where he always wanted to 'escape,' to get away from the place where 'accident' had placed him.

The Enigma of Arrival, his semi-autobiographical narrative not only deals with the growth of a writer's mind but also it depicts the story of a journey taken by him from one place to another, from colonial Trinidad to metropolitan England, from one state of mind to another. Naipaul describes this in very moving words: "To be what I wanted to be, I had to cease to be or to grow out of what I was. To become a writer it was necessary to shed many of the early ideas…" (267). The most important aspect of the book is that it deals with the identity of the man and the writer and his sense of alienation and homelessness amid postcolonial desolation and decay. The separation of the man from the writer slowly dwindled through the journeys and then the man and the writer 'came together again' (160). Naipaul, who constantly looked for

materials for his writing was initially misled by the Mediterranean fantasy: the metropolitan life of England with clubs, pubs, and restaurants, gradually matured while living in Wiltshire where Nature taught him and supplied him with materials for his writings. It is the mystery of Life, Man and Nature which played a vital role in the making of the writer – his lifetime ambition. Before writing The Enigma of Arrival, he was preoccupied with the idea and the mystery of 'death,' particularly the death of his sister Sati and brother Shiva. The, book, therefore, not only deals with death and decay but also is a meditation on the issues of migration and postcolonial identity viewed through rural roots and colonial nostalgia. Therefore, even after all his time spent in England, Naipaul felt himself a stranger: "I still had that nervousness in a new place, that rawness of response, still felt myself to be in the other man's country, felt my strangeness, my solitude" (6).

In most of his narratives, Naipaul talks about the consequences of the World War II: the restlessness and turmoil after the war that had led to an unsettling world while his own world was also too unsettling that he constantly moved on and on. His idea of unchanging world proves to be wrong as he travels and realizes that change is constant. His two African narratives, In a Free State and A Bend in the River deal with postcolonial disorder, conflicts and problem of identity. In a Free State depicts Naipaul's vision of a world which will be free and fair and without violence, and its people are supposed to be 'citizen of the world' who do not require any local or national identity. Nazruddin, the trader in A Bend in the River after being frustrated with the disorder and uncertainty in the interior of Africa, considers his property as just bush: "This isn't property. This is just bush. This has always been bush" (26). In the midst of chaos and insecurity, the characters, including Salim, the protagonist, are always on the move and want to have a fresh start. Naipaul's characters are outsiders everywhere and they have no better place to go and suffer from homelessness; yet they 'carry on' (112).

Naipaul's characters are men of 'two worlds': one which they are born and brought up in their small community in a diasporic situation in the Caribbean or Africa or anywhere else with their simple life and religious background and with no understanding of the outside world; the other is their ancestral past, the country from which their ancestors made the final journey to the unknown New World and from where there is no going back and to which they no longer belong. Half a Life, one of Naipaul's interesting narratives, deals with so-called half-made societies where the people of mixed and colonial background live half-lives. They can be seen in a ceaseless struggle to assert their identity and wholeness. Willie Chandran, the protagonist, born of a Brahmin father and a low-caste mother, goes to London on a scholarship for higher studies and later marries a girl Ana of Portuguese-African mixed descent. His story runs parallel to that of Naipaul himself. He has nowhere to go, he cannot return to hi country of origin, India because of caste problem. He decides to go to Africa with Ana to live her life as her 'kept' man and in the process, Willie's identity comes under crisis in Ana's Africa where he becomes her 'London Man' (145).

Naipaul's vision of the Third World is harsh and his judgements are critical mainly in his travel narratives on India, the Caribbean and the non-Arab Muslim world. His rejection of his country of birth, Trinidad is reflected in The Middle Passage which is dismissed as 'unimportant,' 'uncreative' and 'cynical' (34) and where the 'threat of failure' (37) makes it necessary for one to escape. To Naipaul, Trinidad is only a 'dot' in the map of the world and the West Indian lives in a culture which is not his own: "Living in a borrowed culture, the West Indian, more than most, needs writers to tell him who he is and where he stands" (64). Such Eurocentric view echoes in Edward Said's Orientalism where he holds the view that the white European thinks that Orientals cannot represent themselves, they need to be represented. In the West Indian

society, for Naipaul, there is lack of communal spirit and national identity in the true sense: "There was no nationalist feeling; there could be none . . . it was only our Britishness, our belonging to the British Empire, which gave us any identity" (36).

In An Area of Darkness, the first travel narrative of his Indian trilogy, Naipaul seems to re-write his ancestral land. Having been already rejected Trinidad, the land of his birth, he now tries to re-define the idea of home and identity. Carole Boyce-Davies rightly observes: "Migration creates the desire for home, which in turn produces the rewriting of home. Homesickness or homelessness, the rejection of home or the longing for home become motivating factors in this rewriting" (Davies 113). Naipaul's dream of a homeland shatters when he encounters in India, the mythical land of his childhood: poverty, chaos, corruption, dust and defecation. In India he constantly vacillates between two worlds: the world of his childhood imagination and the New World to which his indentured ancestors migrated long ago for betterment of their lives. He becomes a stranger in India and in the midst of crowd he becomes faceless. India, thus, becomes a difficult country for him to call his home: "India is for me a difficult country. It isn't my home and cannot be my home; and yet I cannot reject it or be indifferent to it; I cannot travel only for sights. I am at once too close and too far" (x).

It is to be noted that migration, diaspora, displacement and problem of identity are major issues in contemporary socio-cultural and political discourse. The uprooting and dispersal of people from former colonies to various parts of the world and especially to the metropolitan centres, have given new meanings to the idea of diaspora. Cultural theorists opine that the narratives of migrancy and diaspora provide enough productive space for postcolonial 'resistance' with the (dis)location of postcolonial intellectuals in the metropolitan centres of the world. The narratives of migrancy and diaspora, therefore, as part of the metropolitan discourse (in Homi Bhabha's phrase), substantiates the idea of the 'in-between' in the diasporic space. V. S. Naipaul is one such writer who, being in voluntary exile in metropolitan London, tries to (re)locate himself and (re)construct his identity. However, the fact is that, by attempting to erase his past, he makes futile attempts to identify and to place himself not only in metropolitan England but also in Trinidad, his place of birth and then in India, his ancestral country. To use Bhabha's term, he is rather trapped in 'in-determinacy' or 'in-betweenness.'

Like most of his characters and peoples discussed in the select narratives, Naipaul seems to be or perhaps, pretends to be a man without stability. He is an eternal outsider in alien lands. His rootlessness and the idea of non-belongingness may, therefore, hint at appropriating his global citizenship just like the tramp in his In A Free State: ". . . what is nationality these days? I myself, I think of myself as a citizen of the world" (3). He may be an Indian in Trinidad, a West Indian in metropolitan England or a British (since he carries a British passport) in India. He is both a postcolonial migrant and a traveller sheathed in one person. As a migrant, he cannot have a possible return either to his place of birth, Trinidad or to his ancestral country, India. And again, as a traveller, he constantly moves on an on to explore the world, as his vision and mission, as said before, have blurred the idea and meaning of 'home' and 'unhomeliness,' identity and non-identity.

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