

Socio-cultural Issues in the Select Novels of V. S. Naipaul

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Abstract: V. S. Naipaul is considered to be one of the most prominent expatriate novelists having first hand colonial experience. Most of his novels deal with socio cultural crisis in postcolonial societies with an explicit account of the common complexities inborn among the marginalized societies. He delineates the Indian immigrants' dilemma, his problems and plights in a fast changing world. In his works one can find the agony of an exile; the pangs of a man in search of meaning and identity; a daredevil who has tried to explore myths and see through fantasies. This research paper will explore the socio cultural issues in the novel of V. S. Naipaul. It is about the Caribbean societies as portrayed by the various character in the novels of V. S. Naipaul. Nobel Prize winner Naipaul plays a paramount role in the postcolonial writings. His novel *Half a Life* records his exile life and manifests the raptures among subjectivity, geography and language towards multicultural and fluid identity. The present paper will also examine the feelings of social and cultural dialectics undergone by expatriates with reference to selected works of V.S Naipaul.

Key words: nostalgia, migration, society, culture, identity crisis

Introduction: V. S. Naipaul was born in an impoverished rural Hindi-speaking area of Trinidad. His grandfather, a trained Brahman, indentured himself from India to teach among Trinidad's Indian cane-workers. Naipaul's father, Seepersad was a local journalist, and also a short story writer. Seepersad Naipaul introduced his son to serious literature and had instilled in the son the notion that he should become a writer. He won a Trinidad government scholarship in 1948. In 1950 he left Trinidad to study literature at Oxford University and, since then, he has lived in England. He has written in many forms: the short story, the novella, the novel, the travelogue, the essay, the history, and the autobiographical account. He has won many literary prizes, including the Booker Prize in 1971 and the Nobel Prize in 2001. Naipaul has multiple origins to which he only partially relates.

This makes Naipaul's achieving a sense of belonging difficult. The nature of colonial education encouraged Naipaul in his identification with the values of English civilization. On the other hand, he is consciously aware of his ethnic roots as an Indian, and reveals a Hindu morality in his works. His self-recognition as a colonial subject is also strong. His colonial identification defines the destinations of his journeys. For instance, through the journeys to postcolonial nations, Naipaul reflects not only on postcolonial conditions, but also on his own circumstances. However, Naipaul belongs to none of these origins completely. Consequently, his search for his roots is caught in an unfruitful repetition. Multiple heritages also cause inconsistency and ambiguity in Naipaul. For instance, he reveals an unresolved ambivalence in his attitude towards the history of empire: he sees colonial rule both as a system of vile plunder and as a lost ideal of order; he views the metropolitan centre both as fulfilling and betraying. These aspects of rootlessness, multiple heritages, multicultures and ambiguous belongingness are the significance of the author. Naipaul is deprived of a consistent identity, a sense of security, and a sense of belonging to a certain culture as a consequence of cultural transplantation caused by imperialism. Naipaul embodies the aftermath of imperialism and the condition of the postcolonial era.

V. S. Naipaul himself experienced, and repeatedly described in his fiction, this particular urge. Throughout his life he has desired a place to identify with. From genealogical mining, especially in his homeland (the Caribbean), through the quest for his cultural roots (India), and finally to his place of education (England)—he has attempted to search for his own identity. Being an Indian by ancestry, a Trinidadian by birth, and an Englishman by education, V. S. Naipaul possesses a multi-cultural background. As a colonial, he has always needed to locate his place in the world through writing. Prolific and critical in both fiction and non-fiction, he presents colonial anxieties in his quest for self-identity. For him, travel is a way to understand oneself, to achieve self-knowledge. In *Finding the Center*, V. S. Naipaul particularly mentions the significance to him of traveling for self-understanding. He states that travel was glamorous. But travel also made unsuspected demands on me as a man and a writer, and perhaps for that reason it soon became a necessary stimulus for me. It broadened my world view; it showed me a changing world and took me out of my own colonial shell; it became the substitute for the mature social and cultural experience – the deepening knowledge of a society – which my background and the nature of my life denied me. As shown in *Half a Life*, the protagonist Willie, just like Naipaul, intends to search for his self-identity and construct his own subjectivity in the world via traveling. Willie initially departs from his hometown India to England in search of his

own world at the adolescent age like Naipaul. After that, he goes through Africa and Germany in order to find his own place in the world. Eventually, he can courageously confront his identity loss and open up his new life in the future. *A House for Mr. Biswas*, from the point of view of social, cultural, and rootlessness and identity crisis. It narrates the search for independence and identity of a Brahmin Indian living in Trinidad. The novel is set in Trinidad and covers the story of three generations. The novel has a direct association with the modern problem of identity crisis. It portrays a single man's struggle to arrive at authentic self-hood. The novel sketches the character of Mohun Biswas, the protagonist, as he tries to find relief from rootlessness and have a house of his own. The 'house' is symbolic of identity and self respect. It represents one's culture and one's roots.

The worldwide culture, economic and political changes resulted in the emergence of Diaspora writing by the well-known writers such as Derek Wolcott, Margaret Atwood, Michael Ondaatje and V. S. Naipaul. These writers represented the generation that had to meet the resist that resulted from the withdrawal of imperial order and the resultant cultural confusion. Although all the diasporic writers mentioned above hold a sway over the perceptive reader, Naipaul seems outstanding among the popular postcolonial novelists because of his exceptional treatment of common diasporic experiences.

In his early fictions V. S. Naipaul captures twice-torn and displaced immigrants oscillating between home culture and alien culture on the one hand and obviously fascinated by the sophisticated culture of the Westerners on the other hand. The novel exposes the essential ambivalence of East-Indian emigrants at Trinidad seeking belongingness and affiliation there in the West. To present the apparent cultural confusion has been the obsession of diasporic writing, but Naipaul's account of these dispossessed is based on his first hand experiences and thus seems quite authentic. Jasbir Jain elucidates: There is need to realize the significance of the cultural encounter which takes place in diasporic writing, the bicultural pulls and creation of a new culture which finally emerges Diasporic writing has developed ... a double visionThe expatriate as he moves from one culture to another may need to locate ... in relation to the centre.(15-16).

A House for Mr. Biswas tells a personal story and an ethnic, social history. At the same time, however, it also tells a story informed by the author's exile, and the ethnic communities and society of the novel are constructed out of that exile and a need to justify it. As Kenneth Ramchand has observed insightfully: "One suspects that the

world of A House for Mr. Biswas is one modeled upon a society from which the author has himself wished to escape, and that this attitude is the source of some of the over-emphasis in the construct.” (46) The novel depicts a social history of the community of indentured laborers from India who have replaced the emancipated Black slaves after the abolition of slavery by England in 1833. There never-ending isolation, adherence to traditional culture and reverence for Hindu norms of life, form the pivot of the story.

Naipaul writes about the Indian civilization, and overlooks the age old richness of Indian society but concentrates on the trivial things like people defecating on the roads. Thus he writes:

Indian defecates everywhere. They defecate, mostly besides the railway tracks. But they also defecate on the beaches; they defecate on the hills, they defecate on the river banks, they defecate on the streets, they never look for cover... These squatting figures... are never spoken of; they are not mentioned in novels or stories... But the truth is that Indians do not see those squatters. (Naupaul:178)

Naipaul makes another observation on Indian personality by relating it to what he calls the underdeveloped. He mentions that in India caste and class is more than brotherhood; as it is that which defines a person completely. The individual is never on his own, he is always fundamentally a member of his group, with a complex operation, with a complex operation of rules, rituals and taboos. He even points out the fixture of specific hands in India for every activities, i.e. left hand to be used for intimate sexual contact and not right hand. He thinks that relationships are codified, and religion, religious practices, magic and animistic ways of thinking, lock everything into place. Naipaul appears irritated by Indian mimicry, and he advises Indians to reach outside their civilization and let others know that they are not at mercy. He further expresses that Hinduism and the caste system are often thought of as inseparable. Historically, the origin of the caste system has its roots in the social constitutes than the religious injunction. Mahatma Gandhi, who worked towards religious tolerance, eradication of untouchability and change in the Hindu attitude, was considered as unsuccessful by Naipaul. He faults Gandhi for being against untouchability but not against the caste system. Gandhi, focused on the deprived, the untouchable and by doing so he attacked the social evil at its roots.

Naipaul is highly perturbed by Indian's adherence to customs, which they strictly follow on account of their being ancient. This Indian attitude is expressed in this way:

Customs are to be maintained because they are felt to be ancient. This is continuity enough; it does not need to be supported by a cultivation of the past, and the old, however hallowed, be it a Gupta image or a string bed, is to be used until it can be used no more. (228)

Comparing Trinidad with India, he says, that 'caste was not such a big issue there, "it had no meaning", where as in India this concept was totally different, here caste played a major and decisive role'. (289)

In India people were also to be tainted by their caste, especially when this was announced beforehand, approvingly or disapprovingly. But caste in India was not what it had been to me in Trinidad. In Trinidad caste had no meaning in our day -to - day life; the caste we occasionally played at was no more than an acknowledgement of latent qualities; the assurance it offered was such as might have been offered by a palmist or a reader of handwriting. In India it implied a brutal division of labour; and at its centre, as I had never realized, lay the degradation of the latrine - cleaner. In India caste was unpleasant; I never wished to know what a man's caste was.

Naipaul's characters attempt to achieve European power and success by means of imitation of European culture. While imitating western culture they shed their true identities without any regret. An instance could be seen in Ralph Singh giving himself a new name just to sound extra - ordinary and to compete with Deschampsneufs. His real name Ranjit Kripal Singh is distorted by him. He broke Kripal Singh into two added Ralph and use to sign his name as R. R. K. Singh. In this way he became Ralph Singh. This attempt at self - baptism shows his attempt to change his destiny as well as identity. The township named "Kripalville" after his father also gets distorted into "crippleville". He is familiar with different aspects of London life. Ralph is a third generation Trinidad Hindu; the loss of traditional values led him to alienation. Ralph Singh's access to political power is achieved by putting an end to the old order.

To sum up, there are certain behavioral trends that acquire universality due their close association with human psychology that in itself is universal with all its shades and colors. Cultural clash emerges when a sharp contrast between ideologies emerges. Diaspora provides that platform. Exile both willing or forced bring with it

cultural contrasts. Naipaul reveals the pangs of the migrants. For such victims of Diaspora the struggle of life increases by leaps and bounds as most of his life spent merely in the process of getting adjusted in an alien land.

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