

The Theme of Exile in Naipaul's Fiction

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In the 20th century no one has gone to Naipaul's lengths to cultivate such an emphatic link between the literary theme of exile and his personal literary, nor has anyone so consistently played off that connection in the body of his or her work. Naipaul is generally considered as the most comprehensively uprooted of twentieth century writers and the most bereft of national affiliations. He is regarded as one of the greatest writers of the theme of exile. Naipaul's moralistic writing can be seen as a process of identity recovery undergoing a series of transformations: he denies or negates his Caribbean homeland, adopts a stage of mimicry in England searches for his cultural roots in India, and finally reconstructs his identity out of his multi-cultural particularity and uniqueness. His writing career comes in four stages: 1) alienation 2) colonial predicament 3) cultural heritage in India and 4) writing for self-definition. By accepting his homelessness and statelessness he recreates a new identity in exile. He makes a voice not only for himself but also for other marginalized people.

V.S. Naipaul is one of the finest writers of the post- colonial era. Chief among the views on him is the recognition that at his finest, in books as varied as *A House for Mr. Biswas*, *The Loss of EI Dorado* and *The Enigma of Arrival*, Naipaul commands a unique style. Even Derek Walcott, a frequent critic of his ideas, hails him as the finest writer of the English sentence. Nor can one fail to admire Naipaul's faithfulness to exacting standards of productivity. Many readers would concur that *Biswas*, a tragicomic novel of epic scope delivered at age twenty nine, remains his most remarkable work. Nothing since has equalled the inventiveness and emotional generosity of that homage to his father's misfortunes in the straightened circumstances of colonial Trinidad.

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generalized as “alienated”: haunted by a global homeless that is inseparably geographical, existential, and literary”.(52)

Naipaul has been successful in fashioning and sustaining an autobiographical persona who is accepted at face value as a permanent exile, a refuge, a homeless citizen of the world and an international writer. In the 20th century no one has gone to Naipaul’s lengths to cultivable such an emphatic link between the literary theme of exile and his personal literary, nor has anyone so consistently played off that connection in the body of his or her work.

Almost all the indigenous peoples of the Caribbean were exterminated European colonists. Contemporary Caribbeans are descended from introduced populations. The displacement of Naipaul and other such writers to England (mostly in the 1950’s) can be read as a response, several generations later, to the extraordinary violence of that ancestral exile that entailed suffering the middle passage, or in the case of Naipaul’s forefathers, crossing the *Kalapani* (black water) as they were shipped out from India to Trinidad as indentured labourers. So, by leaving for England, West Indies writers effectively retraced the second leg of the Triangular trade.

Even writers less dismissive of the Caribbean – Derek Walcott, George Lamming for instance – have considered displacement to the metropolitan as the legitimate even inevitable direction in which an aspirant author would make. Most of the West Indies authors who ended up in England have written in one form or another about a double sense of displacement – a sense of removal from Trinidad, Barbados, Guyana, or Jamaica as superimposed on the earlier uprooting of their captive forbears. “The writer’s alertness to their personal upheavals” notes, Rob Nixon, “as symbolically connected to ancestral movements is often accompanied by a sense of trans-regional affiliations: to the West Indies, England and either Africa or India.”(102)

M.S. Nagarajan describes Naipaul in “The Hindu” “eternally as outsider – an Indian in the West Indies, a West Indian in England, and as described by many a critic, a nomadic intellectual in the nondescript third world”. In short, he is a writer without roots. It was said of Walt Whitman’s that all his life time he was writing one book, *Leaves of Grass*. And so it is with Naipaul. Though one his works, he has been discussing themes of histories, and the most painful dilemmas of the post-colonial societies.

The Nobel Committee singles out Naipaul’s 1987 book, *The Engima of Arrival* as his masterpiece. Driven by a voice that values precision over passion, this largely autobiographical novel is a summary of Naipaul’s themes. The narrator, inspired by, a surrealist painting dreams up a book about “a sunlit sea journey ending in a dangerous classical city” with a hero whose

“feeling of adventure would give way to panic”. (95) As *Engima*’s essayistic sentences unroll, the narrator converts this imagined tale to this biography and his anxieties, any by the end he is reworking the book had imagined. The story has become more personal: the journey, the writer’s journey, the writer defined by his writing discoveries, his ways of seeing. Thus, the story of Naipaul’s life – is an eloquence given to exile.

The themes of homelessness, alienation and dislocation occur in all the novels of Naipaul. Naipaul went through a series of life stages between homelessness, alienation and dislocation occur in all the novels of Naipaul and in his nonfiction. In his early fiction, the Trinidad trilogy including *Miguel Street*, *The Mystic Masseur* and *The Suffrage of Elvira*, the author wields irony in order to manifest the corruption and failure of Trinidad. He cannot bear the stifling atmosphere and must find a position in the world for himself. In *A House For Mr Biswas* and *The Mimic Men*, Naipaul demonstrates the colonial predicament and their struggle for a place in the world stemming from their feeling of alienation, isolation, homelessness rootlessness and placelessness. He even lays bare the more complicated problems of dislocation faced by the exile in *A Bend in the River* and *In a Free State*.

The *Mimic Men* is a fictional autobiography. The narrator, Ranjit Kripal Singh (known as Ralph Singh) is rootless and homeless. The entire novel describes the rootless and ship-wrecked life of Ralph Singh. He is a failed Caribbean politician living in exile in London, lamenting the failure of his life. This constant sense of failure is a regular pattern in the novels of VS Naipaul.

Naipaul’s moralistic writing can be seen as a process of identity recovery undergoing a series of transformations: he denies or negates his Caribbean homeland, adopts a stage of mimicry in England searches for his cultural roots in India, and finally reconstructs his identity out of his multi-cultural particularity and uniqueness. His writing career comes in four stages: 1) alienation 2) colonial predicament 3) cultural heritage in India and 4) writing for self definition. By accepting his homelessness and statelessness he recreates a new identity in exile. He makes a voice not only for himself but also for other marginalized people. Identity, for Naipaul, is not given, but constructed and contingent. *Half a Life* records Naipaul’s exiled life and manifests the ruptures among subjectivity, geography, and language toward multicultural and fluid identity.

Exile has been a major theme in post-colonial literature and no other writer has depicted it more successfully than V.S. Naipaul.

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