

Cultural Translocation in Three Novels of V. S. Naipaul

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Abstract

Border crossing involves much more than crossing over physical locales and bridges. This paper foregrounds cultural translocation as one of the effects of location and translocation in V. S. Naipaul's three novels. Translocation generates the clash of cultures, cultural segmentations, and cultural hybridity. In this work, clash of cultures refers to that aspect whereby two cultures are in conflict with one another; cultural segmentation refers to the situation whereby people living in the same society, though hailing from different cultural backgrounds, segregate in order to avoid mixing with others (outsiders in terms of culture), while cultural hybridity refers to that situation whereby people accept each other's culture and practise both at the same time. Translocation results in conflicts in that the persistent desire to define and redefine the other is abrasive. Culture also becomes fissured as the mixings of peoples cannot but pick up and drop certain cultural aspects. On the other hand, migrants struggle to maintain their original culture in the foreign land. This point is supported by Pramod K. Nayar's remark in *Postcolonial Literature: An Introduction*; he states that "Exiles tend to hold on to their tradition in an almost desperate effort to retain/reclaim their 'original' culture" (195).

Key Words: migration, culture, migrants, hybridity, cultural segmentation, translocation

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State. Translocation generates the clash of cultures, cultural segmentations, and cultural hybridity. In this work, clash of cultures refers to that aspect whereby two cultures are in conflict with one another; cultural segmentation refers to the situation whereby people living in the same society, though hailing from different cultural backgrounds, segregate in order to avoid mixing with others (outsiders in terms of culture), while cultural hybridity refers to that situation whereby people accept each other's culture and practise both at the same time. Translocation results in conflicts in that the persistent desire to define and redefine the other is abrasive. Culture also becomes fissured as the mixings of peoples cannot but pick up and drop certain cultural aspects. On the other hand, migrants struggle to maintain their original culture in the foreign land. This point is supported by Pramod K. Nayar's remark in *Postcolonial Literature: An Introduction*; he states that "Exiles tend to hold on to their tradition in an almost desperate effort to retain/reclaim their 'original' culture" (195).

The characters that we come across in the novels under study have a deep feeling of cultural loss, a detachment from the original Hindu culture. The Indians in Naipaul's novels are represented as a culturally lost people, condemned to a life of imitation on foreign grounds. They remain cultural aliens—aliens to their original Indian cultural practices and alien to the metropolitan (host) culture. This displays the varied cultural traditions that happen to exist in the same physical space. At the end of the characters' locations and translocations, the resulting effect is cultural plurality. This corroborates with Homi Bhabha's view that such convergences of cultures position the people living the experience in a "neither the *one* nor the *other* but *something else besides*" place (*The Location of Culture* 25).

Concomitant with translocation is the feeling of loss that the characters in the *Mystic Masseur* exhibit through their religious rite of initiation. During the initiation of young Indians as Brahmins, they are asked to mimic a trek to Benares, a legendary Hindu tradition brought to the Caribbean islands by Hindu plantation workers as far back as the eighteenth century. It is extremely important to note that the Hindu cultural practices here have been somehow adulterated by their interaction with other religions such as Christianity and Islam. The mock trek to Benares is therefore an attempt to guard against the complete destruction of the remnants of cultural ties with India. It is also a reminder to the present

Hindus in Trinidad that they have a home somewhere in India, and that there is a cultural attachment that links them to this home.

Moreover, the narrator of *The Mystic Masseur* talks about Mr Ramsumair—Ganesh’s father’s preparations to send his son to ‘the town college’ (15). He moves around the district, showing Ganesh off to friends and acquaintances. On the day Mr Ramsumair takes Ganesh to Princes Town, the former dresses in his “visiting outfit: dhoti, *koortah*, white cap, and an unfurled umbrella on the crook of his left arm” (15). His dressing suggests a blend of Hindi and English dressing styles yoked together. This passage shows Mr Ramsumair as a cultural hybrid, a status that has resulted from his migration from India to Trinidad where he has come into contact with the English. His dressing makes him ridiculous to the people in Princes Town.

Due to this cultural blend of the Hindi and English ways of life, Ganesh appears as the ‘other’ among his school mates at the Queen’s Royal College. Before Ganesh and his father leave home, his father has him “[dress] in a khaki suit and a khaki topee” (15). When they arrive at St. Joseph, people mock at their dressing and Ganesh becomes shy. In spite of the length of time that he spends at Queen’s Royal College, his manner of dressing does not change for: “He continued to dress badly, he didn’t play games, and his accent remained too clearly that of the Indian from the country” (17). Ganesh finds it difficult to dress well in the college milieu because he does not master the foreign way of dressing here. In addition to this cultural difference brought about through the dressing style, the narrator adds that “He still believed that reading by any light other than daylight was bad for the eyes, and as soon as his classes were over he ran home to Dundonald Street and sat on the back steps reading” (17). This is very humorous, but there is a satire behind this humour. The author satirises the stupidity and the backwardness of the Indians in Trinidad in spite of their cultural hybridity. Ganesh who pretends to be an English man by the name he forges and by the way he dresses remains a country Indian. He is unable to get assimilated into the English culture in its entirety.

Cultural transformation is also seen in *The Mystic Masseur* through Leela. She is an Indian girl and culturally, girls and women are supposed to wear saris which cover their entire bodies. On the contrary, Leela is dressed in frocks and her father does not show any reproof. Frocks are generally worn by Western girls and women. The years that the Indians

have spent on this island and their coming into contact with other ethnic groups have altered their cultural behaviours. Although it is culturally forbidden for a Hindu man to have anything to do with a girl with whom he is not married, Ramlogan transcends this Hindu cultural boundary by asking Ganesh to massage his daughter, Leela's foot. He is indirectly negotiating space for Ganesh to fall in love with Leela. Even though the Indians are accustomed to match-making, the match making is not as overt as that which takes place in *The Mystic Masseur*. The culture of match-making is therefore adulterated through the character of Ramlogan.

Furthermore, there is cultural fragmentation in *The Mystic Masseur* which is shown through Ganesh's practice as a masseur. For him to succeed as a masseur, he should have a good knowledge of Hinduism. When a lady, Ganesh's first customer, arrives in Fuente Grove, Ganesh is at Beharry's shop. He feigns importance and dignity by not smiling when the lady and Beharry talk about him. When they get to his house, Ganesh invites the lady into his study, but instructs her to take her shoes off on the verandah first. This taking off of shoes is a remnant of the fragmented memories of the Hindu temples in India that Ganesh can still take hold of. While in the study, Ganesh tells the woman that books are his only vice for he neither smokes nor drinks. This other emphasis on life style also connects him to the withdrawn life of the Brahmins and mendicants in India. However, whatever Ganesh does portrays him as a mimic man – he has no mastery of any religion. Ganesh fakes everything that he does. Even his temple is a symbol of uncertainty, its pictures, drawn from Hinduism, Christianity, and unknown sources depict cultural hybridity.

In a *House for Mr Biswas*, there is also cultural translocation which results from migration. In the section of the novel which is entitled "Prologue," the reader is told about Bibpti's grandfather who had migrated from India to Trinidad. Many of the characters in the novel are descendants of Indian immigrants who had come to this Island as indentured labourers. These generations of Indians continue to maintain and practice the culture of their ancestors. The Tulsi clan is a clear example of those who hold on to the Hindu tradition and culture. However, this culture has assumed another blend as it clashes with other cultures of the inhabitants of Trinidad who are not of Hindu origins. Some of the Hindu cultural practices that have been transported to Trinidad are rites of passage, (for example, marriage rites, death rites), and the matrilineal heritage. In the Hindu tradition,

women wed men—that is, the dowry is paid to the man and the man moves in to stay with the woman.

When Savi, Mr Biswas's daughter is born, her real name is not made known to the people around, for "The real name of a person could be used to damage that person, whereas the calling name had no validity and was only a convenience" (162). This myth shows how superstitious the Indians are. This aspect of the Indian culture has been translocated from India to Trinidad by the immigrants. Furthermore, the Hindus generally consider other religions as inferior. They do everything not to mix with Christians and Muslims. However, the presence of the Hindus in Trinidad breeds a different atmosphere as they are bound to live side by side with Christians and Muslims. Christianity gradually infiltrates into the Hindu community as time goes on. The narrator notes in one of the instances in *A House for Mr Biswas* that when the Tusli children are preparing to go and write exams in school, their parents give them a piece of lime and a crucifix as talismans for good luck. This aspect raises the idea of cultural hybridity. There is a mixture of the Hindu and Christian cultures in the Tuslis' act

Moreover, when Christmas comes, "the shop-signs" in Arwacas "[celebrate] snow and Santa Claus. The Tulsi store [is] hung with paper holly and berries, but [carries] no Christmas signs" (212). In spite of the fact that this shop carries no Christmas signs, there is some sense of acknowledgement and involvement by the Tulsis in this Christian festive period. They actually hang the berries because it is a period when Christians all over the world decorate places to announce the birth of Christ. The absence of the Christmas signs is just an indication that the Tulsis are cautious about this cultural hybridity and they do not want to display it publicly. As Christmas draws near, there is more life at the Tulsi store. The narrator posits that "Christmas was the only time of the year when the gaiety of the signs [which Mr Biswas had painted long ago] had some meaning. Then the Tulsi store became a place of deep romance and endless delights [...]. Now all day there was noise and bustle" (212). This shows cultural hybridity where the Hindus are now involved in Christian feast activities.

Remarkably, life only comes to the Tulsi store, as Savi observes, when Christmas is approaching. All along, no mention has been made of any livelier activity in Tulsidom before this period. There has never been an occasion when music was played in the Tusli

family, even during Mr Biswas's wedding ceremony with Shama, no music is played. Now, gramophones play all day long in the Tulsi shop and every other store around. Even Mrs Tulsi is moved by this Christmas spirit and the narrator remarks that she herself comes to the store from time to time and talks with the people she knows "and on occasion even [sells] something" (213). On Christmas Eve, the Tulsis are also involved in preparations for the festival. Sumati is in charge of baking and is assisted by many other sisters, including Shama who is said to have no recognised talents. Brothers-in-law leave for their families and when Mr Biswas is on his way cycling to Green Vale, he remembers that he has not bought a present for Savi and Anand. "But they expected none from him; they knew they would find their presents in their stockings on Christmas morning" (214). Putting children's presents in their socks is a Christian practice. We notice that the Tulsi family is fully involved in this cultural aspect of Christmas which is as a consequence of their contact with Christians in Trinidad.

As the Tulsi daughters prepare the Christmas food on the eve, the children hunt around for their presents. They even talk of staying awake all night, but one by one they soon retire to their bedrooms. Their mothers can be heard singing in the kitchen and certainly the songs that they are singing are Christmas carols which adds to the idea of cultural hybridity. On Christmas day, the children get up and find their presents. They all get ready and go downstairs to kiss Mrs Tulsi. The whole family gathers in a hall for breakfast and wish one another "Happy Santa Claus" (*A House* 215). The Tulsis avoid saying 'Happy/Merry Christmas' and instead wish one another "Happy Santa Claus". This indicates an adulteration of the culture which they have copied or in another sense, it shows their ignorance of Christianity even though they are celebrating it. It can also represent the fact that the Tulsis reduce Christmas to perishable goods and spiritual emptiness.

When Hari comes to bless Mr Biswas's house at Green Vale, he comes in clothes that represent Western fashion and culture and then bathes and changes into a "dhoti in Mr Biswas's room before going to the site with a bras jar, some mango leaves and other equipment" (*A House* 257). At the site, he sprinkles water into one of the holes which Mr Macleans had made Edgar to clean. He sprinkles the water with a mango leaf as he murmurs his prayer. He also drops a penny and "some other things wrapped in another mango leaf" (*ibid*). As he goes about this rite, Mr Macleans watches reverently with his hat

in his hands. This rite informs the cultural translocation that has taken place in Trinidad through the presence of the Hindus on the island. After the rite, Hari goes back to the barracks and changes into “trousers and shirt before leaving” (ibid). This aspect of changing into a dhoti only when he has to perform a religious rite shows that Hari is a cultural hybrid. His exposure to other cultures in Trinidad has caused him to put aside his Indian dressing for European dressing. The dhoti now serves only as a religious and cultural relic.

Most importantly, the fissured Hindu culture in this novel is brought out through Mr Macleans’s alarm at the briefness and simplicity of the rite which Hari has just performed. Immediately Hari leaves the barracks, Mr Mcleans is surprised and asks “That is all? [...]. No sharing-out of anything –food and thing – as other Indians does do?” (*A House* 257). This is an aspect of the Indian culture that is fast disappearing as far as Hari is concerned. It signifies to what extent the Indians have adopted into the cultures that they have come into contact with. There has been a lot of shedding of some cultural aspects by the Tulsi family members in particular. In order to cover up Hari’s hybridised identity, Mr Biswas tells Mr Mcleans that the sharing will be done when the house is complete. Mr Mcleans’s comparison of Hari and other Indians also shows the extent of the impact of the Indian presence in Trinidad. They have also translocated their Hindu culture into Trinidad and so non-Indians like Mr Mcleans know the Indian culture.

It is important to note that Mr Biswas has lost faith in Hindu practices in Trinidad, especially as they are now adulterated by other cultural interferences. He neither adheres to Hindu religious cultural activities nor to those of other religions on the island. When he goes to Hanuman House some days after Hari has blessed his house, Chinta enquires about the house and Mr Biswas retorts: “ Why you asking? Hari bless it, and you know what does happen when Hari bless something” (258). Mr Biswas questions Hari’s priesthood and his spirituality. He is superstitious about Hari’s blessing of things. According to him, Hari is a fake pundit and anything he blesses turns out to be a failure. No wonder, his response to Mr Macleans’ surprise at the fact that nothing has been shared after the rite is a sarcastic one. This sarcasm is intended to indict Hari’s falsehood.

In terms of religion, the Hindus continue to perform their *pujas* after which the milk from it is shared to family members. Pundit Jairam performs this *puja* every morning in

order to continue the Hindu religious culture. The Tulsi sons, Owad and Shekhar are also taught to perform this religious rite every morning in Tulsidom. However, aspects of Christianity begin to infiltrate into the Tulsi clan as they live with Christians in Trinidad. For instance, even though they are Hindus, Mr Biswas invites his three children: Anand, Savi and Myna to sing a Christmas carol for their mother. The narrator remarks that “they sang *While Shepherds Watched their Flocks by Night*” (393). This brings in the idea of cultural hybridity.

When Mr Biswas and his family move to Port of Spain, he often sends Anand and Savi to Sunday School on Sundays. He does this to have peace at home when Shama goes to Hanuman House. Anand and Savi love it and that “they [are] given cakes and soft drinks and taught hymns with catchy tunes” (340). The children get accustomed with these songs in such a way that one day at home, Anand begins to sing “*Jesus Loves Me this I know*” (ibid). Mrs Tulsi gets offended and asks him how he knows that Jesus loves him and Anand simply quotes the next line of the hymn; “*Cause the Bible tells me so*” (ibid). Mrs Tulsi, in spite of her own religious transgressions, considers this to mean that Mr Biswas is silently restarting “his religious war” (*A House* ibid). However, the sending of the children to Sunday School contradicts Mr Biswas’s distaste of Mrs Tulsi’s Roman Catholic practices. He had earlier condemned Mrs Tulsi calling her a “Roman cat”, for sending her sons to a Roman Catholic college, which is quite out of the ways of the Hindus. When Shama confronts him concerning this aspect of singing hymns in the presence of Mrs Tulsi, Mr Biswas tells her: “I thought a good Christian hymn would remind her of happy childhood days as a baby Roman kitten” (340).

Towards the end of the novel, the narrator gives a detailed description of a collection of pictures by W.C. Tuttle. In one of the pictures, W. C. Tuttle is naked, but for “dhoti, sacred thread and caste marks, head shorn except for the top knot, sat crossed legs [...] and meditated with closed eyes” (*A House* 460). This picture shows a typical Hindu boy in a Hindu setting and portrays the cultural heritage of the Hindus. In the picture next to this one, W. C. Tuttle is in “jacket, trousers, collar, tie, hat, one well-shod foot on the running-board of a motor car, laughing, his gold tooth brilliantly revealed” (ibid). This second picture portrays W. C. Tuttle as a Westernised man. No sign of Indianess is seen in him. His dressing is completely exotic. These two pictures portray W.C. Tuttle as a cultural

hybrid. In some of the pictures, he is in complete “pundit regalia, turban, dhoti, white jacket, beads, standing with a brass jar in one hand, laughing again, [...]” (461). Among these pictures are also pictures of the “English countryside in Spring” and “Mahatma Gandhi”. To this, the narrator concludes that “it was W. C. Tuttle’s way of blending East and West” (ibid). This cultural blend makes him a man of two cultures. The effect of cultural mixing is obviously great on him. He has become a cultural hybrid, neither here nor there, a situation which Elleke Boehmar in her scholarly work, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature* (1995) refers to as “not quite” or “in-between” (227), or what Homi Bhabha will call “indeterminacy” (*The Location of Culture* 219).

When Mrs Tulsi’s health deteriorates, she indulges in many religious rituals. She regularly has *pujas* performed for God alone. She makes the pundit read out scriptures to her while she sits in front of him listening. The narrator remarks that for “every *puja* Mrs Tulsi tried a different pundit, since no pundit could please her as well as Hari. And since no pundit could please her, her faith yielded. She sent Shushila to burn candles in the Roman Catholic church; she put a crucifix in her room; and she had Pundit Tulsi’s grave cleaned for All Saints’ Day” (522). This passage shows religious hybridity as Mrs Tulsi blends Christianity with Hinduism in order to seek for healing. The author points at Mrs Tulsi’s exaggerated religious mixture when he mentions that she had Pundit Tulsi’s grave cleaned for All Saints’s Day. Mrs Tulsi’s religious practices also show the extent to which Hinduism has lost its hold on the Indians in Trinidad. On another hand, her religious hybridity is paradoxical because she had earlier regarded Anand’s singing of a Sunday School hymn as an offensive thing.

As concerns the section of *In a Free State* entitled, “Tell Me Who to Kill” the narrator, Dayo’s brother walks to Tottenham Court Road where he finds “the Indian restaurant [which] is hot and smelling” (99-100). The presence of an Indian restaurant in the heart of London is a landmark of the cultural diversity that characterises metropolitan England. The immigrants have brought their own culture and wish to preserve it by setting up a restaurant where food from their origin is prepared. Besides, the existence of such a restaurant is indicative of the fact there are many Indians living in that area of London. This kind of clustering in one area by immigrants is described by Gil S. Esptein and Ira N. Gang in *Migration and Culture* as “immigrant clusters” (3). They argue that “[a] characteristic of

international migration is the clustering of immigrants in ethnic communities” (ibid). They cite the cases of “Turks in Germany, Tamils in Switzerland, Moroccans in the Netherlands and Belgium, Italians in Argentina, Greeks in Austria, and Ukrainians in Canada” (ibid). According to them, immigrants tend to choose to relocate in areas or cities where other immigrants from their ethnic groups already located in order to get assistance in getting shelter and work.

In “One out of Many,” Santosh recounts the story of an American who once came to dinner at his employer’s apartment in Washington. He states that when the American observed the pieces of sculpture in the apartment, “he said that he had himself brought back a whole head from one of the ancient temples; he had got the guide to hack it off” (*In a Free State* 41). When Santosh’s employer tells the American that what he did was illegal, the American replies that that is why he had to give the man two dollars. He adds that if he had a bottle of whisky the guide “would have pulled down the whole temple for [him]” (ibid). This is actually humorous, but there is subtle satire behind it. The guide does not have value for the temple and has lost respect for his own culture. That is why he accepts two dollars in the place of the head of the god that he guides. Another instance of irony is that he is placed at this temple as a guide in order to guard it against intruders and any possible destruction of its artefacts and; but he himself is the perpetrator of such acts. It also portrays the differences in cultural values between the Americans and Indians. While such temple antiquities are important religious aspects of the Indian culture, the American tourist considers them as remnants of some civilisation that can be kept in a museum somewhere for history or simply as artistic decorations in an American home.

Likewise, Santosh accepts that he can wear neither his dhoti nor the American suit in Washington, and decides to wear what he describes as “pants with some sort of zippered jacket” (*In a Free State* 40). This dressing is half American and half Indian; through his migration, Santosh has become a cultural hybrid as far as dressing is concerned. His status of a cultural hybrid is both a strength and at the same time a threat because he has the ability to see in both sides, but he does not know which of the halves he can fully claim in order to be a complete or whole person.

As for Priya, he keeps a collection of good-luck objects in his new restaurant. When he invites Santosh to look into the restaurant, the latter notes that among these good-luck

objects are “a brass plate with a heap of uncooked rice, for prosperity; a little copybook and a little diary pencil for good luck with the accounts; a little clay lamp, for general good luck” (46). This is part of Priya’s cultural belief that he has brought to Washington. He might have brought the brass plate with him all the way from India as this article is very significant for his caste. The Americans who come to eat in this restaurant may not understand the meaning of these objects that Priya has displayed on the shelf. For instance, when Bab comes in to deliver the menu document for Priya’s restaurant, he sees the shelf and asks: “But what’s that Priya? What’s that shelf doing there?” (48). Bab walks to the shelf and resolves, “Well, it’s yours, [...]. I suppose we had to have a touch of the East somewhere” (ibid). According to Bab, the objects on the shelf are just a decoration; he does not understand the spiritual aspect of it.

Santosh remarks that most of the waiters in their restaurant were Mexicans, “but when we put turbans on them, they could pass” (*In a Free State* 50). There is an aspect of cultural translocation here. The Turbans are known to be part of the Indian outfit, but now the Mexicans have to wear them in order to appear like Indians in the Indian restaurant in Washington. Thus, translocation has brought about a cultural mixture. Had the Mexicans remained in Mexico, they would not have been in need of a job which would require them to change their outfit. Thus, migration has enabled the Indians to translocate their culture to Washington and introduce it to the immigrants from Mexico. The wearing of turbans in order to appear like Indians is, in a way masking the Lebanese identity. They have to pretend to be another person in order to survive in the metropolis where they have migrated to.

In “Tell Me Who to Kill” the narrator, Dayo’s brother walks to Tottenham Court Road where he finds an “Indian restaurant [which] is hot and smelling” (99-100). The presence of an Indian restaurant in the heart of London is evidence of the cultural diversity that characterises metropolitan England. The immigrants have brought their own culture and wish to preserve it by setting up a restaurant where food from their homeland is prepared. Besides, the existence of such a restaurant is indicative of the fact that there are many Indians living in that area of London. This kind of clustering in one area by immigrants is described by Gil S. Epstein and Ira N. Gang in “Introduction: Migration and Culture” as “immigrant clusters” (*Migration and Culture: Frontiers of Economic and*

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This paper has proved that migrations lead to the translocation of cultures. As one migrates from one place to another, he/she grapples with the several cultures which he/she encounters on his/her way. This mixture of cultures gives rise to cultural hybridity, complex identities, or lost identities. From our analysis in this paper, we can say that there is no pure culture as long as people displace themselves from one geographical location to another. As they move and cross cultural boundaries, cultures take different forms, some cultural aspects are left out, new ones are picked up and added to the remnants, such that what the characters end up with is a blend of so many cultures that postcolonial critics term hybridity. Migration as we have demonstrated in this study brings about culture shock, culture fissures, and cultural conflicts. All in all, culture alters with the movement of people for they translocate cultural aspects from one society to another.

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