

A Search for Identity by a Diasporic Writer: V. S. Naipaul

J. Albert Vincent Paulraj

Assistant Professor in English
Urumbu Dhanalakshmi College,
Kattur, Trichy, Tamilnadu

ABSTRACT

The concept of ethnicity has been used in recent discourses to map the cultural, social, political, and national identities in the colonized world. This present study is an inquiry into V. S. Naipaul's fiction as an experiential recreation of the third world consciousness as it emerges into an anguished awareness of 'unimportance' in the modern world. Naipaul is a multilayered international writer and the question of his identity crops up because of his immigrant background and the displacement it caused. This article analyses three novels by Naipaul: *A House for Mr. Biswas*, *The Mimic Men*, and *Guerillas*, based on the theme of the search for identity.

KEYWORDS

V.S. Naipaul; Diasporic; Identity.

The diasporic writings which are also known as 'expatriate writings' or 'immigrant writings' give voice to the traumatic experiences of the writers owing to the clash of two cultures or the racial discrimination they undergo. Immigration proves a pleasant experience only for a few immigrants who succeed in assimilating themselves into the new geographical, cultural, social, and psychological environment. To most diasporic writers, immigration is not a delectable experience. They often find themselves sandwiched between two cultures. The feeling of nostalgia, a sense of loss, and anxiety to reinvent home obsess them, which finds an expression, consciously or unconsciously in their writings. The relationship between entrapment and freedom remains an open question.

The Modern Man is suffocated by the intellectual scenario of the past and

therefore he is unable to see the present clearly or step towards the future. Naipaul being a diasporic and exploratory writer of contemporary thoughts presents complex contents in a simple existential way. Naipaul insists on the need for a tradition, a myth, and history as the external starting points for the 'self' to become real. Naipaul feels the necessity to define personal identity in one's own life. He adopts determined characters in his fiction who expose their loss of identity in various ways.

In *A House for Mr. Biswas* (HMB), Mr. Mohun Biswas associates the highest achievement of his life with owning a house. Biswas's life is a series of minor disasters, each of which can be seen as his angry rebuttal to an uncongenial society. Born with six fingers in the wrong way, at the inauspicious hour of midnight in the family of a labourer of Indian origin in

Trinidad, Mr. Biswas is not likely to have a bright future. Mr. Biswas's father dies in trying to retrieve his supposedly drowned body from the village pond while he is hiding under the bed at home. The untimely death of his father leaves Mr. Biswas homeless and emotionally bewildered. He lives with his mother who hesitates to bestow her affection on him in the presence of strangers. However, he is lucky to find a mother-substitute in his issueless aunt, Tara who treats him very kindly and helps him in every way. When he goes to paint signs at the store of the Tusli family of Arwacas in Hanuman House, he gets caught while passing a love note to one of the daughters of Mrs. Tulsi called Shama.

Consequently, he is trapped into marriage with Shama by her mother, Mrs. Tulsi, and her uncle. "The world was too small, the Tulsi family too large. He felt trapped." (HMB 91). Mr. Biswas enjoys the physical security provided by his marriage to the Tulsi family but refuses to submit to its orthodox and authoritarian arrangement. But he manages to establish areas of independence for himself, though at times of unemployment and illness he and his family remain tied to the Tusli household for shelter and sustenance. Consequently, the idea of a house of his own becomes an obsession or a symbol of true independence for Mr. Biswas. He bought a house for himself on Sikkim Street in Port of Spain, and at last, is contended to live independently with his family. He dies from a heart attack at the age of forty-six, but he has left his family the independence and a place to belong. "Mr. Biswas had no money or position. He was expected to become a Tulsi. At once he rebelled." (HMB 97).

As long as the Tulsis aid him to 'paddle his own canoe' each attempt to set up his own, fails. Biswas's victory is insignificant but measured against what has happened to the Tulsis, it assumes importance as a precursor of a new order.

For his triumph, Biswas pays with his life: he dies young, prematurely aged, sick, exhausted, and receiving little or no recognition but much humiliation from society for his sincere efforts to organise as per his heart's desire. Indeed, Mr. Biswas is not a conventional hero, but his tenacious faith is truly heroic.

The autobiographical account *The Mimic Men* (TMM), renders the protagonist with both a historical as well as an existential context, and thus redeems the previous static reality as a study of the relationship between political power and human nothingness, oppressor and oppressed, colonizer and colonized. Political power embodies the colonized's dream of power, possession, and self-realisation.

A forty-year-old colonial minister, Ralph Singh, is the narrator of the novel, who lives in exile in a Private Hotel in the Kensington High Street area, London. He writes about his childhood and adulthood, his life in Isabella and England, his political career and marriage, and his education to give shape to his past and to understand himself. By writing his memoirs, Singh tries to reconstruct his identity and impose order on his life, as the place where he was born is associated with disarray. Thus, writing becomes an approach to releasing himself from the pain of being a displaced colonial citizen. Ultimately, through the presentation of the events in his writing, he can take control of the wreckage of his past and shape them into a spiritual and emotional autobiography. "It never occurred to me that the writing of this book might have become an end in itself, that the recording of a life might become an extension of that life" (TMM 244).

However, the irony is that in his search for order, Singh is incapable of following a sequence in his writing. The constant shifts between the past, the present, and the future may also reflect Singh's mental disturbances. By writing his memoirs, Singh tries to impose order on

his life, reconstruct his identity, and get rid of the crippling sense of dislocation and displacement. In other words, Singh is the representative of displaced and disillusioned colonial individuals, and colonization is depicted as a process that takes away their identity, culture, history, and sense of place. Thus, the novel considers the relationship between the socio-political and the psychological consequences of imperialism.

Imaginative, idealistic, romantic Ralph Ranjeet Kirpal Singh, hero of the autobiography *The Mimic Men* playing the game of politics on a larger scale is unable to compromise or withdrew and is forced to leave the country in disgrace. Deprived of all social standards of success (wife, home, money, friends, status, leadership, and children) he experiences a loss of aspiration. His failure as a politician signifies to him the failure of Trinidad to be a nation. The occasions that followed are a blur: of encounters less with individual bodies than with anonymous flesh. Each occasion pressed me deeper down into emptiness, that prolonged sensation of shock with which I was every minute of every day trying to come to terms. (TMM 28)

Nevertheless, political failure and humiliation at home and abroad, exile in London come at the end of a devastating personal failure, each pressing down on his sense of non-existence becomes for Singh the impetus of a life which will deny this death. He bitterly expresses the mimic nature of his life and personality in words that have the overtones of political awareness. Naipaul can establish by contrast the vulnerability which thrusts a man and a nation further into an existing alienation and hence anonymity. He takes politics as a drama and examines its effects on himself but he does not concentrate on his people or the institutions that are established on the island with his assistance. The political reality is a proportionate understanding of self and

Trinidad with the national and international community.

In *Guerrillas* (G), politics and society are non-existent in the accepted sense, so the internal and external, once antithetical, are now analogues. The external world of both novels is as chaotic, disordered, violent, and deranged as their mental landscapes are. Naipaul through the omniscient impersonal narrator creates the personal, individualistic, self-aware, self-centred world of subjective reality. The characters, aware of an external world from which they are detached and free-floating, form a community of the fearful and the lost. The description of Jimmy's house on Jane's and Roche's first visit is by the omniscient narrator. It is exact and reflects the personality of Jimmy as the narrator wishes us to see him. "Sunlight struck full on the terrazzo porch, and the sitting-room caught the glare". (G 24).

The objective world of political and societal reality, as a thing in itself, does not exist in the novel. It is real and meaningful only in so far as it impinges on the experiential awareness of the character and forms the stuff of his subjective existence. Objective reality, mingled with the past and present, with aspiration and fantasy, is distorted and made bizarre. At least the material world (money and automatic living) provides a foothold for survival for people who have exhausted their resources and know their limits. Transcontinental and international travel end in repeated journeys between the ridge, the town, and the Grange in *Guerrillas*.

All the themes of *Guerrillas* which build up a picture of despair and social breakdown are dramatized by the dual consciousness of the narrator: alienation from the land, from society, and self. Jane says, "...The thought came to her as words alone, but within herself, she began to simulate an imaginary scream." (G 163-64).

It dramatizes not only the static drifting society of the idle and the native, ironically claiming to be doers and saviours, but it also becomes a dialogue between the personal past and present as each character examines and exposes himself or the other. He expresses his present despair most truthfully as he realizes the distance between the imagined and the actual self. He is reflective, a person of intellect in search of experiences. Jimmy is imbued with the spirit of self-examination and realizes that all, including

himself, is 'rotten meat' and the will to fight leaves him.

Naipaul suggests that man is not a spiritually aspiring being. He seems rather say that such experience is not a lot of common humanity today but the privilege of a few souls. He relates literature to life to examine the social groups, chaos, tradition, security of life, religion, and the self. He realizes that the core of life can never be taken as a mirage; its truth lies in the search for self-identity. The Discovery of oneself is the full release of knowledge.

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