

## V.S Naipaul in the Line and Light of Colonial Culture

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**Abstract - ‘Identity’ in the terms of, nationality, language, and the rights as a true citizen of the country one habitat and the culture- remains one of the most- urgent, as well as hotly disputed topics, in literary and cultural studies. For nearly two decades, it has been a central focus of debate for psychoanalytic, poststructuralist, and cultural materialist criticism. At the same moment it has been subjected to a searching critique. But, In the case of V.S Naipaul, especially, when they are viewed with a wider sense, neo-colonial view is not a controversial issue to him, but is paramount to changing people’s perceptions. Thus, A humble effort has been made in this paper with the help of the intersection between ‘diasporic’ and ‘postcolonial theories’, to move beyond the assumptions, and offer a more differentiated and definite view, of what has too frequently been taken for granted, and hereby, proffer to substantiate V.S Naipaul as an ‘epitome’ and ‘a front man’ of the dominating culture: the ‘Colonial culture’ and explore the original themes prevalent in his novels and also, examine his advancement from a regional writer to one with more worldwide allure, whose novels are viewed as representing a turning point in his development and effectiveness as a colonial writer.**

**KeyWords - Colonial culture, Colonial discourse, Cultural-immigration, Multi- Culturalism, Third-World, Imperialism, Diaspora, Identity.**

### I. THE WRITER IN THE MAKING

*‘The Joy of writing lies in discovering truths that are otherwise often elusive.’*

Vidiyadhar Surajprasad (VS) Naipaul, a ‘Postcolonial Mandarin’ [1], like the sun piercing the prolonged darkness has emerged on the Britain’s soil of colonial writing, as ‘a prophet’ of our ‘world-historical moment’, and has produced a luminous account of the most compelling literary works, of the last fifty years. He is Britain’s the only living Nobel laureate (2001), in literature.

Naipaul was born in Trinidad in 1932 and migrated to England in 1950, when he won a scholarship to the University College, Oxford. Nothing sustained him afterwards, except the determination, to become, a writer. He is the author of many novels, including *A House for Mr. Biswas* (1961), *A Bend in the River* (1979), and *In a Free State*, which won the Booker Prize for him. He has also written several non-fiction works based on his travels including, *India: A Million Mutinies Now* (1990) and *Beyond Belief: Islamic Excursions Among the Converted Peoples* (1998), *A Wounded Civilization* (1977) and so on. He was knighted in 1990 and in 1993 was the first recipient of the David Cohen British Literature Prize. A season when many were just awakening to realities, Naipaul had been writing for about more than 20 years, and

established as an unrivalled and the most influential writer of contemporary world of literature.

## II. APPROACHING THE 'COLONIAL EPITOME', V S NAIPAUL

To accomplish the theme of present research paper effectively, the major *chefs-d'oeuvre* of Naipaul will be considered under three different heads: Firstly, the 'Roots and Continuity', under two sections viz., 'Naipaul: A Modern Prophet' and 'Colonial Reflections of the East and West', passing through which the origin of the Naipaul in contrast to his acceptance or non-acceptance in a different land will be probed into. Secondly, the 'Assimilation and Difference' will be cross-examined under the next two segments i.e., 'Floating Between the Three Worlds' and 'Naipaul's Ideology of Colonial Discourse' to make a speculation of his political and authoritative control over his ethical and cultural identity, which retains his distinctness. Finally, the 'Construction of a New Identity' under the heading 'Colonial Writing, *A sine qua non* of Naipaul's Identity', where Naipaul's own efforts to build up a collective national identity under British civilization, on the western land will be critically analyzed.

This paper pursuit, analyses what is unexplored or unsaid, or less said, by the critics and makes an approach to the psychological and cultural forces, that support the notion of Naipaul's assimilation with the colonial world, with a complete picture of the mind and body under colonialism.

Also, it is intended to, make an in-depth and insightful study, of the existential predicaments of the various protagonists, the techniques as well as the style-aphoristic and epigrammatic-of writing, adopted by the writer that connotes him as 'a no mean performer' in the world of writing and writers. Including all of his major literary works for the period 1957 to date, which must

be said, are Naipaul's 'the fount of knowledge' of the colonial and the 'diasporic' epoch.

This will honestly be not only simplifying his work, but also, formulate a better familiarity with and understanding of his works for the upcoming scholars.

## III. NAIPAUL: A MODERN PROPHET

The biography of a writer or even the autobiography will always have Incompleteness. At present, the most rational debate characterizes, West Indian literature, as a tradition within a tradition, an outgrowth and extension of the western mode of writing [2]. This creates an environment of literature just like the colonial experience of the West Indian writers themselves, who are striving to find an identity for themselves and their dexterity that is distinct-from the borrowed forms of the colonial authorities.

Naipaul's belief in a new form of autonomy for the human is liberating. He is a writer who encourages us continually to question, to write about the world with the freedom of a person with no home, no country, and no affiliations. His testimony, his witness, set the bar high for other writers.

V.S. Naipaul changed the way the fiction is understood and written, without qualification. As he has said so well, "The books have to look after themselves, and they will be around as long as people find that they are illuminating". His books will certainly look after themselves, taking on the personified life of text living on outside and apart from their author. Naipaul is, foremost, an ascetic writer, dedicated to seeing the world clearly and without sentimentality. He has often said, "Good writers have always looked for truth".

In Patrick French's recent authorized biography of Naipaul, *The World is What It Is* (1988), we find, that Naipaul is just increasingly straightforward about his life. His forthrightness, his apparent lack of repentance, cause

discomforts. The society has got to examine the writer and the writing on a social podium.

Undoubtedly, the 'colonial experience' is the theme that confronts each West Indian writer, and his attempt is a resolute confrontation between himself, his inner needs and his history. It is worth quoting, the comments of James Gordon Farrell (1973), about the relevance of the theme, in the following passage:

West Indian fiction is distinctive for its intense social consciousness. Faced by a society formed through slavery and colonialism, whose values have never been defined before, the novelist in the West Indies must recreate experience and simultaneously create the standards against which such experience must be judged. Criticism of West Indian fiction, itself, has tended to be an evaluation of sociological truth, perhaps to the detriment of analysis, which aims at making statements about literary merits [3].

In absence of this universal premise, it would be very difficult to establish the literary merit of any West Indian work of art. Even, Edward Said has argued, that Naipaul "allowed himself quite consciously to be turned into a witness for the Western prosecution"[4], promoting "colonial mythologies about wogs and darkies".

Naipaul inscribes in *The Middle Passage* (1962), "Living in a borrowed culture, the west Indian, more than most, needs writers to tell him who he is and where he stands" [5].

The primary relevance, of this paper assignment, in today's literary society, is, to visualize Naipaul's literary heritage, which responds to the quest for cultural identity, to him, and the peoples, who are culturally or ethnically, circumscribed and dwelling within a colonially assimilated world.

Naipaul in a true sense can be venerated as, a 'modern prophet', who with his literary-intellect, elaborately carries on the tradition and culture that originates in the soil of his 'Belles-Lettres'. He possesses the unparalleled 'Philosopher

Sensibility' to transform rage into precision and turn the harsh reality into an experience perfectly, with a vigilant-style and allows events to speak with their own intrinsic satire.

#### IV. COLONIAL REFLECTIONS OF THE EAST AND WEST

Firstly, Naipaul's autobiographical work concerns itself with the bitter knowledge that, for all its pretensions to the contrary, the English canon is an incarnation of English imperialism. Secondly, in his ethnographic and travel literature, Naipaul addresses the lie of the 'civilizing mission'. In other words, closer examination reveals that, for all its apparent concern for the cultural and civilizational 'betterment' of its colonial subjects, the English empire was a profoundly narcissistic enterprise. And finally, in his rewriting of a familiar postcolonial trope, Naipaul battles with the discovery that the 'real' England bears little or no relation to the one imagined and constructed in the colonial periphery. The subsequent section looks at Naipaul's disclosure of his fraught relationship with the imperial metropolis, with a specific focus on his negotiations with the English canon. Describing the East and The West, Naipaul introduces the association between the British capital and the offshore spheres of its empire. Raymond Williams in his *The Country and the City* (1973) puts in the English pastoral as a generic evidence for the metropolis and the rural periphery and also reveals the pastoral underpinning of the colonialism. The oeuvres of Naipaul, *An Area of Darkness* (1964) and *The Loss of El Dorado* (1969), suggest, a similar ideology of the colonials in the East and the West for the setting on the English colonies and hence establish and the colonial identity. When Naipaul travelled India in desire of discovering his childhood memories, he found England in its place. Everywhere, he found this unwelcome surprise

of 'Englished landscape'. Naipaul has reacted to such disparity colonialism in the East, where the literary history of the word 'British' from Austen to Forster, makes a swing from a geographical idea to a cultural ideal. 'Between the two uses of the word', as he writes, 'lie a hundred years of industrial and imperial power'. The West is the yet another overlooked plot for England's imperialism. Naipaul on himself describes it as a colonial aspect of the taste for pastoral'. It must be said that Naipaul skillfully transforms a beautiful description of the imperial justice into an influensive narrative, which is more concerned with a struggle over the signification of Englishness. To such imperialism of the East and West, Naipaul denies forgiving the colonial world for its own uncontrolled defeat to the English myths; this theme is well described in *A Bend in the River* (1979). In a nutshell, Naipaul's studies of the East and the West bemoan the egocentricity of colonial empire.

#### V. FLOATING BETWEEN THE THREEWORLDS (INDIA-TRINIDAD – LONDON)

Critics see Naipaul, almost fit to claim this identity acquired into a new 'cultural hybridism' at once, on behalf of these facts: First, his childhood Trinidad being, a former British colony, he is a writer from 'a country with a history of colonialism'; second, he migrated from Trinidad to England for his education and to start and continue his career as a writer; and third, he is descendent of a migrant family, as his ancestors came to Trinidad from India as indentured labourers, all of these countries being former colonies of the British Empire.

Naipaul, in one of his text in a sequence, comments 'People come and go all the time; the world has always been in movement.' His composition *A Way in the World* (1994) inculcates a clustered but interwoven ideology.

Now, he establishes himself into a community of travel writers whose expeditions are temporally wide-ranging from India to Trinidad to Oxford (London) as well as encompasses the three worlds of socio-cultural space. Naipaul declares in his 2001 Nobel lecture that his 'aim has always been to fill out [his] world picture', and this travel writing is the greatest aid which extended technically, allowing him to take in a wider and more complex 'world view' [6]. These comments seem to support readings of his work as 'trans-spatial' and 'trans-cultural'. This paper discusses the relational process that connects, without merging, his subjects positions at various phases of his life.

Naipaul's worldwide visions and narratives of political affiliation, do intimate the possibility of associations beyond national, ethnic and cultural margins of the three worlds.

#### VI. NAIPAUL'S IDEOLOGY OF COLONIAL DISCOURSE

Naipaul, allegedly, remains free to animate the outdated diction of Imperial-empire. Joseph Epstein writes, 'It may be that among living writers only Naipaul is able to speak of 'barbarian peoples'; only he can say things that... in the mouths of others would straight away be declared racism' (cited in Nixon, 118). Nixon would argue, Naipaul's literary success in England, especially through the 1970's, accrues, in part, from his racially secured license to condemn the third-world. But Said, vetoes Naipaul from the postcolonial counter canon, and coins him as the most shameful variety of eurocentricism. He writes of him as a 'third-worlder' denouncing his own people, not because they are victims of imperialism, but because they have an innate flaw, which is that they are not English.

Through the pages of Edward Said's *Orientalism*, we learn that the non-West (during 80's) having been occupied with the

constructions and representations of imperialism, a new tendency hunts for a reversal of the imperial gaze, with the colonized cultures and their 'travelling and writing figures' made of England and its empire, when they arrived as emigrants, expatriates, travellers, in the 'mother country'. Each of these perspectives, as we perceive, offers an alternative of Naipaul and his oeuvre. Albeit still incipient, it must be the shift in attitude and the changing nature of postcolonial critics who condemn Naipaul explicitly as an apologist for empire, a few recuperation reveals Naipaul as a man who is a 'casualty and victim' more than an associate of imperialism. But, viewing through the glass of colonial discourse analysis, Naipaul has emerged as a native colonial performer, conspiring opportunistically with imperialism and neo-imperialism reforms of the third world.

#### VII. COLONIAL WRITING, A *SINE QUA NON* OF NAIPAUL'S IDENTITY

V.S. Naipaul, often described, as a writer of the 'Colonial Literature', and with no other reference point, than the British Empire. It is not to wonder, when the 'Literary Academicians' regard him as, 'the grand old man of British literature's [7]. Above all, he has acquired, one of the most contested literary reputations, of 'Contemporary Literature' [8]. A few literary figures, in recent memory could excite, such passionate admiration as, he has.

He has, all-time, remained among, the 'conscious literary adherents', as, 'an extremely controversial personality' [9] on account of which, his readers have been sharing his 'wealth of literary art'. It would be worth mentioning, a few literary legends, who chant the praises of Naipaul for his exquisite mastery of English language, such as, Edward Said (1935-2003, a well-known Palestinian American Literary critic and theorist and an outspoken pro-Palestinian activist.), Derek Walcott (1930-, a Caribbean

poet and winner of the 1992 Nobel Prize in Literature), Chinua Achebe (1930-, Nigerian novelist and poet), Irving Howe (1920-93, an American literary and social critic), and Salman Rushdie (1947-, an Indian-born British novelist and essayist).

To sum up, he has been confronting with his readers -ranging from, a critic to a philosopher- with a wide spectrum of literary oeuvres, for more than half a century. For this reason, Patrick Swinden, (a senior lecturer in English literature at the University of Manchester) observes him as "one of the finest living novelists in English"[10].

Of large and varied body of Naipaul's 'literary craft', the readers, critics and reviewers, -perceptive and appreciative of it- have by and large, focused on various aspects and themes, such as, the 'Third World identity', 'ethnicity', 'racism', 'mythology', 'postcolonialism', 'multi-culturalism', 'migration', 'gender' and a great many. But, the aspect of 'Colonial Culture', in his works has still remained unexplored. Perhaps, no complete and comprehensive work has been done in this segment yet.

Thus, a humble but inquisitive effort has been made at length, throughout this research paper, to explore and analyze what is unexplored or unsaid, or less said, by the critics and make a critical approach, to the psychological and cultural forces, to substantiate Naipaul, as an 'epitome' of the dominating 'Colonial Culture' along with his assimilation and absorption into the colonizers' frame, with a complete picture of the mind and body under colonialism.

Also, the theme of this paper discovers its intensity in the 'contemporary world', where cultural identity subsists as *a sine qua non* to the emigrated ethnic groups, which demand the endorsement of their cultural identity, into the mainstream, of 'the country of migration' of 'imperial horizon' that now prevails, like a customary truth.

In the 'Western intellectual climate' Naipaul, of his own free-will, appreciates the codifying and institutionalizing, often the crucial aspects of literary study, with the theme of 'cultural identity' and mull it over, as something, that has been going on, for a long time, which now -in the modern epoch -is apparently a necessary posture, in the new category of 'Commonwealth literary studies'.

The roots of thoughts coincide with Naipaul's in, reviewing the Press' book for *The New Statesman*, 24 September 1965:

"Things move so fast nowadays, even in the Literature Schools. Commonwealth writing, as we understand it is so new, and already it is being picked to pieces... it all seems to have been codified already. I know now, for instance, that the difference between the United States and Canada is that the United States had a revolution and Canada didn't. But I also get the impression that the point has been made so often before and has become such a received idea that it is now almost without meaning. Then there is the West Indian with his search for identity."

Judith Misrahi-Barak, [11] the editor of the bilingual book, significantly appreciates this uniqueness of opinion about the Early Trinidadian Naipaul does sustain with the unity of thoughts amalgamated with the diversity of perceptions that beautifies and enriches the literary portrait of Sir Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul, that can be witnessed with any point of view.

Diane Mehta, (*The Atlantic Monthly*, Nov., 2001), on the one hand criticizes, "Naipaul's, *Half a Life* has a few problems, including some stilted dialogue and a scrambled, distracting chronology.' But on the other hand, praises him, by affirming about his candidness and honesty of narrative style:

"His style is so frank, it seems intimate, and the awful characters are studied and well crafted. Behind the matter-of-fact style is a cuttingly

ironic view of human relations, and occasionally the author's voice simply overwhelms his narrator's [12]."

Subsequently, Landeg White, in *V. S. Naipaul: A Critical Introduction* (1975) points to the Naipaul's social inadequacies, and remarks: "Novels which set out to expose the inadequacies of a society whose history is one of slavery and exploitation are acceptable if the prevailing tone shows sympathy and understanding" [13].

Researchers and authors have also, explored into Naipaul's ambivalent feelings about the "clan" set in his literary works at a length of prose as well in an epigrammatic form of sentence, and have regarded it -the psychological explanation of his hostility towards mobilization for 'political change': "The clan that gave protection and identity, and saved people from the void, was itself a little state, and it could be a hard place, full of politics, full of hatreds and changing alliances and moral denunciations. It was the kind of family Life I had known for much of my childhood: an early introduction to the ways of the world, and to the nature of cruelty. It had given me, as I suspected it had given Kala, a taste for the other kind of life, the solitary or less crowded life, where one had space around oneself" [14].

Selwyn Cudjoe, in his popular work entitled *V.S Naipaul: A Materialist Reading*, (1988), portrays Naipaul's concern for the Imperial world, in his works: "A writer who has aligned himself with the values and preoccupations of the dominant Western culture," [15] Derek Walcott, about Naipaul's prolific "literary art", (as cited at, [www.guardian.co.uk/books/2007/aug/25/poetry](http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2007/aug/25/poetry). biography) hails him as "our finest writer of the English sentence" has attracted a great deal of critical curiosity.

We discover in the study, of Bill Ashcroft and his co-authors, to define the Naipaul's theory of

postcolonial literature in their famous oeuvre, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-colonial Literatures* (1989), and maintain: "The idea of 'post-colonial literary theory' emerges from the inability of European theory to deal adequately with the complexities and varied cultural provenance of post-colonial writing" [16].

A strong support to this notion is, made by Robert Young in *Postcolonialism: A Historical Introduction* (2001)[17], firmly deems and points out to the political theory that it is an amalgam of the optimistic and pessimistic consequences of the peoples (nations) their cultures which may be either affected by hybridized city cultures, dominated colonialism or metamorphosed cultures.

For Naipaul's, *The Overcrowded Barracoon* (1972), critics consider, it as a book sufficing the reasons, why Naipaul, chooses the colonial societies, along with that of England, for a majority of his literary works, including the travelogue inscriptions.

Edward Said, argues for Naipaul's fiction and the travelogues, as an allegedly 'unsympathetic portrayal' of the 'Third World'. He delivers that Naipaul allowed himself quite consciously to be turned into a witness for the Western prosecution, "promoting what Said classifies as "colonial mythologies about wogs and darkies" [18].

Theroux differentiated more intelligently in his useful analysis of Naipaul's early texts and pointed out that Naipaul like many other postcolonialist condemnations boosts up the concept of ethnic and racial diversity egotistically. Theroux further criticizes Naipaul for his ethnocentric self that takes him far away from other postcolonialist writers disabling him to establish his own standard and class of identity [19].

A full-length study, of the fiction and non-fiction, together with the reviews, articles,

essays, travelogues, the volumes of letters and the interviews of and about Naipaul, by the philosophers and critics-those dealing with 'postcolonial criticism'- allow us to deem that, there are sufficient documentations to substantially consider, Naipaul under the characterization of colonial culture and colonial writer.

Recapitulating the instance of John McLeod [20], in his *Beginning Postcolonialism*, puts forward, the necessary elements to spurt Naipaul, as supreme artist of the 'colonial culture' not withstanding that he was descended from a migrant family with a history of colonialism and its harsh consequences.

Very interestingly, Laura Ciolkowski, in *The New York Times Book Review*, on September 10, 2000, remarks: "He (Naipaul) elegantly expresses hard-earned wisdom about literature and culture, the political stakes of history and the relationship between the writer and the world" [21].

In a review of the *Enigma of Arrival* (1987), Bernard, Levin moved on to describe the author (Naipaul), as "an inquiline, an animal that lives in the nest or abode of another species: it was a reference to the stranger's in-between status that Naipaul thought fit very well his position as a writer, in this as in his other works" [22].

Prolific writer Brent Staples, comments, for Naipaul's interpretation of history through his two wonderful creations, *The Loss of El Dorado* (1969) and *A Way in the World* (1994) on the, 'an archaeology of the colonial impulse' [23].

Both Nixon and Cudjoe, attribute to Naipaul's fundamental, social and cultural values to his psychological reactions. Although, Cudjoe constructs from Naipaul's writings a psychopolitical biography of the man. In London calling: V.S. Naipaul, *Postcolonial Mandarin*, Rob Nixon analyses the rhetorical strategies of Naipaul's travel narratives for evidence of his

commitment to the idealized imperial England of his imaginings [24].

To sum up it can be said that, a perceptive study of Naipaul's 'literary fount' reveals, that he subsists, entirely under the interpretation, of colonial culture whose journeys from that of his childhood Trinidad to the British-London and then in nearly most of the colonial spheres in finding the center -where he experiences several colonialisms -are spatially and temporally wide ranging.

Thus, Naipaul's unrivalled 'art of literature', has acquired immense 'hegemonic qualities' worldwide, with an authoritative leitmotiv over Colonial Culture. This exploratory paper on Naipaul, from the perspective of colonial culture, is not to prove critics' wrong for their comments on him (Naipaul) since they represent their respective cultural and political positions, instead, It intends to significantly procure the thought-provoking and deep-rooted theme that, the text wants to convey, through this paper assignment which doing so, I shall find a special satisfaction.

### VIII. CONCLUSION

In absence of this universal theme, It would be very difficult to assess the literary merit of any West Indian work of art without first considering its sociological relevance. Thus the foremost relevance, of this paper assignment in the literary society, is, to visualize Naipaul's literary heritage, which brings to him and all others who are culturally and ethnically circumscribed. Naipaul said, only nonfiction could capture the complexities of today's world. It was a profound observation. And it speaks to a larger cultural situation. Naipaul's literary creation adopts an outgrown and extended mode of writing that can certainly be said as *sine qua non* of his Identity shows his writing as a literature as a tradition within a tradition. This paper also encompasses those west Indian writers who are still striving

for an identity for themselves and their writings which indeed has the "colonial experience" not unlike Naipaul's whose attempt is a tenacious confrontations between himself, his inner needs and his history with its bitter and painful intensity. Naipaul's feeling is reflected through his sea of novels of living in a borrowed culture, needs to tell the writers of the world who is he and where he does stand. He has promptly metaphorised the colonial experience for his texts. Naipaul has been able to successfully prove that West Indian literature is independent and original of its kind, which serves him as the best example by becoming the Nobel laureate on the colonial land. In a nutshell, Naipaulian texts are a special blend of humility and arrogance in which lies his true genius.

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