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Editor: Saikat Banerjee

Editor: Dr. Saikat Banerjee
Assistant Professor, Department of English
Assam Don Bosco University



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The Politics of Otherization and Exile in the Post-colonial Fictions of V.S. Naipaul

Dr. Ghanshyam Pal

Guest Lecturer, HNB Garhwal University,
Srinagar Uttarakhand
&

Prof. Surekha Dangwal

Professor, HNB Garhwal University,
Srinagar Uttarakhand

Abstract - The paper entitled “The Politics of Otherization and Exile in the Post-colonial Fictions of V.S. Naipaul” is an attempt to explore writer’s concern for the subalterns, his philosophy about exile and home, and his diasporic experiences. The socio-cultural perspective has been taken to explore the various cross-currents and ethnic pluralities discussed by the novelist in this research paper. The interdisciplinary approach offers a new dimension to the study of the novels of V.S. Naipaul. A different aspect of Naipaul has been explored in this paper through analysis and criticism. The postmodernist world has seen the emergence of interdisciplinary and cultural studies as the major thrust areas of academic exploration. One of the most relevant aspects of Post-colonial writing is that it forces, interrogates and challenges the authoritative voices of time.

Key words- Subaltern, Exile, Diaspora, Colonialism and Postcolonialism.

The field of Postcolonial Studies has been gaining prominence since the publication of Edward Said’s book, *Orientalism* (1978). The term “postcolonial” became more popular with the appearance of *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (1989) by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin. Since then, the use of terms “Commonwealth” and “Third World” that were used to describe the literature of Europe’s former colonies has become rarer. Although there is considerable debate over the precise parameters of the field and the definition of the term “postcolonial,” in a very general sense, it is the study of the interactions between European nations and the societies they colonized in the modern period.



Concept of the “Other”

The notion of the *Other* has always been an important topic examined by philosophers, anthropologists, and ethnologists. Throughout the years, the *Other* has been described as the quintessence of another individual who was different from the inner self (Sarukkai, 1997). But the recognition of the *Other* has also meant its contact/relationship with the self. In fact the act of “othering” is a manifestation of power relations. When we start describing ourselves as part of a group of people united in a “we”, while other people are constructed as fundamentally different, united in a “they”, we are using a powerful weapon that might serve to delegitimize others. And too often, these distinctions are drawn along the classic axes of discrimination and power differences, like sexuality, gender, ethnicity, race, class and so on. According to Michel Foucault, “othering” is strongly connected with power and knowledge.

When we “other” another group, we point out their perceived weaknesses to make ourselves look stronger or better. It implies a hierarchy, and it serves to keep power where it already lies. Colonialism is one such example of the powers of “othering.” Precisely stated, according to Hall (1996), identity is not only important for its political aspect, but also for its foundation of culture and representation of the individual and the society. In fact, identity, the definition of the *Other* and culture are connected and contribute to the explanation of a specific topic in international relations and cultural diplomacy. According to Hall, “... The most important psychological aspect of culture - the bridge between culture and personality – is the identification process. This process...is most certainly a major impediment to cross-cultural understanding...” (Hall, 240). In other words, by discovering and appreciating the *Other*, people can recognize culture as a tool for fostering mutual understanding, establishing relationships between countries, and promoting social cohesion.

Exile

Edward W. Said in his book *Reflections on Exile* writes in the title essay about exile:

Exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience. It is the unbearable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home; its essential sadness can never be surmounted. And while “it is true that literature and history contain heroic, romantic, glorious, even triumphant episodes in an



exile's life, there are no more than efforts to overcome the crippling sorrow of estrangement...". (Said 5)

The word 'exile' evokes multiple meanings which cover a variety of relationships with the mother country- alienation, forced exile, self imposed exile, political exile and so on. In the Indian context perhaps all meanings are true with the migratory movements having been governed by different reasons at different times of history. Economic reasons governed the movement of indentured labour and of trading communities. John Simpson in *The Oxford Book of Exile* writes that exile "is the human condition; and the great upheavals of history have merely added physical expression to an inner fact (Simpson 2). The non-resident Indian writers have explored their sense of displacement—a perennial theme in all exile literature.

In an interview with Nikhil Padgaonkar for Doordarshan, Edward W. Said reflected on the condition of exile:

I think that if one is an intellectual, one has to exile oneself from what has been given to you, what is customary, and to see it from a point of view that looks at it as if it were something that is provisional and foreign to oneself. That allows for independence—commitment—but independence and a certain kind of detachment (Said 13).

V. S. Naipaul has been identified with a new literary tradition of Indian writing in English, which is stylistically different and less conservative than colonial Indian literature and concerns such issues as hybridity, shifting identity, and "imaginary homelands," a phrase coined by Indian novelist Salman Rushdie (Rushdie 11). One of the most relevant aspects of Post-Colonial writing is that it forces, interrogates and challenges the authoritative voices of time.

V.S. Naipaul's writings are about colonized people who were the victims of the politics of indenture, otherization and exile. His novels take us to the pre-Independence India when coolies in large number were sent to the cotton, sugar and tobacco plantations owned by the imperialists. India was the main source of cheap labor after the abolition of the Negro slavery in 1934. From 1847 to 1917 large number of Indians migrated to many islands and they were called indentured laborers working as slaves in Fiji, Trinidad and other islands. V. S. Naipaul's characters, like Mohun Biswas from *A House for Mr. Biswas* or Ganesh Ramsumair from *The Mystic Masseur*, are examples of



individuals who are generations away from their original homeland, India, but their heritage gives them a consciousness of their past. They become itinerant specimen of the outsider, the unhoused, for the world to see. For them their homeland India is not a geographical space but a construct of imagination. Their predicament can be explained in Rushdie's words: "the past is a country from which we have all emigrated, that its loss is part of our common humanity" (Rushdie 12). The period covered in the novel *A House of Mr. Biswas* is forty seven years of life, from 1905 and 1951. The main changes recorded are the decline of the Hindu culture and the rituals as they undergo the process of "creolisation" and the accompanying changes in attitude. Mr. Biswas himself is caught between the old culture of India and the emerging cross-fertilizations which are dramatized by the departure of Anand and Savi, the children of Biswas. V. S. Naipaul regrets the passing of the old customs and traditions. In *The Middle Passage* Naipaul describes the changes of Trinidad and how it turned into a materialistic society.

Naipaul discusses the issues of dislocations, migrations, exile, the idea of being unanchored and displaced, and the enigma of a displaced coolie. Naipaul is known for last three decades as a writer of exile, the writer in search of place home. An important theme of his books is paradox of freedom. Naipaul's fictional world is located in the inter-play of realistic external situations and personal lives. He writes about democracy, freedom and independence in an ironic style. He presents his view of history as a complex interaction between the individual and circumstances, the collective slave and separate individual, the exploiter and the exploited, the slavery and colonialism. The Swedish Academy stated in its official citation that it honored Naipaul "for having united perspective narrative and incorruptible scrutiny in works that compel us to see the presence of suppressed histories." He got Bennet Award in 1980. William Walsh pays a rich tribute to Naipaul's genius in the following words;

He is engaged with the stress and strains we recognize as crucial in our experience now. His writing is nervous and present. This, together with the mixture in him of creeds, cultures and continents, with his expatriate career, his being able to practice an



art in and of totally dissimilar worlds, all gives him a peculiarly contemporary quality.
(Walsh 1)

Naipaul's life has been one of constant moving about in search of identity and a "resting place for imagination". He used this phrase as his title for the opening chapter in *An Area of Darkness* (1962). There is a unique urge in his novels to find a centre, a fixed place in aesthetic and existential terms. In an extensive interview with *Times Literary Supplement* on September 2, 1994, Naipaul observed thus:

I wanted to deliver the truth, to deliver a form of reality based on what I have observed, seen, experienced. Western writers come from the imperial period without considering themselves imperial writers. They inhabit a world where they do not see the other half or three quarters... I carry many cultures in my head, and these people are much more restricted.(TLS 2).

In a very meaningful statement in *Finding the Centre* he clarifies his quest as a writer to find a centre thus:

A writer after a time carries his world with him, his own burden of experience, a human experience and literary experience (one deepening the other), and I do believe that I would have found equivalent connections with my past and myself wherever I had gone. (Naipaul 2)

Dispossessed ----

V.S. Naipaul presents a consistent image of social reality in the non-Western world, where dispossessed people search for order in their lives. His own search for rootedness expresses the search of many colonial people. He articulates his views of the dispossessed, the former colonial subjects who are seen struggling for identity. In empathic and critical language, Naipaul catalogues the failures of developing societies. The quest for autonomy and form reveals opportunities for self-deception, for seizing the image of a coherent self or the illusion of a just society rather than grasping their essence.



In Naipaul's novels, the West is depicted as an inchoate cluster of culture and technology. Dispossession is a state into which one is born, a fact not of one's own choosing.

V.S. Naipaul and his post-colonial experience

Naipaul's perspective begins with the non-Western person's realization of this state, of the sense of having boundaries drawn around his life by the West. Having sensed this dispossession, the former colonial begins to fantasize, to dream of greater reality, and seeks to create the conditions of liberation. In his major fiction, Naipaul portrays marginalized characters on the basis of race, class, nationality and colour. They are understandable in terms of intersecting dialects of slavery and the impact of imperialism and colonization. Naipaul portrays men who can not construct a coherent self and the reasons for this malady lie deep in the pattern of subordination and existential split suffered by them under a system that recognized no difference, humanly or culturally in its ruthless drive to hegemonize everything. As Peter Hughes has commented:

Above all, because the writing out of the narrative of decline and fall, of disorder and lack of authority, involves, the discovery of a void at the heart of Naipaul's world and it has been discovered through his writings. (Naipaul,31)

Perpetual wandering was a heritage in the lives of Naipaul's father and grandfather. The grandfather, although born in India of a Brahmin family, went to Trinidad as an indentured laborer. He worked as an indentured laborer under the British colonial rule. This migration, thousands of miles away from India to a strange land, resulted in a feeling of alienation and loss of identity. As a young boy in Trinidad, V.S. Naipaul was never in one place long enough to form attachments because his father's assignment as a newspaper reporter kept the family on the move. In describing himself, Naipaul has always maintained that "I have nothing common with the people from Jamaica or the other islands for that matter. I don't understand them." (Naipaul 3).

Even as a third generation Indian in Trinidad, Naipaul never felt at home in the Caribbean. He is ruthlessly critical of the Indian community in Trinidad:



A peasant minded, money minded community, spiritually static because cut off from its roots, its religion reduced to rites without philosophy, set in a materialist colonial society: a combination of historical accidents and a national temperament has turned the Trinidadian Indian into a complete colonial even more philistine than the white. (Naipaul 4)

As a dissector of civilizations, cultures and histories across the world Naipaul has gradually occupied a coveted place along with some of the most celebrated 20th century writers in exploring and interrogating the postcolonial, diasporic and post imperial experiences. Naipaul has earned notoriety for being an unsympathetic, negatively detached writer with an air of hopelessness and void in respect of the societies he has addressed and which have been his subject matter. V.S. Naipaul has written so many fictional and non-fictional books. His first novel *The Mystic Masseur* (1957) describes the career of an imaginative islander who rises through a series of failures as a teacher, a writer, and a masseur to become a successful politician and then ultimately a disillusioned Member of the British Empire. Ganesh Ramsumair belongs to Trinidad. The author has made the claim that the history of Ganesh is, in a way, the history of our times. In each step of his career, the author is satirizing the rise to power of a representative of the people in a country which is about to achieve its independence from British rule.

Naipaul's *A Bend in the River* (1979) explores the multifaceted experiences of a post-colonial world. He deals with contemporary human problems like disintegration of values, social institutions, family relationships, alienation and existential identity problems of modern and foreigner in an outsider society. Metaphorically Naipaul delineates the exiled, migrant, refugee, displaced, up-rooted, expatriate modern man in a complex scenario of ever-changing post modern reality. The era of colonialism in the works of Naipaul appears as a shifting, derailed panorama of lost history and significantly appears in his fiction as an enormous loss of historical and cultural values.

A Bend in the River signifies a post-colonial African text which brings us out of the colonial era of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and presents new found realities of an independent nation ready to



cope up with the new found challenges and predicaments. Also *A Bend in the River* takes us back into the interior of the continent in opposite direction of the journey of slaves in colonial times; and describes Africa through the eyes of a Third world migrant waiting for the tide of history to wash him from his settled place and then displace him from the settlement to some other settlement, ready to be washed again. The whole story appears as a kind of discourse written amidst wars and rebellions under the politics of tooth and claw. The whole journey is long search into the interior of the life which basically holds nothing except savagery and bush. Recently independent states are explored neither through the eyes of colonizers nor the colonized but an exiled refugee Salim. Zebeth, a native merchant uses 'mis' for Salim. Salim explains:

I was mister because I was a foreigner, someone from the far-off coast, and an English speaker; I was mister in order to be distinguished from the other resident foreigners, who were monsieur. (BEND 5)

Salim traces his ancestry to East Coast of Africa and his ancestors came from India. He runs a small departmental store in a war torn and ravished town in the interior of Africa at the bend of the river. His ancestry can be traced back to Gujarat in India from where his forefathers migrated in search of better prospects and future. Salim nostalgically recalls his life on East coast with three slave families and the big house of his grandfather. Indar's family is also migratory from Punjab in India and his grandfather belongs to railway contact labourer. Though Salim and Indar have different orbits but Salim is somewhat paranoid towards Indar. Indar's richness and his casual style upset Salim to great extent but still their friendship is of long standing.

The shop that Salim owns is almost gifted to him by his uncle Nazruddin at a throw away price. It is a small departmental store which Salim runs assisting the natives with few articles of daily use. Nazruddin gave it to Salim during political troubles when his family migrated to Uganda to invest in the cotton business there. Nazruddin sees Salim as his future son-in-law. Salim took up this early opportunity because he has nowhere else to go and this shop is somewhere for him. Salim is here not by choice but by chance. Ali (Metty) is his companion at this new place. Salim feels as an outsider



among natives and tries to reconcile with the situation here but he fails. The lycee of father Huismans and the lycee boys especially Ferdinand and his blue blazer companions are viewed by Salim as rooted civilians who constantly haunt his consciousness. Salim views himself in the mirror of these natives and find his position as fragile and frail. Displacement and rootlessness disturbs him. The town seems to him just as bush. The Big Man, symbol of a jingoistic dictator Mobuto, sees the New Domain as a symbol of progress but for Salim the New Domain is just the reminiscent of the dead civilization.

The New Domain which country boasts is ironically contrasted as the scholars are still exported from Europe. Through this Naipaul tries to prove that Europeans are superior to natives. Actually the Big Man tries to create a miniature Europe in the centre of the continent within the bush culture and thus attempts to civilize Africa is actually the trace of the European hegemony over the undeveloped countries. For Salim past is simply past; and he credits his own sense of history to the works written by Europeans:

Without Europeans, I fell, all our past would have been washed away, like the scuff-marks of fishermen on the beach outside our town. (*BEND 6*)

Naipaul's most impressive achievement is *A House for Mr. Biswas* (1961) depicting the life and difficulties of Mr. Mohun Biswas in an alien environment. Mr. Biswas belongs to a Brahmin family and his ancestors came from India. He faces so many physical, economic, residential and identity, existential problems throughout his life. This novel depicts Mr. Biswas as an individual. Mr. Biswas is the youngest of Raghu and Bipti's children. After his father Raghu's death he lives with his mother in Pagotes where they are given some accommodation by Tara, Bipti's sister. Here they live in bad conditions. He does not like this place:

It would have pained Mr. Biswas if anyone from the school saw where he lived, in one room of a mud hut in the back trace. He was not happy there and even after five years considered it a temporary arrangement. Most of the people in the hut remained



strangers, and his relation with Bipti were unsatisfying because she was shy of showing him affection in a house of strangers. (HB 7)

After having failed in his effort to establish himself either as an assistant to Pandit Jairam or as an assistant to Bhandat at the rum shop, he marries Shama. He is a sign painter in Tulsi store. Mrs. Tulsi and Seth do not pay him for this. At Hanuman House he finds that it would be necessary for him to lead a life of servility and of utter subordination. As a self respected and independent minded man, he immediately rebels against the system which demands his unquestioning obedience. The Tulsi sons-in law are mere cogs in the machinery of the organization of Hanuman House. He rebels against Tulsi's authority and all his life struggles to for identity. When Gobind asks him to be a driver on the estate; Mr. Biswas replies:

Give up sign painting? And my independence? No boy My motto is: paddle your own canoe.(HB 8)

Mr. Biswas's wish for his own house is a symbol of his search for independent self. This shows his urge to belong. He is physically weak. Economically he faces so many problems. His ambition to be a well known reporter and to own a house would be a symbol of security in an oppressive environment. He gets job with a newspaper "Trinidad Sentinel". At the end of the novel he purchases his own house in Sikkim Street. He borrows money from Ajodha. The debt is now a heavy weight on his mind. Then he gets two heart attacks. He dies at the age of 46. Mr. Biswas feels alienated with the society in which he is living. He has no feeling of being a part of that society. This unbelongingness makes him miserably rebellious. Through Mr. Biswas's various associations and experiences with peoples in different positions and places, Naipaul gets a chance to portray the problems of diasporic people. The various lodging places have all their drawbacks. Hanuman House is authoritarian and oppressive in its organization; the houses at "The Chase" and "Green Vale" are unbearable burdens because of the uncertainties surrounding their construction. Briefly stated, *A House for Mr. Biswas* is a novel about a man trying to make his mark on the diversified Trinidadian



society. It is a highly penetrating study of the fear of anonymity in a society that offers only failures and discontent. It reveals the restlessness and schizophrenia of the descendants of the new world.

The protagonists of Naipaul suffer because of lack of stability, security, and belongingness. They don't enjoy happiness and tranquility. They feel orphaned, defrauded and at a bay. Alienated from their immediate environment, feeling lonely, isolated and unhappy, his characters constantly search for identity and belongingness. Naipaul has given us two important protagonists who are struggling against mercantile and foreign environment for their existence. Mr. Mohun Biswas tries in his own life for his independent identity. His urge for house symbolizes his urge to belong. He feels very much alienated with the society in which he is living. He has no feeling of being a part of that society. Similarly, Salim, protagonist, narrator in *A Bend in the River* is a young man. In this novel he goes from one place to other. He feels very much alienated and lonely. Not only Salim in this novel, Indar, Mahesh, Nazruddin, Father Huismans all experience diasporic problems.

The notion of exile is pertinent to any study of post-colonial literature. V.S. Naipaul has presented exile and outsider characters Salim, Mahesh, Indar, Nazruddin, Raymond etc. in *A Bend in the River*. They are living in Africa but they don't like Africa and African natives. Mahesh says to Salim:

You must never forget, Salim, that they are malins ... The people here we malins because the English words he might have used- 'wicked', 'mischievous', 'bad minded'- were not right. The people here were malins the way a dog chasing a lizard was malin, or a cat chasing a bird. The people were "malins" because they lived with the knowledge of men as prey. (BEND 63).

Ferdinand, son of a village witch Zebeth, is displaced from the outset, not only because of his tribal background, but also because of his having to make the transition from villager to "new man of Africa". Salim says "He could never be simple. The more he tried, the more confused he became." (61)



To try to overcome his identity problems, he successfully does several roles. At the end of the novel, after spending time at town polytechnic and an administrative cadet in the capital, he is appointed commissioner for the area around the town at the bend in the river. When Salim is arrested he helps him in his release. His own vision of a millenarian future has way to nihilism and the feeling that everyone is “going to hell”. For Ferdinand and his fellow Africans there appears to be no escape route, survival through fight is an avenue which is only open to those who are outsiders in the symbolic hell of the African interior.

Salim later also expresses his need for a nation of his own so as to protect him from Africans. He says that he is unprotected. He has no family, no flag, and no fetish. It is worth noticing that they do not feel the need to claim national identities until the collapse of the Empire. The reason is that they, in spite of their lack of a nation of their own, still can lead quite affluent lives within the Indian Community in East Africa under the European flag. However, with the collapse of the Empire, they begin to be conscious of the weakness and unprotectedness brought about by the lack of national identities, aware that they belong neither to Africa nor to the area of Indian Ocean. Salim says:

Africa was my home, had been the home of my family for centuries. But we came from the east coast, and that made the difference. The coast was not truly African. It was an Arab-Indian-Persian-Portuguese place, and we who lived there were people of the Indian Ocean. True Africa was at our back. Many miles of scrub or desert separated us from the upcountry people; we looked east to the lands with which we traded- Africa. India, Persia. These were also the lands of our ancestors. But we could no longer say that we were Arabians or Indians or Persians; when we compared ourselves with these people, we felt like people of Africa. (*A Bend in the River* 24)

Salim, though having lived in East Africa since his family departed from Gujarat in northwestern India in the distant past, cannot be counted as an African because the Eastern part of Africa is actually populated by immigrants from Indian Ocean. The isolation from the African world may be the possible reason for their failure to be integrated into the African world. However, neither



their frequent connection with the traders from Indian Ocean nor their Asian origin make them “Arabian or Indians or Persians”. From this perspective, they are characterized as minority groups who are always trapped in-between’s and whose multiple geographies of identity exceed the boundaries of nation-states. Salim’s disclosure of the lack of his national identity illustrates the complicated meaning of “home” which is more than its literal meaning mentioned before. Crucially, then “home” is not a neutral place but is embedded within unequal power relations. According to George Robertson the notion of home is built in the basic pattern of select exclusions and inclusions, which “are grounded in a learned sense of a kinship that is extended to those who are perceived as sharing the same blood, race, class, gender, or religion”(George 9). Brought up in the diasporic context, Salim and Indar have to, in their way, grapple with the problematic of home operated in the networks of unequal power relations. The newly emergent national identity, “Africans,” is a threat to Salim and Indar, which prompts them to have desire for a nation of their own so as to protect them from being robbed of their property and from being left at the mercy of Africans. Thus, they pin their hope on their community. But they find out that unlike the Europeans, who were preparing to get out, or to fight, or to meet the Africans halfway. Their community continued to live as we had always done, blindly.

Conclusion

Most of the major novels of V.S. Naipaul are replete with the happenings of social realities, longings and feeling of belonging. *A Bend In The River*, *A House For Mr. Biswas* and *The Middle Passage* all these novels abound in the same tragic tale of woe and strife from different angles. The novels of Naipaul provide an understanding as to how a settlement was established, illustrated the daily conduct of trade, explores the relationship between diverse people and also depicts the conflicting and heartrending emotions felt by a particular migrant community.

The main focus of the paper has been to explore the various problems of Indians who were treated as the “Other” by the colonizers. V.S. Naipaul has explored their sense of displacement, their multiculturalism, they have given more poignancy to the exploration by dealing not only with a



geographical dislocation but also a socio-cultural sense of displacement. Their concerns are global concerns as today's world is afflicted with the problems of immigrants, refugees, and all other exiles.

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