



Identifying diasporic sensibility in V.S. Naipaul's writings

Pratiksha¹, Dr. Deepak Kumar Singh²

Department of English

^{1,2}Shri Venkateshwara University, Gajraula (Amroha), U.P. India

Abstract: Behind the realm of a diasporic writing or diasporic 'discourse' the core genesis of perception and understanding principally relates to the historical and socio-cultural junctures and dimensions through which the populace of a country has undergone alteration and transformation in the critical process of immigration, adaptation and adoption. This migration, global movement of so many sorts situates the individual, very often unenviably, torn among on the one hand the country of his origin (seen or nostalgically remembered as the country of his possible return even after many generations), the country of adoption (to which he or his ancestors had adopted), and on the other, for some the country of residence, the metropolis — London, Paris, New York — former colonial citadels, looked at with illusory promises of justice, betterment, racial tolerance, and so forth. In this paper, we will keep the diasporic framework in mind and an attempt has been made to examine some of the early writings of V.S. Naipaul, basically focusing on the struggles of Indians, their identity quest, occupational mobility, cultural confusion of the West Indians, especially, Indians, other socio-cultural dimensions of the West Indian society and Indians' encounter with the other West Indians in the West Indian socio-cultural setting.

I. INTRODUCTION

Naipaul as a postcolonial novelist with a diasporic contemplation, recording and analyzing various nuances of the colonial as well as diasporic people, situates his novels in colonial, ex-colonial and diasporic settings and provides a perceptive account of the complexities and intricacies inherent to such societies. The sense of alienation, identity crisis, paradox of freedom and the problem of neocolonialism in the ex-colonies are the major themes that emerge from a reading of his novels [1]. The early novels of Naipaul deal exclusively with the colonial society of Trinidad, the island of his nativity, and are preoccupied with the themes of dispossession, homelessness, alienation, mimicry and the search for an authentic selfhood. Naipaul's personal experience of being a displaced member of a marginalized community in Trinidad provides him issues and essences for his writing and the characters in his novels are continually in search of an identity and home representing Naipaul's as well as the Indian Diaspora's search for selfhood. Being an Indian by ancestry, Trinidadian by birth and English by intellectual training and residence, Naipaul is indeed a man with a broader perspective and this multiple heritage places him in a position that makes it possible for him to render a detached account of his subjective experiences. Naipaul is unsparingly critical in his observation and interpretation of the ex-colonies and he exposes the inadequacies of such societies, which he believes to be the outcome of the unconscious acceptance of the norms and values of the colonizing culture [2].

The colonial nature of the West Indian as well as the Trinidadian society marks Naipaul's rejection of his birthplace, in his own words it was, "unimportant, uncreative and cynical"(Goonatilake, Sushanta 1982). As an immigrant society Trinidad consists of "various races,

religion and cliques". The Trinidadian society is a fragmented one, comprising of heterogeneous people, whose presence in the island was purely an accident of history. Commenting on the manufactured nature of West Indian societies Naipaul observes in *The Middle Passage*: "The West Indian colonial situation is unique because the West Indies, in all their racial and social complexity, are so completely a creation of Empire that the withdrawal of Empire is almost without meaning". Nationalism or national consciousness was impossible in the West Indies due to the lack of a common West Indian identity. Moreover, there was not even any anti-imperialistic feeling among the Trinidadians; on the contrary, it was rather their "Britishness", their "belonging to the British Empire" that gave them a sense of identity [3].

When Naipaul first ventured into his writing career his material was not "sufficiently hallowed by a tradition" Though Naipaul could stake a claim on the English language, yet he realized that the English literary tradition with its alien mythology could never be his. And for Naipaul living in the closed boundary of the Indian community there was nothing which he could call a literary tradition and the West Indian or Trinidadian values were never liked by him. His father's stories found a way out of the problem for Naipaul and introduced him to a world of writing sensibility with the different nuances of writing, and this endowed him with a starting point. Naipaul's interest and aspiration of becoming a writer was, in the first place, something that had come to him from his father, who was a journalist, which occupation was unusual for a Trinidad Indian of his generation. Opening up an exciting world to Naipaul, his father's stories in a way compensated for Naipaul's lack of tradition. With finding a model for his work and discovering a literary tradition in his father, Naipaul set about establishing his identity by ordering his experiences through his writing (French, Patrick 2008) [4].

➤ **Naipaul's quotation from Trollope in the Middle Passage makes this aspect evident:**

"The West Indian Negro knows nothing of Africa except that it is a term of reproach. If African immigrants are put to work on the same estate with him, he will not eat with them, or drink with them, or walk with them. He will hardly work beside them, and regards himself as a creature immeasurably the superior of the newcomer". The abolition of slavery brought about the emancipation of the slaves and the slaves were now free to sell their labour with a bargain price. But by this time the Europeans had already inculcated their value system in the Negro mind and soul.

➤ **Whatever it may be, the Emancipation brought about a great transformation in the lives of the Negroes:**

Economically the Negro climbed the ladder of occupational mobility, from subservient peasant to different walks of professional life; politically the Negro was granted some of the privileges; culturally the Negro was Creolised with the white master sitting at the top guiding the Negro standing at the bottom about his value system; and emotionally and sentimentally the most important aspect for the Negro was that he was free and this made him the happiest creature of the world.

The abolition of slavery brought about another dimension to the socio-cultural set up of the West Indian society. In order to work in the plantation estates left vacant by the slaves, the Europeans colonial masters imported indentured labour from Asia, especially India and China, and others like, Javanese, Syrians, Portuguese and labour from other parts of the world provided the sufficient labour force required by the white colonial masters. But unlike the slaves, Indians had carried with them their rich cultural and civilizational heritage, which they considered dear than their lives.

II. V.S. NAIPAUL'S EXILIC SELF

Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul, a colonial West Indian with an Indian ancestry and writing about the West Indies highlights imaginistically on the kinds of social, cultural, physical and psychological dislocations and displacement experienced by him and his fellow East Indians. Born and brought up in the West Indian domain, having an Indian lineage and being trained in English craftsmanship and encompassing an English attitude, V.S. Naipaul dwindle in an "in-between;" he is

part of, yet not part of the English world, both included and excluded from it. To write about Trinidad and West Indian societies the colonial had to define a new relationship between self and metropolitan other; he had not only to make present what had been set on the margins, but also to show values in the colony in terms other than the values of another, very different world. Naipaul was marginalized, like other colonials, through the ideology and myths of Englishness, and through this and other experiences he began to learn to see as an exile. [5]

A tradition of exile is also shared by Caribbean writers too, as Kenneth Ramchand notes, by the early 1950s the pattern was established of emigration to the Mother Country for West Indian writers seeking the stamp of approval and wishing to live by their pens;

Nearly every West Indian novel since then has been first published by London publishing houses for sale to members of the British public (Ramchand 1983:12).

In the story "One out of Many" the author treats variations on these feelings through his exiled, Indian protagonist Santosh, who is stuck by pains of an imagined self-defilement after such taboo acts as intercourse with a "hubshi" (black woman) and the purchase of a western hat and suit. Traditional, religious (Hindu) minded Santosh with a caste prejudice is very much tormented by the sexual act, and takes a shower to purify him after the sexual encounter [6]. And after hastily buying the new clothes, he leaves them in the box, unable to wear them because he believes that to do so would be to overstep his caste boundaries and invite humiliation. Like Santosh's shower after the sexual encounter with the black woman and his suit, which he feared to wear due to the apprehension of loss of religious values[(1987), *The Enigma*], Indians always used their religious and traditional values as protective shield to guard themselves from the 'other,' hence not allowing their 'selves' to mix with the 'other.' And looking from the other side, the 'others,' that are blacks, whites, Creoles and other ethnic segments of the West Indian population perceived the Indians as 'new slaves' (French 2008) with savage acts, hence looked at the Indians as the 'other' not to be respected and accommodated in the West Indian social structure.

In "One out of many," that possibility is signified by Santosh's fascination with mirrors and their implicit questioning of his identity. In the Foreword to Seepersad Naipaul's *The Adventures of Gurudeva*, V.S. Naipaul, recalling his father's breakdown, suggests the source of the mirror in Santosh's story:

"My father looked in the mirror and thought he couldn't see himself. It was the beginning of a long mental illness that caused for a time to be unemployed and as dependent as he had been in his childhood".

In *Finding the Centre* and *The Enigma of Arrival* the possibility of breakdown is symbolised by dreams of a crumbling bridge and an exploding head. But like the experience of exile, mirrors and dreams are ambiguous; the mirror of "One Out of Many" may also stand for a vehicle of reconstruction or syncretism of Santosh's Indian-American self-One can view the different, extreme responses to exile — breakdown, or burst of creativity and sense of focused identity — as different aspects of a recursive process or cycle within the self [7].

III. V.S. NAIPAUL'S DIASPORIC SENSIBILITY

Adoption and adaptation in the new environment and the issues of loss, nostalgia, selfhood and identification provide them their diasporic canvass in which they paint the variant pictures of their new and old homelands. Culture, religion, ancestry, literature and history provide a strong sense of bonding in diasporic condition, but where this bonding moves or strives for new patterns of ethnic identity, it brings sometimes itself in a conflicting situation or even exclusion in the metropolitan zones of the west. The present day self-proclaimed, mobile and multiple identities may be seen "not as a market of contemporary social fluidity and dispossession but a new stability, self-assurance and quietism" (Young, 1995:4).

This "quietism" indicates one's coining to terms with unfixed modes of existence and professions; to opportunities the First World offers through attractive assignments, metropolitan consumerism, and freedom to travel, petro dollars or illusory promises of a heavenly life with utmost equality and justice [8]. In this world of globalization and trans-nationalism, not only the commodities move, but also the human beings cross borders in search for the promise and prosperity that the metropolis makes them dreamt of, hence begins the process of trauma and tribulations of dislocations, broodings, identity quest, nostalgia, loss of selfhood, issues of diasporic sensibility or notions of exilic self and so on.; thus marking the beginning of the germination of diasporic discourse making the sociologists, cultural critics, historians, cultural anthropologists, men of literature and policy planners to trace out the answers to these concerns[(1984), "The Mind of Winter: Reflections on Life in Exile"]. Here it should be remembered that Diaspora is not a recent phenomenon, neither the diasporic discourse; as has been discussed in the previous chapters of this study, from the very ancient period human history is encountering this notion of Diaspora and Diaspora has occurred in many forms. Through the diasporic writings or discourses the diasporic writers not only exhibit their own and their fellow diasporic beings' sensibilities but also open up new paradigms in which the lives of these people can be understood and revisited.

V.S. Naipaul's stance as a West Indian by birth with Indian ancestry, having a training in English craftsmanship with English attitudes, experience of meeting the globe with his traveling, exilic contemplation and diasporic self, makes him stand in an extremely superb position to analyse various dynamics and vitalities of these people [9].

Naipaul's position and status as a diasporic writer needs to be understood and evaluated through the Caribbean literary, historical and cultural imponderables, which are fraught with all kinds of violent mixings. Recording the course of Caribbean history that has shaped his initial progressive development of his personality and traits, Naipaul claims in the first section of *A Way in the World*:

"I had grown up thinking of cruelty as something always in the background. There was an ancient, and not so ancient, cruelty in the language of the streets; casual threats, man and parents to children, of punishments and degradations that took you back to plantation times. There was the cruelty of extended family life. The cruelty of the Indian countryside and the African town, the simplest things around us held memories of cruelty" (Naipaul 1994: 20)

The important aspect here is Naipaul's involvement with the issues of cultural and literary identity in multiple ways, and secondly, his intellectual and personal obsession with India as a country and metaphor that he evokes in a mood of anger and despair, at other times signifying a desperate need to approach the new reality of India with a dramatic shift in stance. Naipaul's diasporic discourse needs to be understood in many complex perspectives: the initial West Indian society with multiple socio-cultural variants, then the evolution of the society to plurality, then Naipaul's colonial self-residing in the metropolis colony, his perception of India and his exilic sensibility. Naipaul as an ex-colonial individual and writer quests for a viable tradition, carrying within him a whole burden of race, history, language and personal ambition, Naipaul not only inquires and examines the involuntary forces of history that shaped him and his ancestry, but also retraces phenomenon of a whole gamut of nationalities, cultures, races and people [10].

In the Preface to *The Adventures of Gurudeva* Naipaul has pointed out that his literary ambition, his singular decision to be a writer was an inheritance he received from his father. And there is yet another and a significant 'point' which later became a point of departure for Naipaul himself in London; the crystallization of the local East Indian life he saw and knew. Coming from the East Indian segment which after the turn of the century had enlarged, his father's marriage into distant relations brought that background to the fore(Bhatia, Shyam 2000). Seepersad chose to write about his own background and people; poor, unimportant, illiterate a life and a background he celebrated.

IV. CONCLUSION

According to V. S. Naipaul, in the diasporic discourse especially that of the West Indies, the question and the positioning of cultural identity has to be seen and understood against several diverse issues of race, nationality, colonialism, and the way it has become problematized. Cultural identity in the diasporic discourse has to be defined in terms of a shared culture, a sort of collective 'true self hiding inside other, more superficial or artificially imposed selves, which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common. The other most vital aspect is the experience of dispersal and fragmentation which is the history of all enforced Diasporas. The history of transportation, slavery and indentured migration holds the prominent key in understanding and comprehending the forgotten connections, the rift of separation central to the West Indian experience. The ruptures and discontinuities which constitute West Indian uniqueness provides significant dimension in exploring and examining the notions of cultural identity in a diasporic framework. As Stuart Hall has argued, far from being eternally fixed in some essentialized past, cultural identities are "subject to the continuous play of history, culture and power" Diaspora's position and part in the West Indian social campaign and how these viewpoints have been portrayed in the works of V.S. Naipaul.

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