

## **Alienation and Rootlessness in the Novels of V.S. Naipaul**

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### **Abstract**

Displacement and complexities prevalent in the life of expatriates have emerged as a major theme in the 20th century authors crossing the barriers of caste, creed and nationality. It has become a universal phenomenon. Modern literature abounds in alienated individuals. It reflects the general disillusionment that hassles the two post war generations and the deep spiritual isolation felt by men in a universe which he feels himself to be inconsequential and a stranger. Owing to socio-cultural and historical region, Indian literature in English of the recent decades also could not help being affected by it. V.S Naipaul, the first Nobel Prize winner of 21st century has become spokesman of emigrants. 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. Out of his dilemma is born a rich body of writings which has enriched diasporic literature and the English language.

The present paper will examine the feelings of rootlessness and alienation undergone by expatriates with reference to selected works of V.S Naipaul.

### **Keywords**

Alienation, Rootlessness, Cultural Crisis, Expatriation.

### **Introduction**

V. S. Naipaul, the mouthpiece of displacement and rootlessness is one of the most significant contemporary English Novelists. Of Indian descent, born in Trinidad, and educated in England, Naipaul has been placed as a rootless nomad in the cultural world, always on a voyage to find his identity. Born in Trinidad in a migrant family of **Girmitiyas**- indentured labourers- who went across the *black water* in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Naipaul was brought up in the Hindu ghettos of the West Indies: surrounded with pictures, icons and rituals of the enigmatic Indian Hindu gods and goddesses. Exiled at his very birth, far away from his

ancient cultural roots, Naipaul suffered a **second exile** when he left Trinidad for England to pursue higher studies. In England, too he remained on **outsider** unable to identify with the world of the colonizing super power. **Alienation** and **identity-crisis** pursued him like the Greek Eumenides and became his obsessive themes when he chose the career of a freelance writer. The painful experiences of the exile recur in his works through different images and metaphors. He tramped through countries and continents to detect the lost umbilical cord relation. His literary journey from *Miguel Street* to *The Enigma Of Arrival* has the undercurrent of expatriate feeling.

Naipaul is candid in his comments about his evolution as an author. He began as a chronicler of West Indian *street life* and slowly grasped the deeper issues of **alienation** and **exile** that dominate his later works.

I have done this little survey of the early part of my career to try to show the stages by which, in just ten years, my birthplace had altered or developed in my writing from the comedy of street life to a study of a kind of widespread schizophrenia. What was simple had become complicated.

As the title chosen by him for his *Acceptance speech* shows Naipaul is a writer of *Two Worlds* –the coloniser's and the colonised's. Naipaul once said that his fiction was a struggle to *deliver the truth* by discarding the Nineteenth century aestheticism, *the ideas of Bloomsbury, ideas bred out of empire, wealth and imperial security*. Naipaul's fictional works are projections of the *worlds he contained within himself*, the memories of Trinidad and its rootless milieu lost between their past and their present. Lillian Feder's comment can be a good starting point for analyzing his fiction:

In his stories and novels, Naipaul transforms actual societies, he has known, their rulers and subjects, into fictional communities that generate narrators and characters more vivid than their models... These protagonists are linked to each other and to their progenitor to pursue truths about themselves and their worlds.

*A House for Mr. Biswas*, the most famous novel of Naipaul is basically concerned with the search of Mohun Biswas. Mr. Biswas' complex and insightful story is the story of the community he belongs to. The novelist has presented it on a large canvas in a grand style. The novel begins with a glimpse of Mohun Biswas, a sacked journalist dying at the age of forty six in his mortgaged house in Sikkim Street, St. James, Port of Spain. He is penniless. He has been suffering physically and mentally for months. He has a wife and four children. The theme of the novel is the transformation of Mr. Biswas's, a slave, into a free man. *The sign of his emancipation is his own house*. The house stands as a symbol of Mr. Biswas' lifelong search for identity and self-recognition. And during his search for a house he had

always assumed a new and modern concrete house, bright with paint, to be beyond him; and they had looked at few. He is an alien in an alien land. He fights the odds of the life to achieve stability for himself and his family. He had been dependent on his in-laws for a long period. He has lost his individuality among the Tulsis. He does not want to leave his wife and children amidst the crowd of the Tulsis, unattended and in a state of inadequate freedom. He does not possess even a square foot of land to claim as his own. His whole family is flocked together in a small room of Hanuman House. So the house of the solicitor's clerk is an astonishing achievement of Mr. Biswas. It is a modest structure designed and *built* by the solicitor's clerk, who *built houses in his spare time*.

Mr. Biswas wants to be a free man. His struggle symbolizes both his freedom from the oppressive world of Tulsis and the West Indians' quest for freedom from colonial subjugation.

In *A House for Mr. Biswas* Naipaul describes the rituals enacted in one of the remote villages to Trinidad, jointly by people of all ethnic groups. Migrants and exiled people can find their identity and their house, if they identify their new world as their second home. The need for the exiles in Trinidad was to fully accept their foster country as their new home. The foster country also has to adopt the exiles as its own people. An amalgamation of different racial cultures might have allowed the emergence of a new West Indian culture. But this did not happen. The different ethnic groups remained alienated from each other.

Mr. Biswas moves through this chaotic and diverse world, confronting and trying to free himself from social bondage. His life is a symbol of the colonized societies as he was *flogged, duped, thwarted, cheated, maligned, robbed, humiliated, frustrated, disappointed and frightened*. But rather than cursing the fate, Mr. Biswas seems to accept the challenge. His freedom was over, and it had been false. The past could not be ignored: It was never counterfeit: he carried it within himself. If there was a place for him, it was one that had already been hollowed out by time, by everything he had lived through, however imperfect makeshift and cheating. It seems that adverse situations and bitter experiences of life have made Mr. Biswas accept the Hindu philosophy of Dharma and Karma. Mr. Biswas does not read *The Bhagvad Geeta* and the *Vedanta*, but *Marcus Aurelius* and *Samuel Smiles*. In fact, he is directed by a biased vision of Hinduism and bastardized Western values.

Naipaul presents the vision of Trinidad as a place without rules or patterns and a disintegrated and disquieting Hindu community within it. Mr. Biswas tried to escape the obscurity and anonymity of the society. Mr. Biswas at least seems, in the end, to rise above the disconnected but potent forces always pulling him down. Like the frog in the well who makes a move backward for every three forward, he eventually surfaced.

He hopes that in the changed circumstances, the children would also get an opportunity to discover themselves culturally and spiritually. Savi, the beautiful, intelligent daughter of Mr. Biswas, carries on the torch he has lighted. She fills the last moments of his life with hope and happiness. It seems, Mr. Biswas dies a contented man. It is yet another question that the sense of fulfillment is telescoped through the daughter, Savi. His own search for identity and house remains unaccomplished. The exile finds a house by proxy. Anand, his son, had left his father with an expectation of a brighter life. He knew that Trinidad conceived only unsuccessful stories and aborted ambition. Like the narrator Naipaul, Anand has no shame in the partial satisfaction of a disillusioned father. Mr. Biswas has only one consolation to keep him alive, his daughter, Savi. Mohun Biswas is born as an alien, he lives and struggles like one. Even in his death, he has not fully succeeded in establishing his identity or becoming a Trinidadian. He carries in his heart the memories of the land of his ancestors. Anand's refusal to return to the land of dilemma clearly shows that the problems of identity have not been resolved by Mr. Biswas. The question remains open for Anand too. Mr. Biswas may find some sort of solace in Savi but the search of Anand will remain alive with a greater sense of alienation and anxiety. The fears, uncertainties and the loneliness of the West Indian have not been resolved. Again and again Biswas will be born, the quest will pass from father to the son and the question of identity will remain open for a Trinidadian. Even when a house is found it will remain without walls.

In the *Mimic Men*, an attempt has been made to magnify the condition of expatriates in a displaced world. Naipaul's is, in a way, confessional in his exploration and analysis of the woes and problems of an expatriate. There is a ring of genuineness and authenticity *in the depiction of the protagonist's sense of restlessness, alienation and his search for rooted order and stable values*. *The Mimic Men* reflects a deepening understanding of Naipaul's alienation from the three cultures. Indian, Caribbean and British. He neither rejects his Indian heritage, nor adjusts with the Caribbean and finally fails to reconcile with the metropolis of London. The failure to acknowledge has turned him into something of a permanent *deracine*. The vision of the triple exile has found a new dimension in his *The Mimic Men*.

In this novel, the protagonist, Ralph Singh's goal was to acquire money, success and fame through the easy way. His philosophy of life is to acquire power and wealth without hesitation by any means.

Like a pragmatic politician of the world, he decries dishonesty to hide his own. He is a *dandy; a pretender and a mimic man who concealed his pettiness in intellectual sophistry, and whose high pose betrayed shallowness and bankruptcy of values*. Ralph Singh is very much conscious of the mimicry of life. There is no real commitment and affection to life and society in Ralph Singh. *We pretend to be real, to be learning, to be preparing ourselves for life, we mimic men of the New world, one unknown corner of it, with all its reminders of the*

corruption that came so quickly to the news. His play boy attitude at human relationship exposes his uncertain and fragile character. The theme of *The Mimic Men*, like of Eliot's poem *The Hollow Men* is corruption – *corruption of the body politic* and *corruption of the individual human soul* says Peter Nazareth. The drama of his life which brought success to Ralph Singh, also becomes the instrument of his failure. Unmasking of one irregularity of a false government is enough for its fall. Ralph Singh realizes it very late that any arbitrary rule is imminent to collapse. Foundations laid on fraud will not sustain for long. An adroit politician can stick on the political stage only with his game. At forty, Ralph Singh falls from power and withdraws from *responsibility and attachment for final emptiness*. The novel moves towards a goal that is *goallessness*. Naipaul presents the greater theme of chaos and order in *The Mimic Men* than in his earlier novels. Here, chaos and order are related to the game of politics and power. The happenings in the life of Ralph Singh are not accidental. The destiny of the vulnerable politician of the *Roman house* is not unexpected. In such circumstances, it is hard not to accept *paradoxes of existence*, which lead to nothingness.

Naipaul's *Half A Life* (2002) also revisits his favourite themes of **exile** and **alienation**, but with a very significant difference. This time he takes up a protagonist **born in pre – independence India** and the first part of the novel is about **Indian life in a provincial town**. The opening section of the novel has echoes of R. K. Narayan, as Naipaul goes through the gamut of India's ritualistic tradition ranging from temple –life, Sanyas, silence –vows, caste prejudices and the little Maharajas of John Company. Even the name of the hero, Willie 'Somerset' Chandran reminds us of Narayan's Chandran in *The Bachelor of Arts* as he copes up with his mission school education in English medium. The tensions of inter-caste marriage and the lament of Chandran's father for his lost *Brahmcharya* are all Narayan territory.

However, the novel takes a sudden leap into Naipaul territory as little Chandran travels to England on scholarship. The snapping of roots and the bewilderment of Willie Chandran in the Bohemian West where he is in exile are typical Naipaul situations. However, Chandran gets a modicum of security with the help of a West Indian immigrant-Perecy Cato-who is himself a floater between three worlds of Africa, America and Europe. Naipaul is surprisingly candid about Chandran's loss of virginity and his sexual escapades in London. Yet he remains a drifter, he does not belong. Casually, Naipaul includes another track to the story which is going to play a major role later. In this track the reader is told about Chandran's younger sister, Sarojini, who was born ugly as their mother was from a low caste. Chandran's father says:

The girl was the image of her mother ... I called her Sarojini, after the woman poet of the independence movement, in the hope that a similar kind of blessing might fall on her.

The blessing that falls on her in due course is that an old, lame German tourist takes a fancy to her, marries her, and takes her away to Germany. From Germany, she comes to London for a visit and meets Chandran but she is, even in the West, a *Sari-Cardigan* clad ungainly Indian housewife. At this stage she symbolizes the fossilized Indian tradition, backward –looking and timid.

Meanwhile, Chandran is in a quandary. At the end of his studies, he has to leave England and he does not want to go home to India. The succor comes to him in the form of Ana, A Portugese –African girl whose father has an estate in East Africa. Chandran goes away to Africa after marrying her, but is never comfortable there in the bushland surrounded with half –clad negroes. In the violence –torn tribal world the Europeans are fleeing with bag and baggage –the end of the colonial paradise is at hand. Willie thinks:

‘I don’t know where I am. I don’t think I can pick my way back. I don’t ever want this view to become familiar. I must not unpack. I must never behave as though I am staying’ He stayed for eighteen years.

Eighteen years of his life Willie wastes in Africa, doing nothing but chasing women and generally being a parasite. Then comes a time when he decides to run away again, to another **home**. Where is that **home**? He thinks of Sarojini and writes to her. She calls him to Germany. There he finds a new Sarojini, transformed into a confident young woman with her integration in the modern Western world. Gone is the awkward housewife from traditional India. Chandran is pleasantly surprised:

She was attractive now –Something impossible to think of in the Ashram days –And gradually... Willie understood that she had had many lovers.

This new liberated, confident and attractive Sarojini gives him shelter and there, before her, he confesses how he had lived **half a life** in Africa, living and partly living, in T. S. Eliot’s phrase. He is still homeless, but Sarojini has given him hope for integration. Naipaul empathises with Willie Chandran, a man trapped between three worlds of India, Europe and Africa. Like Chandran.

## Conclusion

In all these situations the protagonist is **alienated** and becomes an **exile**. In his writings Naipaul has explored the vast potentialities and dimensions of this theme of **exile** and **alienation**. The **quest for identity**, search for a home appears to be within reach. But it remains an illusion. Reality is a painstaking endeavour, though it may be futile. In between certainty and illusion lies the vast area of *human predicament in exile*. It is this area which

Naipaul tries to explore. The pathos of *exile* and futility of the *search for identity* appear as irreconcilable *existential* problems of the modern world.

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