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A STUDY IN THE NOVELS OF V.S. NAIPAUL

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Abstract

Thus here Naipaul himself exposes the emptiness of the claim of being citizen of the world of not only his own creation Tramp, but to some extent of his own heart. His claim to belong to a “Universal Civilization” is, at best a self-delusion. Even then, he is not unclear: his idea of it includes all men, and he sees it in existence today, which means everyone, unqualified belongs to it. It is just another way of saying that Naipaul is human and therefore, mortal! This self delusion is best expressed by Ralpyh Singh, “We pretend to be real, to be learning to be preparing ourselves for life, we mimic men of the New World.Finally, as Naipaul says, “Men need history; it helps them to have an idea of who they are. But history, like sanctity, resides in the heart; it is enough that there is something thee.”

Yet the question remains who is Naipaul? Borrowing again from his last creation Willie Chandran we can safely conclude. “I was always someone on the outside. I still am.” A disturbed and cursed soul, he is fated to be an outsider wherever he finds himself and is destined to remain as confused, perplexed, desolate and lost as he ever had been.

Keywords: V.S. Naipul, Postcolonial Study, Literature Review, Cultural identity, India, West- Indies.

Sir Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul (August 17, 1932- August 11, 2018) well known not only among connoisseur of English literature world over but also among millions of laymen even ‘without being read widely or popularly’. He has always remained an enigma. He is known to be frank on most matters. Yet, there is never consensus among critics and reviewer over his statements made directly or through his writings. Not only his words interpreted variously, but his Nobel, too was interpreted in many ways, often contradictory to one another.

To understand Naipaul and his writings, it is necessary to understand his past, which was there or which was not there. This could be valid criterion for every other writer but in the case of Naipaul, is not only more valid but an utmost necessity. As Harish Trivedi puts it, “That anxiety over a missing past is Naipaul’s grand theme, it unites all his works, from the earliest social comedies, to the most recent travel writing and it has always coloured his vision of the world. It is the

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anxiety of a man twice robbed of history.” It is his past where lies hidden the answers of the riddle that why the writings and, even, uttering of Sir Vidia, as he should be addressed after knighthood, has been so controversial yet so engaging.

Naipaul’s continuing and never ending journey of exile is actually a desperate response to the fate befallen him as a result of another exile and journey of his ancestors. His ancestors were taken from a remote village of Gorakhpur districts Bansgaon Tehsil, South of river Rapti; as indentured plantation workers, to a small Caribbean island of Trinidad 19 kilometers from the North Western cost of Venezuela in 1880. These indentured sugarcane plantation workers, popularly named “Girmittias” created a mini India for them in the heart of Trinidad. Born in this mini India in 1932, of Dubey and Pandey Grandfathers, his memory of the culture of his ancestors was contained in rituals, ceremonies, and the paraphernalia of scripture, brass bells , gongs and consecrated nectar that they had carried with them.

‘His upbringing familiarized him with every short of deprivation, material and cultural” He was brought up almost like a North Indian boy, confined to his family life where they ate certain food, performed certain ceremonies and had certain prejudices and taboos, which were unique to them and expected others to have their own. In the multiracial society of Trinidad they remained apprehensive towards others and could not strike a cord with the Island and its people.

The characteristic Brahmin response to this alienation was to close out the “outside world of darkness” with a “tall corrugated iron gate” giving a “Fierce kind of privacy” and fortifying taboo on enquiry. The “areas of darkness” encircled the feeling of being. That were to be feared and denied; distrust for everyone of a different caste, race, culture, The Blacks, Mulattoes, Creoles, Spaniards even the other caste Hindus and Muslims from India. Long list of those to be avoided constricted the already tiny world.

Until 18, before he left for London to pursue his ambition of being a writer in Oxford, Young Vidia growing up suffocating in this environment, did learn a lot, but knew nothing and inquired little. All those questions that were pushed back of mind were to come to haunt him later, after exhausting what was in him as an author, drawn from his 18 years of Trinidad life, in first four works, ‘The Mystic Masseur (1957), The Suffrage of Elvira (1958) , ‘Miguel Street (1961) and A House for Mr. Biswas (1961).

The first three of these are satirical accounts of the private social (and also political) lives of fellow colonials, of different races, though the focus is on East Indians in Trinidad. One misses the tone of affection, as well as the satire that runs through his first three works in his later works after “A House for Mr. Biswas”. Many critics have held “A House for Mr. Biswas” as his masterpiece. It is about his father’s life in Trinidad who had the greatest influence on young Vidia. It was his father who worked hard to come out from fate

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of being a sugarcane worker and become a journalist and his aspiration and ambition of becoming a writer was transplanted to him in the age of eleven. In 'A House for Mr. Biswas' his inspiration becomes his theme as he had emptied himself of early material he had of life and now he is in London far removed from his early source of experiences in Trinidad. Naipauls early works also seem to be inspired and influenced by his father's style in latter's only work. 'Adventures of Gurudeva and other stories.' His autobiographical novels-Finding the Centre (1984), Enigma of Arrival (1987) and A Way in the World (2001) after House for Mr. Biswas either explore and explain the "worlds contained in him" or exposes the "personas contained in him."

In search of themes, Naipaul found himself at the end of the road he had thought leading to the centre of his world. He felt misled after the hard journey he had under taken to reach there. He was lost. And this in itself came to him as 'the theme'. Trying retracting his way back in time and space, he travelled to the Caribbean's, where he had hoped he would never return, on the invitation of the first government of the newly independent colony. Now he had found a new form: A travelogue cum historical account, autobiographical novel, weaving past with present, and facts with impressions and memories with conversations. This he was to use repeatedly writing about the Africa and the South of the U.S. in 24 works in all.

Naipaul had resolved to leave Trinidad, to reach the centre, and not to return again

because the waves from the other side of the Atlantic whispered about a more firmly rooted, more stable and more metropolitan civilization there. The same waves also spelt the obvious and permanent shakiness of what patchwork of a civilization they had in Trinidad. He had to ride a boat all of a piece. When he reached the centre, he found himself unprepared for the site of what lay around him. And more, he found himself made of two worlds, belonging to none either. There was no going back, so he had only one choice left: becoming, footloose, ready to ride any boat or carriage, with all kinds of co-travelers. In fact, it is difficult to separate Naipaul's fiction from non-fiction, to him he had been writing big book right from beginning to end. The connoisseurs will also see the truth in his observation that fiction reveals the author completely.

One can readily see the way Naipaul's 'one big book' is like the script of a film about the life of many colonials in constant exile in different countries trotting all over the globe to find a home, to a 'final' centre, all rolled into one; written in order to convince the audience that the central character not only looks like a hero a peace with himself, but can finally achieve this oneness, the wholeness of body and mind. it only was the subject matter of present study whether he had been able to accomplish this goal, looking through fictional characters.

The search of oneness begins with search of one's roots and identity. It is enlightening; making one aware of those aspects of his personality that one is

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unconscious about; buried in the distant, forgotten past. If one has come to terms with one's identity, it is empowering socially, culturally and psychologically and even becomes tool in building ones destiny. One's identity guides him; orients him in social intercourse. One's knowledge of his roots gives him the stability and nourishment needed to face the daily changing reality. His identity gives him the confidence and tranquility that is precondition for the ability to conceive and imagine a future destiny for one.

There are today so many claims and enunciations of various identities, old and new, that one gets confused in conundrum. The problem is further complicated by the escalation of the phenomenon of migration and exile. And the New World is a world, is a whole continent populated by mostly descendents of immigrants and immigrant's of the first generation. But with all these migration, amalgamation and cultural synthesis, one question remains, what is meant by identity?

There are two approaches to this question. Ralph Singh, the protagonist of *The Mimic Men*- says, "We become what we see of ourselves in the eyes of others. In reality most of us look at this question in Ralph Singh's manner. The process is, in the main, unconscious, though the question may be haunting us. As Erich Fromm states, " For majority of people, their conformity with the social cliché's. They are what they are supposed to be."

But problem arises if a community is composed of multi-ethnic groups having roots elsewhere. As an identity does not form all by itself; it comes into the conscious thought process. In the absence of one, there will be this curious combination of return to the entrenches old values and to a closed clannish attitude as well as adaptation of the reality of a mixed society, the combination that intrigued Naipaul, prompting him to say in the Nobel lecture. "There was too much to be explained, both about my home life and about the world outside".

Erikson in his definition, places identity in the community. All the three aspects of the present, past and future can be shared only through a shared way of living with one's community. Identity begins with the personal name. It is said that the word that is most dear to the heart of a person is his personal name. Another component of identity, second in importance after personal name is language. Language is made up of two components: one, the informal part, the speech, as one converses freely when one is at home, and the other, formal part as one writes and consciously present oneself.

Since language in itself embodies the historical process of its creation and development, it is an important indicator of the attitude of the society towards history. To make people forget their history, it is their language that is first undermined. In the final analysis it is history, which shapes an identity, and search of one's identity finally boils down to the search of history of his person, of his

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family, of his community or of his nation. As Waghmare puts it, “Quest for identity is a kind of search for the roots, for reconstructing the history. Rediscovering and reconstructing history is the most essential prerequisite for identity.

It is said that a litterateur’s real biography “the biography, of his inner self, the history of his spiritual life is inseparable from the life and history of his people. In the case of Naipaul not only that the two aspects are inseparable but also they essentially constitute the subject matter of all of his works.

So to know the Naipaul the man, we have to know Naipaul the writer. He himself has argued in favor of this method, against the other way round. “ This method (of using the man to illuminate his works), he quotes Proust, “ignores what a very slight degree of self – acquaintance teaches us that a book is product of different self from the self we manifest in our habits, social life, in our vices. If we would try to understand that particular self, it is by searching our own bosoms, and trying to reconstruct it there, that we may arrive at it.” It follows, that we must enter the bosom of Naipaul’s work to know him.

Migration of his forefathers to the countryside of Trinidad, their sense of loss, shame and defeat they carried with themselves from their land of origin, their pastoral agricultural life of object poverty and agony, seclusion of their family life with caste and social prejudices insulating them from outside influences, Naipaul’s first eighteen year of life in this ambience, his journey to London in

quest of reaching to “The centre”, his subsequent dischantment and endless journey in pursuit of identifying himself, are all there to see in his writings. These events and many more in-between not only shaped his worldview but actually got recreated in his works with Indian immigrant characters with mixed parentage or any such fate and with problems in adjusting or identifying with immediate cultural milieu recurring again and again. In his works of fiction or travelogues, his characters repeatedly speak for him.

In his stories and novels a number of these protagonists are linked to each other to their progenitor by an impulse to pursue truths about themselves and their world. For a casual reader early novels and stories of V.S. Naipaul like “Mystic Masseur, Miguel Street, Suffrage of Elvira are enjoyable, entertaining novels and stories of transplanted society. But a reader of perspective can read between the lines the pain of being an alienated person on alien land. “Mystic Masseur’s Ganesh story is about a man who continually recreates himself as a School Master, Masseur, Author, Mystic and the statesman. ‘Miguel Street’ (1959) this street is full of different individuals belonging to different communities. Seventeen stories are interlaced, intermitted street people with their peculiarity and a narrator as perceiving something. Naipaul presented them as “they appeared on the street” in the last story narrator “left them all not looking back.” The last fiction background of which is Trinidad is a hilarious account of an electoral campaign in Elvira. This is about candidates’ (Chittaranjan,

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Baksh and Ramlogan) tactics and blatant vote buying.

The prism through which his character look at the world at large is the same prism Naipaul is destined to look through. Its roots yet are in the original sense of difference about everything outside home. The worldview of Naipaul has been shaped with the combination of caste and religious prejudices inherited with those of colonial legacy and the West. Naipaul had decided to overcome the effects of the accidents befallen his ancestor, hoping that leaving the Island and becoming a writer at “The centre”, would free him of the programmers half-life. But as Edward Said, said that” The achievement of the exile are permanently undermined by the loss of something left behind forever.”

The feeling that history has been burnt away where he was born is transmitted to his characters. The first of his fiction, which could be characterized under ‘Colonial Writings.’ The Mimic Men (1967) is set on an Island very much resembling Trinidad. Born of Indian heritage, brought up in the British dependent Carribean Island Isabella and educated in England forty-four years old Ralph Singh has spent a lifetime struggling against the torment of cultural displacement. Now in exile from his native country the former government minister has taken up residence as a means to impose on a chaotic existence. His memories lead him to recognize the paradox of his childhood during which he secretly fantasized about a heroic India, yet changed his name from Ranjeet Kripal Singh to Ralph Singh to fit in at

school. About Isabella, Ralph Singh |Confesses, to be born on an Island like Isabella an obscure New world Transplantation, second hand and barbarous, was to be born to disorder. Now I was to discover that disorder has its own logic and permanence: The Greek (who said that the first requisite for happiness was to born in a famous city) was wise.

Naipaul was beset with a double colonial handicap: Trinidad was small and non-urban , and it had been a colony, He has written about this handicap in more than one place. In The Enigma of Arrival he says: “I had thought that because of insure past colonial smallness that did not consort the grandeur of my ambition, my uprooting of myself for a writing career, my coming to England with so little, the very little, I still had to fall back on I had thought that because of this I had been given especially tender or raw sense of an unaccommodating world. Naipaul’s characters too carry this raw sense. But they, like Naipaul, too, recognize soon that they are not singled out, they are part of a large exodus, a great movement of people across the globe. Ralph Singh comments, “Today we can see this exodus from our city as a small part of the unrest in colonies and poorer territories of the Americas just before the war. Each territory produces its own symptoms of disease, its own fantastic growth. We lived with the disease; we had ceased to notice. I see these the religious excesses, still an aspect of the tourist quaintness of the Island, as an attempt to deny the general shipwreck.”

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The general shipwreck! The phrase is sad yet alleviates the sorrow by universalizing it and aptly sums up the predicament of the small Islands of the New World and the Pacific. Most of the inhabitants are living there as a result of “accidents” and they can neither be rescued, nor are they ready to leave the “familiar temporaries,” like the protagonist of ‘A Bend in the River (1979). The narrator of A Bend in the river is an Indian Muslim descendent in Africa. Africa to him, has never come out of the bush. In the time of independence Salim is unable to associate himself with the people of the land. Salim identifies himself with the colonial past. His sense of loss, of not knowing what to do and where to go, is so profound that he envies the destitute local tribal’s.

The past is blamed, but at the same time it is longed for. Naipaul’s characters are preoccupied with the thoughts of the past, in whatever mood. Ralph Singh knows well about his past, ambiguities about it are not his problem. Some of Naipaul’s creations even do not have this solace. Salim, the protagonist of Bend in the River laments in the beginning of his narrative, ‘My family was Muslim. But we were a special group distinct from the Arabs and other Muslims of the coast; in our custom and attitudes we were closer to the Hindus and North – Western India, from which we had originally come. When we had come no one could tell me.’ Salim suffers from an unknown past, and an uncertain present.

Naipaul’s characters are obsessed by the thought of the past: whether they cherish it

or blame, or long for it or run away from it, remember it or trample on it. Indar, Salim’s friend, too feel the same. But he responds in a different way as Indar says, pointing out to his heart, ‘the past is here’, and nowhere else’ They become unhappy in the present, but they are fleeing the unhappiness of the past. Sense of loss is not expressed as poignantly as in Willie by any other Naipaulean Characters. Willie, unusual for Naipaul’s is not ‘half-bred’ or emigrant as are his many characters though he is ‘half caste’ because of his father inter caste marriage in which he glorified himself, though was ashamed of it. Willie Somerset Mougham’s name itself is an enigma. Willie throughout his life, across two narratives (Half Life (2001) and Magic Seeds (2004) is always like a lost child. If we believe Naipaul that he has no more novel in him, then Willie is his last child Naipaul has lost him in the vanity fair. As Willie, Naipaul’s last creation says, ‘I was unhappy where I was. I had strong idea that my place was in this world here’. With this strong idea too, he is not attached, involved, happy or at home here. “In this world here” is India; but India was the last place where he wanted to be. After his graduation he had no idea at all what he might do or where he might go. After spending more than fifteen years in Africa, he begins feeling that he had thrown his life away. He becomes tired of living his wife’s life, which she says, is neither really hers, too. Yet, he leaves her to face himself. One can get an impression that one is hearing the story of chronically fragmented personality. But so is Willie, and most of Naipaul’s characters, too, living ‘half

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and half lives.’ Indar, at one point, says. “I found myself growing false to myself, acting to myself, convincing myself of my rightness of whatever was being described”.

Outsiderness and disappointment with Europe are another defining characteristic of Naipaulian characters in most of his novels except his early Trinidadian ones. Though in *Guerrillas* (1975) self-styled leader James Ahmad Jimmy commits heinous crimes in the vain efforts to gain fame and power and wealth yet he is portrayed not as a running and successful plotter, but as an accomplished politician and writer. His selfmade tragedy and was almost encoded is his make up (Black mother and Chinese father), in his tragic background and the Colonial setup. Again ‘In a Free State (1971)’ particularly two stories deals with the peculiarities of “Free State” as Naipaul explores the ‘psychic cost’ of being an outsider in both one’s native and adopted land. In its first story ‘One out of many’ Santosh who was servant of a diplomat in India comes in Washington D.C. with his employer. In beginning he sums up his position “Many people both here and in India will feel that I have done well. But “the single word sentence “But” introduces and later elaborates Santosh’s dilemma; he ends by renouncing the very freedom. In the second story ‘Tell me who to kill’ narrator who is not named is also in exile who took shelter in England. He did everything to get rid of from the limitations of the island, but he could not. “In a free state’ novels, is about psychological fragileness of Bobby who is not black, not even by white but hanging in between.

In his colonial writings, his characters are more like him in his adulthood: they are cut off from their ancestral roots, both due to circumstances and choice simultaneously, they are where they are because they have no better choice in their views; they yearn for that insiderness which clouds them everywhere.

Colonial shame, self consciousness of cultural backwardness, loveless relationships, racial isolation and confusion, fragmentation, homelessness, political isolation, helplessness, the knowledge of which he had grown up with in his bones, means all these traits and more in Naipaul’s characters’. They do not know who they are and what is their role in the world notwithstanding the protestations to the contrary of Indar; Willie knows better, he is constantly on the lookout for answers to these questions knowing full well there are none. The whole gamut of these personalities is harmoniously expressed in a single term: emptiness. This emptiness emanates from a lack of wholesome identity, which in turn obfuscates and corrupts all possibilities of being at one with any community in past and future. The Future is spoiled by a broken and impotent past, which cannot but imprison the present. And there is no return to that past or its continuation in to the present. Like the ‘Tramp at Praeus’ illustrate, everyone considers himself a world citizen, not because his identity is so inclusive, but precisely because the opposite is true, that he belong to nowhere.

The past can only cause pain yet it cannot be denied: this is what all Naipaulian

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characters are saying, in chorus. Their Islands, riverside towns, former colonies, are cursed due to their colonial past and dependent present. Their people are yet to arrive at a sense of selfhood; they themselves cannot belong to their people, and are in the hope of finding their people elsewhere. The place most of them choose, is London. But the new place, too, is disappointing to them. The first place was a shipwrecked spot; the new place chosen with so much hope, makes them nonentities. They face the crisis of identity without their passports. They cannot even belong to their spouses, their families. They go back and back in their ancestral past, in the hope of a rescue ship to take them to their ancestral land and people; but there is none: the land and the people have changed and it is again alien to them. Trampling on the past, turning the garden into ground to walk on, too, doesn't help: the past is in the heart. Trampling is , trampling their life.

Nothing remains, but the search. The search of identity of a sense of belonging

But all the melancholy of his characters does not surpass Naipaul's own and it is spread all over his fiction, non-fiction, and autobiographical fiction.

His attempt to find solace in the view of a powerful, resurgent India with her ancient civilization and modern power ended in frustration over the mimicry of the philistine Whites he found in India much worse than Trinidad Indians. And he could neither find his Trinidad village that his grandfather had

recreated in Trinidad. The world had moved, so had India, but no as far as he had wished.

But then, he had no Trinidad left for him, too. It could not be his as it had been in his childhood, when he never thought whether it was his. With all his success, and his family's upliftment, he felt we had made out selves a new. The world we found ourselves in the suburban houses, with gardens, was one we had partly made ourselves, and had loged for, when we had longed for money and the end of distress; we couldn't go back. There was no ship of antique shape now to take us back. We had come out of the nightmare; and there was nowhere to go.

That is the story of V.S. Naipaul, over and above the stories of Mr. Biswas, Ralph Singh, Salim, Indar, Bobby, Roche, Santosh, Dayos brother, Jimmy, Jane and Willie. He has grown out of Trinidad, and though he has seen bestowed upon British knighthood, he cannot belong to Britain also. On this predicament, Harish Trivedi says," Once "unhomed" is to be always and forever, if by home one understands an apt location in history, community, and culture rather than just bedroom, kitchen and hall. Naipaul's contrariness in rejecting each of his three countries as not being his home is thus not really contrariness but a recognition of this home truth. And, in any case the compliment is fully returned not only by India but also by the West Indies (where for example Derek Walcott once wrote of him as "V.S. Nightfall") and England, where when the TLS rang Downing street and then the relevant ministry to find out

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whether any official recognition had been taken of the fact that the nobel had been given to a British writer after a gap of 18 years, the spokesman at the other end, with typical insular ignorance and aplomb, said something like “we are not talking of the Booker, are we?”

The comment succinctly sums up the story of V.S. Naipaul but there is more, Naipaul has talked about “universal Civilization’ he has on many occasion, taken it as a subject of his speech but when he goes in length describing it, we again find that his continent centric view of the world obscures his larger vision, his concept of universal civilization.

We have to turn to Naipaul’s characters again to find an answer of this irony. The journal entry with which In a Free State begins tells of Naipaul’s crossing from Piraeus to Alexandria where he meets a Tramp on a ship. The Tramp speaks of his own, to a Yugoslav, of his globetrotting life; concluding with declaration, “I think of myself as a citizen of the world.”

And, Naipaul the narrator comments, “His speech was like this, full of dates, places and numbers, with sometimes a simple opinion drawn from another life. But it was mechanical, without conviction even the vanity made no impression, those quivering wet eyes remained distant. He couldn’t mange a conversation, he wasn’t looking for conversation, he didn’t even require an audience. Further, Naipaul describes him, “How fragile that face was, worked over by

distress; how frail that neck. It was strange, he looked for company but needed solitude; he looked for attention, and at the same time wanted not to be noticed. I didn’t disturb him. I feared to be involved with him.”

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