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Shehnaz Kabir

Junior Research Scholar,

Department of English, Jadavpur University,

Kolkata, West Bengal, India.

kabirshehnaz@gmail.com

Placing the “Other”: An Understanding of the Sense of Placelessness in V. S. Naipaul’s *The Enigma of Arrival*

Abstract: The notions of time guiding and controlling human activity, behaviour and experience has been overpowered by spatial structures. The indentured labour trade ensuing from the Slavery Abolition Act 1833 resulted in mass exodus from the Indian subcontinent, forming the Indo-Caribbean diaspora. In understanding the socio-politically marginalised communities, it is of utmost importance to acquire an understanding of the relationship between such displaced individuals and the space they inhabit. Whether, it is a rural or an urban setting is a question of secondary status, since the place of a diasporic settlement transforms it into a space for struggle, emancipation and reclamation. An engaging discourse is created out of the hybrid culture emerging from resistance and subversion of a canonical set of doctrines.

Key Words: Indenture, Land, Placelessness, Rural, Space

“That idea of ruin and dereliction, of out-of-placeness, was something I felt about myself, attached to myself” — *The Enigma of Arrival* (Naipaul).

A place comes into existence only after a particular space is discovered and inhabited, creating personal and collective memories, cultural and material narratives, and historical

legends. Individuals residing in a place for a long period of time make it their 'home' and being displaced, creates a sense of homelessness. The migration of indentured labourers from the British colonies to the plantation estates in the Caribbeans led to an intriguing discourse of placelessness and emplacement. An individual once uprooted from his/her homeland and placed in a foreign milieu, instantly takes the position of the 'other' and pushed to the periphery of society. This marginalization makes them camouflage their history of origin, lineage and indigenous culture rather than celebrating them. V.S. Naipaul's autobiographical work, *The Enigma of Arrival*, is written from the point of view of a double-diasporic personality, with whom the sense of placelessness has become deeply ingrained in the unconscious. Naipaul belonged to the family of emigrants from India to Trinidad, who relocated himself in England and traveled vastly before finally, settling down in the urban

England, Wiltshire. In a state of constant flux in terms of home, identity, culture, environs, he ultimately finds a sense of belonging in a bucolic setting, rather than a city. This feeling of at-homeness in the rural bucolic setting is a direct reflection of his diasporic condition; displaced from the centre of one's native land and being relocated in the margin of a new social structure. Naipaul finds peace and tranquility in the pastoral district of England, instead of a cityscape.

Before the titular event of 'arrival' in London, is a long, strenuous passage from the Port of Spain. His first experience of a journey by air gives him an exclusive and unusual opportunity to get a bird-s-eye-view of his childhood island-nation. The vantage position inside the aircraft had illuminated, "a landscape of clear pattern and contours, absorbing all the roadside messiness, a pattern of dark green and dark brown, like camouflage, like a landscape in a book, like the landscape of a real country" (Naipaul). It reveals a confluence of emotion between Naipaul and Michel de Certeau. In his essay, "Walking in the City" (Certeau), de Certeau is standing atop the World Trade Center, allowing him a cartographic view of the city

of Manhattan, with its logical criss-cross of roads, the movement of traffic, significant public places, the outline of the sea and the skyscrapers below him. This panoptic view gives him omnipresence and lends him a false sense of power. He almost seems to have been uplifted from his fellow beings below him, who are still engaged in the daily regime, and feels a sense of superiority. Very similar to how Naipaul feels leaving behind his immigrant country and flying off to the land of his dreams, ambitions and higher civilization. As his entire “clan” (Naipaul) had come to see him off at the makeshift airport in Port of Spain, he feels being unchained from his ancestry. Despite, travelling miles away from the land and culture he detested and reaching the place of his fantasy, there is a perpetual infiltration of the past into his present — his autochthonous ancestry, memories of the plantation estates and his travelogues. As an insider, he finds his “Firstspace” (Soja) to be convoluted and revolting, but zooming out displays a distinct pattern of the landscape, which makes him feel as if it is an alien space. The topography of his homeland, which has always appeared to him as a ghettoized topoi, now seems to be carefully designed, organized and somewhat, appealing to his erudition. The sugar plantations appear as expensive rugs laid out below him over extensive chunks of land, the residential houses occupy very little space, the vegetation on swamplands seems to be casting a shadow over the water bodies, providing shelter from the tropical heat and the various natural landscapes spread out bestow a cityscape conforming more to that land of his dreams he is flying towards. But one cannot bring about or witness the transformation occurring in a place unless they inhabit it — “pedestrian movements form one of these 'real systems whose existence in fact makes up the city.' They are not localized; it is rather they that spatialize” (Certeau). The author was never able to appreciate or accept his “Firstspace” which, according to Soja is the socially constructed and empirically mapped space surrounding us. It was only by living in Trinidad, Orinoco that he has observed the exploitation taking place in

the plantation estates and the unhygienic living conditions which makes him repulsive towards the country of his upbringing.

But man is no longer a unidirectional creature, rooted to a fixed spot; in the era of ‘world wide web’ man has also become a complex network of socio-political relations. The two French polymaths, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, collaborated on elucidating the pedagogy of ‘rhizome’ which fundamentally denotes multiplicity and heterogeneity, upholding the very crux of diasporic existence — “[t]he rhizome connects any point to any other point, and its traits are not necessarily linked to traits of the same nature;...It has neither beginning nor end, but always a middle (milieu) from it grows and which it overflows...The rhizome is an anti-genealogy” (Guattari). In a way, the rhizomatic existence is not a representation or mere imitation of a prototype, since a rhizome is an original pattern rather than a strict, rigid sketch. The narrator essentially being a modern man has come to acquire a tolerance and assimilation towards a multi-cultural, multi-lingual and multi-ethnicity, by way of which has acquired a rhizomorphic character. Going back to his roots, back at Trinidad to observe the funeral rites, he realizes “[w]e had made ourselves anew. The world we found ourselves in — the suburban houses, with gardens, where my sister’s farewell ceremony had taken place — was one we had partly made ourselves, and had longed 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” (Naipaul). There is always a possibility of rupture or stagnation but being a cultural anthropologist, the rhizome will keep shifting and evolving in order to annex new territories.

The (UN) conscious attempt to remain obscure and aloof is evident in most displaced people and it is often seen that these dislocated individuals pool together to form small communities. As a result, it is easier for them to feel associated with individuals with similar distant individuals. Naipaul had only heard about his landlord in Wiltshire, never meeting or speaking with him personally, except for a few brief occasions when they cross paths during

their evening walks. These small encounters with his own landlord made him so fraught with anxiousness that he could never clearly register his physiognomy and gathered an impression of him being a benign man. But he was able to see the flip side to the landlord's character when he learnt about his privileged upbringing and gradual mental and emotional degradation in his later years. Naipaul felt an immediate camaraderie with his landlord due to, "(h)is wish to be unseen by me was matched by my wish not to be seen by him" (Naipaul). All of a sudden, he could identify himself with the landlord and his manor which, "best expressed his character" (Naipaul). Hence, the space of the house symbolized the mental consciousness and essence of the landlord and later on, the author inhabiting it. Space has no inherent structure, but the imbued consciousness creates an intimacy. The house, being concealed by the rich natural vegetation from the human eye, exuberate the quintessential placelessness felt by the author and the landlord, and provided a cache for these isolated souls. A mutual correlation takes place, whereby, the inhabitant is defined by the habitation and vice-versa — "Bonds between individuals (or social groups) and places constitute part of the personal identity of those individuals (or the identity of the social group)" (Long). The intimate association between man and nature creates markers or souvenirs, so to speak, characteristic of the inhabitant and the symbiosis between them. This kind of a guilded relationship with one's land is more commonly viewed in an agrarian surrounding, as seen with Jack's cottage and his father-in-law; the old man preferred walking on the muddy pathways, rather than the new concrete roads, making deep footprints, cutting and stacking hay, covering the barbed fences with blue plastics. Working silently and passionately on his own land in a slow pace, independent of the human notion of time and place; as stated by Bergson that, "duration and succession belong not to the external world, but to the conscious mind" (Bergson). An otherwise, aged and withered man, he looked vigorous only while carrying out such strenuous labour, as if acquiring energy from the land itself. When he dies, the news is relayed to the narrator not through Jack or the locals,

rather through the land he used to work upon — “He had died. There had been no one to record the fact publicly, to pass the news on. And long afterwards, on the fences growing older themselves, those plastics wraps or pads continued to bleach and shred away” (Naipaul). Two disparate, yet equally crucial man-space relationships are seen here; firstly, a corporeal, earthly kinship; second, being a more psychological connection, as seen between the author/landlord and the house — “This mental connection with place is no less important as a form of place maintenance than activity enactment, despite the current legal processes of Native Title proof attempting to only recognize the latter mode” (Long).

The space of travel routes has been a significant space for navigating the journey of material and cultural apparatus. The narrator’s journey from the Port of Spain to Puerto Rico and then to New York via airplane also captures the ethnic journey of the East and West Indian Hindu heritage. The “indelible mauve pencil” (Naipaul) which is used by high officials in Trinidad, later replaced by the Pan American pen offered by the air hostess; a few bananas packed as a snack that had started reeking due to over ripening; and the roasted chicken, demonstrates that “the writer of the diary was ending his day like a peasant, like a man reverting to his origins” (Naipaul).

Edward Soja’s “Thirdspace” (Soja) is “filled with an expanding roster of struggles based not just on race, gender, and class but also on sexuality, age, and nation, region, nature, empire, and colony”. When Naipaul is placed in a foreign place, he is acutely aware of the change of disposition and the manner in which he is perceived in this new place — “Already the light had changed; the world had changed. The world had ceased to be colonial, for me; people had already altered their value” (Naipaul). Back in Orinoco he was envied by his fellow Trinidadians, winning an Oxford scholarship, but in the city of New York he is a dark-skinned man from an indentured background, migrating to the heart of the British Empire. He is immediately transferred into a “Thirdspace” which accommodates the social injustices and

exploitation undergone by his ancestors. This new place represents a particular geo-political identity and becomes constrictive towards specific categories of identity, since, identity and place are both interconnected, following the social conceptualization. This awareness of being perceived as the 'other' makes one draconian towards people belonging to other marginal communities and dissociate from them. On his way to the New World to mould a new reputation, a Negro man was offered to share cabin with the author and an open condemnation towards the racial status takes place as the narrator feels "I didn't want the Negro to be with me, for the very reasons the Negro had given" (Naipaul). In their own nation, they would probably maintain a neighbourly or at least, a cordial relation, but in the White Man's land, each has been pushed to the periphery. Thus, the 'body' becomes a locus of social status imbued with cultural entity. This textualization of the 'body' is also apparent in the narrator's attitude towards the waitress of his boardinghouse. The prejudice and notions harbored for the occident as being decadent is projected towards the waitress, whom he sexualizes owing to her supposed frivolous nature.

Space is a birthplace of human desire. The narrator had spent a significant part of his childhood and adolescent years in trying to excel in literary academics, so as to, achieve the Oxford scholarship. In doing so, he had created extensive, graphic images of the British countries from his readings of British novelists. By drawing inspiration from the images of Dickens' description of London, he was able to create "a city or fantasy which everyone could reconstruct out of his own materials" (Naipaul). This conceived or imagined space resembles Soja's "Secondspace" (Soja), which a dominant mental space, is created out of personal longing and a form of symbolic or perceived rendering. He had arrived in London with all his ideal notions and fantasies assembled from the advertisements, pictures on milk cans, English and French movies and his readings of Dickens, Aldous Huxley, Sherlock Holmes, Thomas Hardy and others. Neither did the winter of England offer the freezing chill he had expected,

so as to put on his pullover, specially bought and carried in great anticipation. Unfortunately, he could not interface with the actual space which he had built and lived in his dreams. Once the place metamorphosed from the “Secondspace” to “Firstspace”, it seemed to lose the romance, strangeness and an unfamiliarity was hurled towards him with each passing moment, and the passion he had felt while reading English novels or watching French movies, ceased to exist.

Naipaul was able to attain and inhabit the “Thirdspace” only when he arrives at Wiltshire. This “Thirdspace” is what Soja defines as an amalgamation of the empirical and conceptual spaces; it encompasses the real and cognitive spaces and transforms it into a composite spatial mode which transcends the experienced, the imaginative and the conceptual. Reflecting Yi Fu Tuan’s notion regarding ‘space’ as a symbol of freedom while ‘place’ providing a sense of security, at-homeness and familiarity — “for that loss, for having no place of my own, this gift of the second life in Wiltshire, the second, happier childhood as it were, the second arrival at a knowledge of natural things, together with the fulfillment of the child’s dream of the safe house in the wood” (Naipaul). The narrator finds an emplacement in this pastoral village, despite having dreamt of living in the urban cityscape of London. This literary topos of the idyllic countryside of England, which is half-known to him, unveils a sparsely populated, engaging rural wilderness. The village of Stonehenge seemed to have a hypnotic effect on the narrator as he walked on the winding, uneven pathway which took him, “from midway or a different time, the farmyard with Jack’s cottage at the bottom of the valley” (Long). He offers a picturesque description of Jack’s cottage, containing old, worn-out farming machineries, moss covered haystacks, few geese and a fenced garden. But what strikes accord between the narrator and that rustic landscape is the Jack and the cottage were “among ruins, among superseded things” (Naipaul), but Jack, himself was a newcomer, an allogenuous individual, similar to the narrator. Jack’s cottage is created through “an interaction process

involving mutual accommodation between people and the environment” (Long). Minute details such as, his backyard being used as an entrance, while his front garden turned into a geese plot, the moss area around the fence with an overgrowth of wild plants, all signify the idiosyncratic interaction between Jack and his land. But a space that is defined by an individual endures as long as the individual survives — “When he wasn’t there to do these things, they weren’t done; there was only a ruin” (Naipaul). The concept of ruin is brought to light only after Jack’s demise. Being allogeous people inhabiting and transposing a space is nothing more than leaving behind a dereliction— “Now I, an outsider, was altering the appearance of the land a little, doing what I had been aware of others doing, creating a potential ruin” (Naipaul). But a ruin is an ideal space for the foundation of a new world or a “heterotopia” (Foucault). Jack’s cottage was built on an abandoned junkyard and previously a church had stood on this site of wreckage “[b]ecause the world – in places like this - is never absolutely new; there is always something that has gone before” (Naipaul). The new workers who had come from the cities to work on the farm estates also built their shelter on the demolished homes of the previous farmers. In this idyllic village, around the narrator’s house, various “heterotopias” (Foucault) grew and came into existence — “The enclosure belonged to the house that was here before the manor, ... before that, there had been a monastery or nunnery on the site” (Naipaul). These enclosures or plots of land symbolize a piece of earth in protraction and preservation, constantly providing a harbor and adapting in accordance to the inhabitants. The close connection between man and land is integral to the biosphere; the manner in which man utilizes land formulates the locale as an urban or rural setting. A symbiotic relationship transforms a space into a place and with the metamorphosis in the symbiosis, a change comes into effect. This modification retains the past attributes in the form of myths, stories and memories, along with creating whole new topoi for human consumption, with prospects for future usage. In Foucault’s words, “a sort of simultaneously mythic and real contestation of the space in which we live, this description

could be called heterotopology” (Foucault). Unlike, cityscapes, rural locales have a more adaptable region where old sacred spaces are turned into agricultural land and then into residential usage, which gradually become a ruin due to prolonged period of abandonment after migration of locals to urbanized spaces. Naipaul describes a heterotopic image where, “religious men or women of another age, renouncers of the world perhaps, pampered people, possibly also half prisoners, ..., busy with peasant labor turning over the heavy, rich black earth” (Naipaul).

In the age of capitalism and technological breakthrough, space is no longer, just a dimension of time, or geographic paraphernalia. Displaced individuals exhibit a greater sensitivity towards the landscape, owing to their flexible positions of an endogenous, exogenous and allogeous status, simultaneously. Hence, suppressed narratives of emplacement, and physiological, social and mental spaces have occupied a center stage.

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