

DIASPORA AND IDENTITY IN NAIPAUL'S WORKS : A SELECT STUDY

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Abstract

"Write what you know" - this is the age-old advice said by someone to all the novelists. Surajprasad Naipaul, generally known as V. S. Naipaul, took it more seriously than others. Naipaul's grandparents migrated from Uttar Pradesh India to Trinidad. His grandfather started working as an indentured laborer in the sugarcane estates there. They faced many problems regarding settlement and adjustment in this new cultural environment. That's why Naipaul's works are replete with the themes of diaspora. He applied his uniquely careful prose style to the point where the observer has called him the greatest living writer of English prose. Often known as the world's writer, Naipaul is both one of the most highly regarded and one of the most controversial of contemporary writers. Much of his work deals with individuals who feel estranged from the societies. The present paper is an effort to analyze his select works based on diaspora and identity. Different characters in his fiction and non-fiction works seem to be in search of their identity in this world. Cultural-clash and hybridity, these twin themes, are also dominant in his works and I have tried to highlight all these diaspora-related issues in this paper.

Key Words: V.S. Naipaul, Identity, Diaspora, Rootlessness, Placelessness, Hybridity.



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There are a couple of Diasporic writers whose quest for self has been unquenched and they poured it on the paper through their works. A name, Vikram Seth, can be cited whose longest novel *A Suitable Boy* (1993), ever published in a single volume in the English language, is about a mother, Rupa Mehra, searching for a suitable boy to marry her daughter, Lata. His second work *Two Lives* bears the same identity theme. A great spokesperson of the self is Bharati Mukherjee whose novel *Jasmine-Identity In Exile* is the clarion call of identity, in which Jasmine, the

protagonist of the novel undergoes several changes during her journey of life, from Jyoti to Jasmine, and often experiences a deep sense of estrangement resulting in a fluid state of identity. Her next work *Middleman and Other Stories* treats a young woman abandoned as a girl by her hippie mother in India. *The Hungry Tide* by Amitav Ghosh is a story of an adventure and unlikely love, identity, and history, set in one of the most fascinating regions in the cost of India, the Bay of Bengal, and Sunderban regions.

Piyali Roy, a young marine biologist, is in search of a rare endangered river. His second novel *The Calcutta Chromosomes* (1995), set in Kolkata, is a novel of fevers and delirium. In this novel, the discovery of Calcutta has been presented. His other work *The Shadow Lines* (1988) is about Ila, Jatin's daughter who feels suffocated in the conventional society in India and marries Nick Price to enable herself to enter English society in the quest for identity. Magda, the second character, has an inborn desire to be the English. The central character Tridib, exceptionally, has an imaginative frame of mind but unfortunately, he is killed by a communal mob and his quest for self remains unquenched for good. Like all these above, V.S. Naipaul has many of his works based on these themes.

V.S. Naipaul was born in Chaguanas, Trinidad on August 17, 1932, and the eldest son of a second-generation India. Born into a small town into a family of Indian Brahmin origin, his father Seepersad Naipaul was a correspondent for the Trinidad Guardian. He also published short stories. When Naipaul was only six, the family moved to Port of Spain, the Capital. Seepersad died of a heart attack without witnessing the success of his son as a writer. He had encouraged Naipaul through his writings. In an inspirational letter, he says, "Don't be scared of being an artist. D.H. Lawrence was an artist through and through; and for the time being, at any rate, you should think as Lawrence." Remember what he used to say "Art for my sake". At the age of sixteen Naipaul has written his first novel which was rejected by the publisher. He was educated at Queens's Royal College, Trinidad, and after winning a government scholarship, in England at University College, Oxford, he worked for BBC as a writer and the editor for the "Caribbean Voices" program. He was the novelist who won the Nobel Prize for literature in 2001. Trinidadian by birth, Indian by Descent and British by Choice, Naipaul began his career in 1950. He built his reputation as a skilled writer on the strength of early novels including *Mystic Masseur* (1951), *A House for Mr. Biswas* (1961), and *In A Free State* (1971). During the 1960s and 70s, he stirred controversy for

his essays and books on post-colonial cultures in the Caribbean, Africa, and India. Supporters say he is unsentimental while critics call him insensitive, if not worse. A world traveler based in England during the 1980s descended from Hindu Indians who immigrated to Trinidad as indentured servants, Naipaul left Trinidad in 1950 to attend Oxford University and settled in England. He won critical reorganization with *A House for Mr. Biswas* (1961) that is an immigrant's attempt to assert his identity and independence. Other novels also explore the same butt though in an often harshly critical tone. The disintegration and alienation, typical of post colonial nations, has been depicted in his *In A Free State* (1971), *Guerrillas* (1975), and *A Bend in the River* (1979).

Naipaul was educated at Queen's Royal College, Port of Spain. In 1949 after having some pictures of himself taken for his application to the university, Naipaul wrote to his elder sister, "I never knew my face was fat. The picture said so. I looked at the Asiatic on the paper and through that, an Indian from India could look no more Indian than I did. After a nervous breakdown, he tried to commit suicide, but luckily the gas meter ran out, while at Oxford he met Patricia Hale, they married in 1955. She died in 1996 from cancer and Naipaul married Nadira Khanum Alvi, a divorced Pakistani journalist. After graduation, Naipaul started his career as a freelance writer. During this period, Naipaul felt rootless but found his verse in the BBC's Caribbean Voices, and between the years 1957 and 1961, he was a regular fiction reviewer for the *New Statesman*. Naipaul published his first books in the late 1950s, but they did not make much money for him or his publisher, Andre Deutsch. Naipaul's novel *The Mystic Masseur* (1957) is about a bright young man. *Miguel Street* (1959) was a farewell to Port of Spain, Trinidad. The colorful character sketches include Bogart who got his name from the Casabkanka B. Wordsworth who sells his poetry for four centers to a man, a man who is a real mystery to the people of *Miguel Street*. The the narrator is a boy who grows up, starts to earn his own money, and finally goes abroad to study. "I left them all and walked briskly towards the airplane, not looking back, looking only at my shadow before me, a darning dwarf on the tarmac" *The Mystic Masseur* (1957) won the John Llewellyn Rhys Prize in 1958 and was adapted as a film with a screenplay by Caryl Phillips in 2001. His non-fiction *Miguel Street* (1959), a collection of short stories won a Somerset Maugham award. His acclaimed novel *A House for Mr. Biswas* (1961) is based on his father's life in Trinidad. His first novel set in England, *Mr. Stone and the Knights Companion* (1963), won the Howthorden

Prize. *The Mimic Men* (1967) is the winner of the 1968 W H Smith Literary Award. In a Free State (1971) won the Booker Prize for fiction. *Guerrillas* (1975) and *A Bend in the River* (1979), are set in Africa. The *Enigma of Arrival* (1987) is a personal account of his life in England. *A Way in the World* (1994) is a formerly experimental narrative that combines fiction and non-fiction in a historical portrait of the Caribbean. *Half a Life* was published in 2001 and follows the adventures of Indian Willie Chandran in post-war Britain. *Magic Seeds* (2004) continues his story. His non-fiction work includes three books about *India: An Area of Darkness* (1964), *India: A Wounded Civilization* (1977), *India: A Million Mutinies Now* (1990), and two books about Islamic societies, *Among the Believers: An Islamic Journey* (1981), and *Beyond Belief: Islamic Excursions* (1998). He was knighted in 1989. He was awarded the David Cohen British Literature prize by the Arts Council of England in 1993 and the Nobel Prize for literature in 2001. He holds honorary doctorates from Cambridge University and Columbia University in New York, and honorary degrees from the universities of Cambridge, London, and Oxford. He lives in Wiltshire, England. Naipaul's works have many strings of diaspora and related themes. Naipaul's novel *The Mystic Masseur* is the story of Ganesh Ramsumair who is born in a Hindu Brahmin family in a small village in Trinidad. He has to adopt many professions to claim his place on the earth. His father has many expectations from him. Naipaul's *Miguel Street* is a short-story a collection where many characters are seen doing nothing. Bogart and Popo just show off about their profession but they are not interested in their profession.

People have views about Popo: "Popo is a man-woman. Not a proper man" (10). Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas* is a novel that tells the life story of a Brahmin boy Mohun Biswas who is considered inauspicious at his birth. Critics generally agree that Naipaul's finest work is *A House for Mr. Biswas* (1961). The main character, Mohun Biswas, Naipaul's third world "everyman", is in the search of his role in the world, more especially, a home he can call his own. When he is born with six fingers and the pundit says that the boys may be the cause of the death of his parents. When he passes a love note to Shama he has to marry her under the pressure of her family. He starts living as a *gharjamai* in that family. His search for his house remains unfulfilled and it is possible only at the later stage. Thus, to "claim (his) portion of the Earth" (8) he lives an unsatisfied life throughout. He feels himself rootless and placeless. N. Sharada Iyer observes: "The entry of Mr. Biswas into the Tulsi household in an environment more liberal than the one which prevailed

at Hanuman House.” (Iyer 22) This sense of rootlessness is the recurring theme in Naipaul’s works and stems from his unique background. The story of Mr. Biswas is the general story of a man tortured by communal pressures and threatened by the unstructured society, the protagonist is inconstant suspension ever ready to assert his identity but failed to do so in the long run.(Prasad, 7)

Naipaul has traveled to many countries of the world and during one visit to India he criticizes India: “Everything is inherited, nothing is abolished, everything grows out of something else.” (Darkness 194). Naipaul’s second travelogue is *India: A Wounded Civilization* (1977). Naipaul visited India in 1975. In it, the period of emergency was imposed by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, the most controversial period of post colonial India. It was a turbulent time of instability, political and social feuds, strikes, terror, and dismay. The basic aims of the emergency were to suppress poverty and illiteracy and to make industry and agriculture more effective and productive. Indian people look back to their past with a sentimental feeling. They worship ancient India and still live on its glory. During world change, even during the emergency, India was unchanging To return to India was to return to the knowledge of the world’s deeper order, everything fixed, sanctified everyone secured (Wounded Civilization, 36) Naipaul says that Indians are not blind to poverty and dirt, the archaic order and insufficient economy anymore. They long for reformation, they cannot look back to their past they imagine that to be able to keep with the rest of the modern world there will be no radical transformation in their political, economic, and social structure. Indian people try to borrow from other countries but they don’t properly understand the outside practices which mutually mutate in the Indian environment into meaningless and purposeless acts of mere imitations that have no longer concepts. In Naipaul’s words, they are sterile divorced from reality and usefulness’ (Wounded Civilization 121). There are no bases in India for such practices and ideas. These ideas are pulled out of context and do not fit Indian needs. It is mimicry within mimicry imperfectly understood idea within imperfectly understood idea’ then he talks about the blind aping of western technology by Indians.

Naipaul’s attitude towards the doctrine of Mahatma Gandhi and his role in the forming of the modern Indian nation considerably changes. In *India: A Wounded Civilization* the author no more sees Gandhi as overall positive. He criticizes Gandhi’s actions and reforms and not only this, finally he regards Gandhi’s influence on India as a complete failure. His views in *India: A*

Wounded Civilization are drastically different from *An Area of Darkness* where he praises him high for his proper judgments whereas in *India: A Wounded Civilization*, on the contrary, Naipaul blames Gandhi for having a “defect of vision”. (*Wounded Civilization*, 97) The third travelogue by Naipaul *India: A Million Mutinies Now* is considerably different from the other two volumes especially in Naipaul’s Attitude to India. The travelogue describes India of the 1980s and the early 1990s. Since the time, the author first visited India, it has gone through numerous transformations and reforms and still a great deal of change is yet to come. Naipaul is a bit happy now that India is going in a proper direction. Naipaul came to India at the time of extensive agriculture revolution and industrial development. He reveals the true state of India to the reader though through the vivid description of actual people and their stories. He tries to cover the whole social and cultural spectrum of society, nonetheless, most of the people Naipaul interviews are men and they are mostly “urban, middle-aged and middle class” (Nixon 110) Naipaul writes in his *The Middle Passage* (1962) “Living in a borrowed culture, the west Indian, more than most, needs writers to tell him who he is and where he stands”. Thus, to sum up, Naipaul’s works have different themes but Diasporic sensibility, rootlessness, placelessness, and identity are the most recurring themes in his works. Naipaul has portrayed these themes with mastery. To sum up, he is one of the best novelists Patrick Swinden, a faculty member of English literature at the University of Manchester calls him “one of the finest living novelists in English” (3)

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