

## **Cultural Representations: Strange or Stranger? Displaced Identities in V.S. Naipaul**

*Madhu Benoit, Université Stendhal Grenoble III*

“To be strange is to be foreign, alien - a stranger is a person whose home is elsewhere.” In other words, an outsider. In the case of the Trinidadian writer, V.S. Naipaul, this definition, taken from the *Chambers Dictionary*, is particularly apt. Naipaul, through a quirk in history, is a stranger, if not a foreigner, in his native Trinidad, as he is a third generation immigrant from India. Thus it is difficult in Naipaul’s case to define that ‘elsewhere’ which is ‘home’. As the word ‘home’ is inevitable linked with identity, it is commonplace to remark that the Nobel laureate’s work often centres on what has frequently been called an ‘identity quest’. If identity is what differentiates individuals, a displaced person is an individual who for some reason lives in a country or society other than his/her own.

Foucault, in his essay, ‘The Subject and Power’ notes the dual aspect of individualism: on the one hand, individualism is the right to be different, including everything that makes individuals truly individual, and on the other hand, the individual is anchored in a community life – and breaking this link forces the individual to back on himself, tying him to his own identity in a constraining way. (211-12). Thus identity is constructed on an individual basis, but within a given social structure, the alienation of which could lead to a corresponding alienation of identity. Thus following Foucault, a displaced identity equals alienation – a favourite Naipaul theme. This is hardly surprising, because, as Stuart Hall famously noted: “We all write and speak from a particular place and time, from a history and a culture which is specific. What we say is always ‘in context’, *positioned*.” (110)

In this paper I would like to attempt to see how Naipaul is ‘positioned’. Does displacement of identity mean dislocation of identity for the Trinidadian writer? Or in other words, does alienation automatically follow geographical dislocation? Following Hall’s connection between art and the context of the artist, I propose first looking at Naipaul’s own cultural dislocation, and then examining dislocation of identity in his book, *In a Free State*.

Naipaul’s writings frequently carry references to his complex cultural heritage, rooted in three countries; Trinidad, the country of his birth, India, whose ancestral rites regulated his tightly-knit family circle, and Britain, the source of his colonial education. But do any of these three facets of Naipaul’s cultural context correspond to that elusive place called ‘elsewhere’, the foreigner/stranger’s ‘home’?

His reticence to claim either India or Britain as 'home' has been the source of several books<sup>1</sup> In an article 'Jasmin', written for the *The Times Literary Supplement* in 1964., he wryly remarked "The English language was mine, the tradition was not". (Naipaul, *Critical Perspectives* 19) Conversely, during his travels in India, he notes that he effortlessly melted into the Indian landscape, but the minute he spoke, he gave himself away as a foreigner, an alien. This displacement of cultural identity is underlined by an anecdote the writer relates in the same article. Naipaul recounts how, upon recognizing a sweet-smelling flower in a British Guiana garden from his childhood memories, he asked his hostess its name, and was told: « We call it jasmine ». Naipaul comments : « Jasmine ! So I had known it all these years ! ». Putting a sprig of jasmine in his buttonhole, the writer smelled it and repeated the word jasmine, jasmine. But, he notes: "the word and the flower had been separate in my mind too long. They did not come together".<sup>2</sup> (*Critical Perspectives* 22)

It is a well-known fact that Naipaul suffered writer's block until the signifier and the signified did, in fact, come together in his mind, and thence, in his writing. His earliest publishable writings, including his first major work, *A House for Mr. Biswas*, are all set in Port of Spain, the city where he grew up and which he knew intimately. However, as the writer himself remarked, positioning himself culturally in Trinidad was not possible. He noted in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech,: "there was my Hindu family, with its fading memories of India, there was India itself." The key to this sentence is really the phrase "its fading memories of India". Naipaul feels that he grew up in a time of transition, marked by the transfer of values from ancestral Indian customs and values to Western values. East Indian Caribbeans were weaning themselves from India, yet Naipaul notes that no values really replaced those of their grandparents<sup>3</sup>.

This problem of a displaced and non-replaced cultural identity is poignantly depicted in *A House for Mr. Biswas*. Mr. Biswas, a portrayal of Naipaul's own father, is a man caught up in three cultures, and in the process, dispossessed of all three. Unable to integrate culturally in Trinidad where he lives, rejecting Hindu culture which he dislikes, and which cannot help him in his ambition to be a writer, he is equally unable to identify with British culture, the only means available to him to achieve his ambition. For example, the Ideal School of Journalism, based in London, requires Mr. Biswas to write about English seasons, which for obvious reasons, he has never experienced. The novel is the story of a life which could be called a failure, but which could also be called a success. In a way, Mr. Biswas achieves very little - even the famous house is only partly paid for at the time of his death. On the other hand, when he finally moves into the house at Sikkim Street towards the end of the novel, despite all its failings, the house secures Mr Biswas's dignity, and his tragic-comic quest is over.

---

<sup>1</sup> *Wounded Civilization, An Area of Darkness, India, A Million Mutinies*, for India, and *The Enigma of Arrival* for Britain.

<sup>2</sup> quoted in my article 'Naipaul and the Motherland'

<sup>3</sup> This aspect of Naipaul's work was more fully discussed in my article 'Naipaul and the Motherland'.

Reading Naipaul's correspondence with his father, one easily recognizes Mr. Biswas in Mr. Naipaul senior. Like his fictional counterpart, Mr. Naipaul (senior) achieved

little in life – at any rate he considered himself to be a failed writer. I quote from his letter to his daughter:

I see Sevlon has had a novel accepted by the Wingate Publishing House and it has been recommended by the British Book Society as its 'Book of the Month'. Lucky fellow. The book, entitled *A Brighter Sun*, deals with a marriage of two teen-age Indian children in Trinidad. My own idea. And I doubt whether Sevlon knows really much of the realities of the Indian way of life in these parts. I don't mind admitting that the thing depressed me. I feel – very foolishly of course – that I have been robbed of my theme."(letters 144)

He nonetheless weathered the transition period, paving the way for his sons. And in real life, both VS and Shiva Naipaul are gifted writers. In his introductory speech to a Symposium on East Indians in the Caribbean, held in 1975, Naipaul explained his father's dilemma: "He has so many difficult things to come to terms with. He was himself part of the process of change, and he couldn't distance himself from this process of change. He couldn't take a longer view, like those of us who have come afterwards." (Naipaul, *East Indians* 5)

This last sentence explains in part Naipaul's own cultural dislocation - Naipaul himself is a product of transition – as he spans both the colonial and the postcolonial period. He is in a sort of cultural limbo both geographically and temporally. Neither could he automatically construct a colonial identity, in the manner of an R.K. Narayan, nor could he automatically construct a post-colonial identity in the manner of a Rushdie. He bitterly remarks about his own life, and the weight of Eurocentrism on it:

You write in London and you don't have an audience. . . . A writer must be supported by the knowledge that he comes from a society with which he is in dialogue. A writer like myself has no society, because one comes from a very small island which hardly provides an audience, and one's books are published in London because one of the great legacies of imperialism is that the English-speaking world is divided between New York and London.(CP 50)

In a similar vein, Naipaul remarked, in an interview with Pierre Pachet:

Le contexte colonial des *Hommes de Paille* n'est pas celui de l'Asie ou des civilisations anciennes, mais celui de petites colonies, peuplées par de petits groupes d'immigrants, des groupes de travailleurs. Voilà leur héritage. On ne peut y devenir un individu. C'est là un contexte mutilant . (79)

Naipaul's blackest vision of the destruction of identity through geographical displacement is to be found in his book *In a Free State* composed of three linked stories. All three present geographical displacement as a final irrevocable destruction of identity. Naipaul's pessimism is all the gloomier as in each case there is some sort

of choice – the protagonists attempt to reach a ‘free state’. However, the cost of the dislocation annihilates them.

In the first story, ‘One out of Many’, the protagonist, Santosh, an Indian domestic servant transplanted from Bombay to Washington DC, loses his identity as his links

with his own community are broken. He manages to conform to the demands of American society, and materially he is relatively successful, but at the cost of a mutilated soul. The irony of the situation is that every step he takes to his ultimate state of ‘limbo’ is an act of free will. His Indian cultural experience simply does not apply to the American context. He is a foreigner, a stranger, incapable of translating the American experience into anything that corresponds to what he knows and therefore can control or integrate, and ultimately, live with.

As pointed out by the authors of *The Empire Writes Back*, Naipaul uses the Hindi word *hubshi*, (demon or monster) with great effect to express the gulf between the two cultures between which Santosh is caught. On arriving in Washington, the protagonist voices his wonder at finding *hubshis*, everywhere:

Once or twice a week I went to the supermaket on our street. I always had to walk past groups of *hubshi* men and women”, “Scattered among the *hubshi* houses were others just as old but with gas-lamps. . . . I also felt that it was like a warning to the *hubshi* to keep off”, “there was always a couple of *hubshi* guards... some old *hubshi* beggar men in rags. There were also many young *hubshi* boys. (27)

I quote *The Empire Writes Back*:

The use of the Hindi word ‘*hubshi*’ rather than ‘Negro’ . . . . prepares the reader for a gradual discovery of the peculiar significance of the word, indicating as it does the singular aversion, the ritual uncleanness, the religious horror which the Indian protagonist attaches to the touch of the Negro maid, who eventually seduces him. In Naipaul’s case the word is used to indicate the protagonist’s culture rather than the writer’s, and in this sense is a self-consciously detached use of language difference. With the word *hubshi* we do not have a different signified for the signifier ‘Negro’, as we might in a translation; we have a different sign altogether. It is a metonym of the Indian cultural experience, which lies beyond the word, but of which it is a part. (64-65)

This inability to read cultural codes dooms him from the very start. His first shopping expedition leads him to buy a green hat and a green suit too big for him and therefore unwearable. The next step is his ‘would be emancipation’ from his employer, and finally, the ultimate act of alienation - his proposal and marriage to a ‘*hubshi* woman. Yet, Santosh recognises the process of destruction engulfing him. When buying the preposterous suit, he tells himself: “When I considered all that cloth and all that tailoring I was proposing to adorn my simple body with, that body that needed so little, I felt I was asking to be destroyed.” (30-31)The story ends on what is undoubtedly one of the most sombre notes in literature:

I was once part of the flow, never thinking of myself as a presence. Then I looked in the mirror and decided to be free. All that my freedom has brought me is the knowledge that I have a face and have a body, that I must feed this body and clothe this body for a certain number of years. Then it will be over. (53)

Thus Santosh voices Naipaul's pessimistic view of the impossibility to escape: the foreigner has become a stranger, an alienated being, trapped in a dislocation of culture.

The protagonist of the second story, "Tell me who to kill" is a West Indies Indian labourer. But the second story is bleaker, inasmuch as at least Santosh has golden memories of an earlier life in Bombay when he walked by the Arabian Sea, waiting for the sun to rise – when "the city and the ocean gleamed like gold". (16) The West Indies, as presented by Naipaul, offers no salvation of any kind, no golden glimpses. The only salvation possible is through departure. The protagonist pins all his hopes for a better life on his adored younger brother, following him to London, working day and night, so as to ensure his brother's studies, and hopefully, thus ensure his freedom from a labourer's life. But neither brother is capable of dealing with life in the metropolis any more than they were able to in the West Indies. The younger boy is flawed – both weak and selfish, the elder has a strong character, and is capable of selfless love, but is consumed by hatred for a world which denies him the means to achieve his ambitions – for himself or for his brother.

The story is narrated in a Pidgin English which echoes the incapacity of the protagonist to escape his marginal position in both countries. It ends like the first, with total alienation of identity through dislocation - with Naipaul's darkest lines – the elder brother seeing the ruin of his hopes, his life, asks God: "O God, show me the enemy. Once you find out who the enemy is, you can kill him. But these people here they confuse me. Who hurt me? Who spoil my life?" (98) And yet every step he took was a considered step to freedom.

In the third story, the novella *In a Free State*, it is the other way around, and the dislocation of identity affects a white person who chooses to live in Africa. The scene is set in an unnamed African state in the throes of revolution. As the full impact of a cultural/cum/political crisis hits the country, all certainties are rendered null and void. The journey from cultural location to culturally dislocated is depicted symbolically, as Bobby (a white civil servant working in Africa,) and Linda (the wife of a BBC cadre) drive from the capital to their 'compound' or home (roughly a day's journey) through the country. At the beginning of the drive, both locate themselves culturally in Africa, albeit colonised Africa. Bobby who represents the white coloniser 'gone native', inasmuch as he wears 'native shirts' ("designed and woven in Holland" (101) notes Naipaul ironically), and chats up or rather, attempts to chat up African boys, remarks to Linda: "My life is here" (123). Linda, "one of the 'compound wives' from the Collectorate, one of those who lived in the government compound" (106) and who has the reputation of a 'man-eater' does not appear to consider the idea of returning to England to live either. (123).

Throughout the journey, Naipaul plays on a dual tension – that between the two white colonisers, and that between the colonisers and the Africans. At the end, Linda will

rejoin the world of 'whites' where she belongs, but Bobby will remain stuck in a dislocated space, at home neither in Africa, which rejects him, nor in Linda's universe of the 'white coloniser' which he rejects.

The transition of the moribund colonial world which is the creation of 'white men' and therefore has become their 'home', into "a free state" where they are foreigners is set into motion as Bobby drives his car across a picturesque African landscape. A transition epitomised by the old 'Colonel', an old time white settler who runs a hotel as decrepit as himself, located halfway along their journey. Colonial Africa is caricatured in the garrulous old man, who tells his guests: "There's not good and bad here. They're just Africans." (185) The dismantling of colonial Africa and the emergence of indigenous power is increasingly visible as they journey 'home' in the form of an increasing number of roadblocks. If at the beginning, they are waved on, with Bobby casually remarking: "They're very good that way", "they have a pretty shrewd idea who we are" (155), this complacent certainty is completely undermined at the last roadblock, where they are not stopped, but Bobby is badly beaten by a 'just African'. At this point, Bobby's comradely Pidgin English – "I report you" rings hollow in his own ears.

Within the space of a journey, he has travelled from the certainty of a familiar and controlled world to an unfamiliar universe which he has no means of understanding, leave alone controlling. Reality merges into nightmare when his own houseboy, Luke, suddenly acquires an unknown face on realizing that his master has been beaten. The story closes with Luke's laughter, and Bobby thinking: "I will have to leave. But the compound was safe; the soldiers guarded the gate. Bobby thought: I will have to sack Luke." (239) But Bobby cannot sack Luke's laughter, nor will he ever be safe again in the compound. Bobby will awaken to the frightening fact that the place he considered 'home' has simply ceased to exist.

This pessimistic view locks the displaced individual in a void – or non-space, from which there is no escape. The more the individual exercises his/her right to be an individual in an 'alien' universe, that is to say the right to 'difference', the more the individual becomes subject to an alienation, or 'dislocation' of identity. To be a stranger thus becomes synonymous, not with being 'strange', but with becoming 'estranged'...

I will conclude this brief study on displaced identities in V.S. Naipaul by noting that unlike the protagonists of the stories we have just looked at, Naipaul seems to have come to terms with his own cultural dislocation in his book *The Enigma of Arrival*, written some sixteen years after *In a Free State*. Naipaul describes the genesis of *The Enigma*:

The story had become more personal: my journey, the writer's journey, the writer defined by his writing discoveries, his ways of seeing, rather than by his personal adventures, writer and man separating at the beginning of the journey and coming together again in a second life just before the end. (309)

Timothy Brennan, discussing nationhood, remarked: "Nations, then, are imaginary constructs that depend for their existence on an apparatus of cultural fictions in which imaginative literature plays a decisive role" (173). Inversely, writers of imaginative literature require boundaries so that they may 'position' themselves as Stuart Hall would say. In the absence of such boundaries, they must forge their own cultural markers through the erection of the imaginary edifice of their fiction. In other words, writers without boundaries must construct their own identities, and we have seen how painful this process was for Naipaul. Perhaps the very act of writing *The Enigma* acted like a catalyser. At any rate, it is certain that if identity is to be reconstructed following dislocation, the act of dislocation must be simultaneously both an arrival and a departure. Perhaps that is what Naipaul meant when he chose the name that

Apollinaire gave to Giorgio de Chirico's painting of a port, *The Enigma of Arrival* as the title for his book.

### Sources

ASHCROFT, Bill, GRIFFITHS, Gareth, TIFFIN, Helen. *The Empire Writes Back*. (1989) London: Routledge, 2002.

BENOIT, Madhu, 'Naipaul and the Motherland', *Muse India*. Issue 8, Jul-Aug 2006.

BRENNAN, Timothy Brennan. 'The National Longing for Form'. *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*.(1995) eds. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin. London: Routledge, 2003

FOUCAULT, Michel, 'The Subject and Power'. Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow. *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*. Chicago: Chicago UP, 1982.

HALL, Stuart, 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora', *Contemporary Postcolonial Theory*. (1997) ed. Padmini Mongia. London: Arnold, 2003.

NAIPAUL, V.S., *Between Father and Son – Family Letters*. Ed. Gillon Aitken. New York: Vintage, 2001.

NAIPAUL, V.S *The Enigma of Arrival*. London: Penguin, 1987.

NAIPAUL, V.S. Introduction *East Indians in the Caribbean : Colonialism and the Struggle for Identity*. New York: Kraus International Publications, 1982.

NAIPAUL, V.S. *Critical Perspectives on V.S. Naipaul* Robert D. Hamner London : Heinemann, 1979.

NAIPAUL, V.S. *In a Free State*. (1971) London: Picador, 2002

NAIPAUL, V.S. *A House for Mr. Biswas*. (1961) Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985.

PACHET, Pierre, *Un à un* . Paris : Seuil, 1993.