

Cultural Disintegration In V.S. Naipaul's Novels

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1. Introduction

In addition to upsetting the cultural ties of the colonized people, colonization also led to their uprooting and displacement. There was a massive transplantation of population between the colonies which separated the colonized from their native lands and forced them to accommodate themselves in alien surroundings. This shift of population between the colonies was a deliberate measure taken to make the colonial societies heterogeneous, as homogeneous ones could have posed a political threat to the colonizers. This mixing up of various peoples created grave problems both at the individual and social levels. The intense alienation and sense of homelessness that such colonized individuals experienced may be ascribed to their displacement in the alien environment. On the other hand, social complications like antagonism between different races as well as miscegenation through mixed marriages have also arisen out of it. Those born out of mixed parentage find themselves in the excruciating state of betweenity. Their identities remain clouded in uncertainty because of the complex amalgam that constitutes them.

Cultural colonization accomplished what military conquest alone could not have achieved for the colonizers. It paved its way into the minds of the colonized and made them complaisant victims. This colonization of the minds maimed the psyche of the colonized in a severe way. It robbed them of all originality and instead, instilled in them a dependency complex. In fact the sense of alienation that the colonized experience and their mimicking tendency have their roots in the feeling of inferiority that was methodically ingrained in the psyche of the colonized through cultural colonization. The crippling effect of this complex manifests itself in the post-independence period in the inability of the former colonized people to stand independently on their own and in their continuing dependence on the West for ideas and technology. Intellectual as well as financial dependence of the Third World countries on the West has made them vulnerable to neocolonialism.

The relation between literature and the historical phenomenon of imperialism has been a long and intimate one. As Edward Said points out, narrative fiction has had an especially intimate association with Empire. Crucial issues related to imperialism have been reflected, debated and even decided in the narrative. It has served as a potent medium for Third World intellectuals as well, to voice their version of the experience. Such responses to the encounter that have come from the former colonized countries form the corpus of postcolonial literature, and are interesting as they carry direct first-hand experience of the encounter.

2. The Problem

Though the novels of Naipaul that have been studied in relation to the presentation of the postcolonial situation, naturally fall into two phases of Naipaul's literary career on the basis of their depiction of colonial and ex-colonial societies, we find that they are distinct in some important respects. The first four novels that fall into the first phase of Naipaul's literary career, draw mainly on Naipaul's boyhood experiences and hence the autobiographical element predominates. In these novels Naipaul is simply recording his responses to the world and fulfilling the recording function of the artist. He has not as yet begun to analyse the responses and come to any conclusions about them. The works belonging to the second phase, however, draw on Naipaul's travel writing and are analytical in approach. Naipaul has come to fresh realizations about the novel as a form of social inquiry with the purpose of imposing a vision on the world. In the works belonging to the second phase, Naipaul quests for a meaning beyond the aesthetic.

As Naipaul claims, the first four novels especially *A House for Mr. Biswas*, are intensely personal to him. These novels were the outcome of his efforts to come to terms with his own displacement and understand his place in the world. To Naipaul, writing is an activity that leads to self-discovery. The act of recording his ancestry helped him in establishing his home identity by imposing an order on his jumbled experiences. His major preoccupation in these novels is the disintegration of the East Indian community and the themes of mimicry and identity crisis emerge out of it. We also notice a thematic linkage between novel to novel which serves to re-create the social background of Trinidad. *The Mystic Masseur* focuses on rural Trinidad, *The Suffrage of Elvira* deals with its multiracial aspect and *Miguel Street* completes the picture by focusing on the urban picaresque world of Port of Spain. Together, the novels up to *A House for Mr. Biswas* trace the social history of the East Indian community in Trinidad.

3. The Argument

The novels throw light on the crucial role played by Western education and the American presence during the Second World War, in the cultural disintegration of the East Indians. We note that Western education created a duality in the lives of the East Indians. This duality is clearly evident in the character of Ganesh who follows the traditional profession of a mystic but wears Western clothes and makes use of Western science for the spiritual cure of his clients. Naipaul brings out the positive as well as the negative effects of the influence. On the one hand we witness Ganesh's intelligent use of Western science to cure Hector, a spiritually troubled client of his, and on the other we see cultural schizophrenics like Ramlogan, who seek to legitimise their actions in both cultural frames as the need arises.

The cultural disintegration of the East Indians takes place gradually through a process of seepage and makes itself apparent in their dress codes, their food habits and their customs. Ganesh's dress contradicts his profession. The same is true of Dhaniram, the pundit in *Elvira*. In the case of language too, we see that Hindi has been so completely replaced by English that the East Indians' use the latter even while performing traditional rituals. Similarly in the matter of food habits also, it is seen that the Western alternatives have become as much a part of the East Indians' diet as the normal Indian one. In matters pertaining to religion and traditional customs as well, we find that the East Indians have had to make compromises. In *A House for Mr. Biswas*, when Hari, the family pundit dies there is no one to take his place as the younger generations have received Western education and lack the training necessary to become a pundit. As there is no one to take Hari's place, Mrs. Tulsi's faith yields and she starts following Christian religious rituals.

If Western education exerted a corrosive influence on the bastions of East Indian culture from within, the Second World War acted as an external catalytic force in the process of cultural disintegration of the East Indians by boosting up the economy and ushering in modernizing forces. It is only after the arrival of Americans that Ganesh in *Masseur* and Tuttle and Govind in *A House for Mr. Biswas* become prosperous. Ganesh's prosperity is reflected in the complete change that comes over Leela, his wife, who begins to emulate the externals of upper-class respectability. Govind's affluence shows in his new suits and Turtle's in the lorry he now owns. In *Street* Edward's dress and mannerisms undergo a change soon after he starts working for the Americans. In *The Suffrage of Elvira*, Naipaul's main intention is to show how unsuitable the borrowed institution of democracy is for multi-racial Trinidad. However, the novel demonstrates the general cultural confusion that prevails in *Elvira* and adds fresh insights to the theme of disintegration. We note that pecuniary gains are given priority and even traditional customs are compromised for its sake.

In *Street* and *A House for Mr. Biswas* Naipaul focuses on the related issue of the identity crisis of the East Indians. The identity of a people rests on their cultural moorings. However, when the very base on which identity anchors itself is destroyed, an acute identity crisis is experienced. In the overall context of the West Indies it is seen that because of the heterogeneous and fragmented nature of these societies, which are basically transplanted ones, a unitary identity becomes an impossibility. It is against such a context that the East Indians' coming into consciousness has to be viewed. At first, there is a tendency to surrender the "self to the "other" or the colonizing culture. In the limited and mediocre environment of colonial societies the colonized often resort to mimicry. In order to escape from the mediocre environment, migration to London becomes inevitable. Ganesh in *Masseur* and the

narrator in *Street* take the escape route to London. However, it is those like Biswas in *A House for Mr. Biswas*, who stay back and put up a struggle against the hostile environment that are finally successful in carving an authentic identity. The theme of cultural disintegration receives a detailed treatment in *A House for Mr. Biswas* which represents three generations of East Indians. The collapse of the Tulsi Household symbolizes the ultimate breakdown of the East Indian community.

4. Conclusion

This study is based on Naipaul's crusade against all colonial powers because of the relevance Naipaul's themes bear on the contemporary world. His works throw light on the postcolonial and post-imperial realities that have shaped the contemporary societies and thus provide important insights relating to them. It is hoped that a study of Naipaul's novels may lead to a better understanding of the problems that face the post-imperial generations. Naipaul is a writer who has always felt physical distance from his subject necessary for an objective presentation of his material. Just as his first four novels had been written in London, in order to write about England he felt the need to refresh himself by travel. Travel indeed proved to be an important stimulus for the further development of his art. For, it not only helped Naipaul to overcome his uncertainties but also enabled him to find his vision in *A House for Mr. Biswas*.

In colonial societies, the crisis of identity of the colonized often seems to over-ride all other considerations. In the context of *Miguel Street* this crisis takes on an even more acute form, for the very basis on which identity anchors itself was completely destroyed by colonization. The social identity of a people is rooted in their culture, while at the individual level; it is determined by personal achievements. In order to experience a "wholeness," it is necessary to fuse the individual and the social consciousness. However, the paradox of the modern predicament lies in the fact that owing to the fragmentation of societies, the affinity that was once felt between the two has now been broken. In the case of artificially created colonial societies like Trinidad, this split becomes even more pronounced.

Thus for Naipaul too, like his protagonists, the new-found freedom is fraught with anguish, it nevertheless is a positive movement towards a genuine Third World consciousness. Taking an overview of Naipaul's contribution to literature we may conclude that his position as a writer of international repute and universal import is assured because his works have become paradigmatic of all the twentieth century experience of deracination and exile.

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