



Diasporic Vision in Naipaul's Writings

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Abstract

V.S. Naipaul is the most acclaimed writer of twenty first century. His works hover around the dislocation and alienation as his characters are far away from their home town. V. S. Naipaul has experienced the homelessness, the dispersion, the problem of identity and he has described this urge in his fictional writings. The present piece tries to acknowledge this basic concept present in his works.

Key words: homelessness, alienation, longing, dispersion, belonging

V. S. Naipaul, a Nobel laureate of 2001, is an epitomized diasporic writer. He is twice displaced from his ancestral homeland of India first to Trinidad and Tobago then to Britain. Naipaul was born in 1932 in the British colony of Trinidad into a diasporic community of Indian descent. His parents were the descendent indentured labourers brought to work in the island's sugar plantations. There were so many Indian poor families with little education. Naipaul won the scholarship to study at Oxford University. His real journey began thence.

When Naipaul won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2001 he said in his speech, "It is a great tribute to England, my home, and India, the land of my ancestors". The literary meaning of the word Diaspora is the movement, migration or away from an established or ancestral homeland. Oxford Dictionary defines Diaspora as "the movement of people from any nation or group away from their own country".¹

V. S. Naipaul has experienced the homelessness, the dispersion, the problem of identity and he has described this urge in his fictional writings. Throughout his life, wherever he goes, he has the problem of identity whether

he is an Indian, Caribbean or British. The search is always there for his identity. Being an Indian by ancestry, a Trinidadian by birth, and an Englishman by education, V. S. Naipaul possesses a multi-cultural background. Andrew Gurr argues that deracination, exile and alienation in varying forms are the conditions of existence for the modern writer the world over. The basic response to such conditions is a search for identity, the quest for a home, through self-discovery or self-realization. The slave colonies of the West Indian Islands have been uprooted from their native land to be transplanted into an alien environment which gives rise to their sense of homelessness, placelessness, alienation, and deracination. Lacking a sense of belonging, they may be able to develop an inner urge to construct their subjectivity in order to confirm their own identity. Naipaul's writings frequently carry references to his complex cultural heritage, rooted in three countries; Trinidad, the country of his birth, India, whose ancestral rites regulated his tightly-knit family circle, and Britain, the source of his colonial education. But do any of these three facets of Naipaul's cultural context correspond to that elusive place called 'elsewhere', the foreigner/stranger's 'home'? His reticence to claim either India or Britain as 'home'

has been the source of several books¹ In an article 'Jasmin', written for the The Times Literary Supplement in 1964, he wryly remarked "The English language was mine, the tradition was not".² (Naipaul, Critical Perspectives 19) Conversely, during his travels in India, he notes that he effortlessly melted into the Indian landscape, but the minute he spoke, he gave himself away as a foreigner, an alien. This displacement of cultural identity is underlined by an anecdote the writer relates in the same article. Naipaul recounts how, upon recognizing a sweet-smelling flower in a British Guiana garden from his childhood memories, he asked his hostess its name, and was told: "We call it jasmine". Naipaul comments: "Jasmine! So, I had known it all these years!". Putting a sprig of jasmine in his buttonhole, the writer smelled it and repeated the word jasmine, jasmine. But, he notes: "the word and the flower had been separate in my mind too long. They did not come together". (Critical Perspectives 22)

In his Foreword, Naipaul explains that the first part of *Finding the Centre*, 'Prologue to an Autobiography', 'is an account of ... my literary beginnings and the imaginative promptings of my many-sided background.'⁴ As a young child (like any young child), he found that 'growing up within my extended family, knowing nothing else, or looking at everything else from the outside I had no social sense, no sense of other societies.'⁵ His mother's family home in the small rural town of Chaguanas was his whole world – 'I didn't like or dislike living there; it was all I knew' – until 1938, when his immediate family moved to Port of Spain. This displacement, at the age of five or six, would have been the young Naipaul's first experience of the kind of change in home and circumstances of which he later made such a feature in his writing; and, like some later moves and unlike others, it was not, on the whole, an unwelcome change: 'After the shut-in compound life of the house in Chaguanas, I liked living on a city street. I liked looking at other people, other families.' The relishing of such a change is one facet of the sensibility which makes a writer: the fascination with new scenes, the enjoyment of observing unfamiliar people and cultures. Even though some of these people were Indians, they

were 'Port of Spain Indians' who 'had no country roots, were individuals, hardly a community ... not people of caste. We didn't see in them any of our own formalities or restrictions'. This kind of individuality seems to have become an aspect of Naipaul's life, and his rejection of a sense of community and lack of a stable sense of a place to call home has, in his own case though not in the case of many of his characters, contributed to his successful career.

In *A House for Mr. Biswas* (HMB) Mr. Mohun Biswas associates the highest achievement of his life with owning a house. Biswas's life is a series of minor disasters, each of which can be seen as his angry rebuttal of an uncongenial society. Born with six fingers in the wrong way, at the inauspicious hour of midnight in the family of a labourer of Indian origin in Trinidad, Mr. Biswas is not likely to have a bright future. Mr. Biswas's father dies in trying to retrieve his supposedly drowned body from the village pond while he is hiding under the bed at home. The untimely death of his father leaves Mr. Biswas homeless and emotionally bewildered. He lives with his mother who hesitates to bestow her affection on him in the presence of strangers. However, he is lucky to find a mother-substitute in his issueless aunt, Tara who treats him very kindly and helps him in every way. When he goes to paint signs at the store of the Tusli family of Arwacas in Hanuman House, he gets caught while passing a love-note to one of the daughters of Mrs. Tulsi called Shama.

Consequently, he is trapped into marriage with Shama by her Mother, Mrs. Tulsi and her uncle. "The world was too small, the Tulsi family too large. He felt trapped." (HMB 91). Mr. Biswas enjoys the physical security provided by his marriage into the Tulsi family but refuses to submit to its orthodox and authoritarian arrangement. But he manages to establish areas of independence for himself, though at times of unemployment and illness he and his family remain tied to the Tusli household for shelter and sustenance. Consequently, the idea of a house of his own becomes an obsession or a symbol of true independence for Mr. Biswas. He buys a house for himself on Sikkim Street in Port of Spain, and at last

is contended to live independently with his family. He dies from heart attack at the age of forty-six, but he has left his family the independence and with a place to belong. Mr. Biswas had no money or position. He was expected to become a Tulsī. At once he rebelled.

V. S. Naipaul's characters, like Mohun Biswas from *A House for Mr. Biswas* or Ganesh Ramsumair from *The Mystic Masseur*, are examples of individuals who are generations away from their original homeland, India, but their heritage gives them a consciousness of their past. They become itinerant specimen of the outsider, the unhoused, for the world to see. Their attempts at fixity are continuously challenged by the contingency of their restless existence - a condition grown out of their forefathers' migration, albeit within the Empire, from India to Trinidad. Naipaul's characters are not governed by actual dislocation but by an inherited memory of dislocation. For them their homeland India is not a geographical space but a construct of imagination. Their predicament can be explained in Rushdie's words: "the past is a country from which we have all emigrated, that its loss is part of our common humanity". It is as if the writer has discovered his Indianness he is out of India. Obviously he has the advantage of looking at his homeland from the outside. The distance affords him the detachment that is so necessary to have a clear perception of his native land. In that sense, through his writing, he helps to define India.

From the foregoing, it becomes clear that many Caribbean writers' fictional worlds centre around the unanchored, estranged individual; a wanderer in space and time who can find no anchorage. The works constitute an intense involvement with the intolerable psychological tensions created by a degrading environment. The writers, paint the picture of "homeless" nomadic migrants making a middle passage from Africa or India to the West Indies, thence to England and back again "for after several years, there seems to be no system of values in which they can take root" (Ormerod 162). Against this indistinct and dissolving background, the characters try to seize upon something to give permanence to their lives and to

arrest the flux, whether it is Mr. Stone's scheme for the aged or Biswas's and Moses's desire to own their own houses. Naipaul, in particular, consistently paints the picture of the derelict man in the desolate landscape. *A House for Mr. Biswas* and *Moses Ascending* are, therefore, individual attempts to overcome "homelessness". The writers see the characters as victims of their environment. Their urgency comes from their efforts to get others to acknowledge them so as to have it validated for themselves, their human necessity.

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