

# **INTRODUCTION**

[Naipaul's] subject was extraterritoriality—the state of being neither here nor there, but rather in-between things (like the tropical jasmine and its name) that cannot come together for him; he wrote from the ironic point of view of the failure to which he seems to have been resigned. (Said, *Reflections* 99)

This more 'mobile' approach to the nature of identity and difference ... unsettles the notion of a bounded, pre-given essence of place to which the identity of those who dwell there adheres. It attends instead to the constant interplay between positional and variable...histories and other histories and the complex intermeshing of the global and the local. (Jacobs, *Edge of Empire* 8)

## I

In his *V. S. Naipaul* (2003), an indispensable guide to the author, Bruce King raises an important point regarding the former's view of decolonization in "unhomogeneous and mixed" colonial societies. Naipaul, for instance, does not always agree with the view that "all postcolonial literature should consist of resistance to imperialist, capitalist, white patriarchy" (18). King insists that Naipaul's art cannot be separated from his perceived notions of pre- and postcolonial displacement of people as well as violent differences in race and class within postcolonial societies in Africa as well as the West Indies.

Clearly, one cannot ignore the fact that Naipaul's writing returns repeatedly to scenes of loss and humiliation—both comic and tragi-comic—of the migrant Indian community. The Indian community, forced by circumstances to leave home in the 1860s, is forced by Africans in Africa and by the Caribbean black community in the 1940s and 1960s to leave their businesses and homes. The fact that members of the Indian community were ritually compelled to give up their land, business and property in 'homelands' each time the colonial machinery transferred power to indigenous populations, is at the heart of Naipaul's work.

This point—that there is no such thing like a uniform postcolonial condition—is lost in the cacophony of postcolonial readings of the author. In a way, the passage of Indians to Africa and the West Indies was instrumented by colonial needs. Ironically, it was under

colonialism that the community thrived and prospered in select areas in certain pockets, in spite of colonial indifference, local hostility and inter- as well as intra-ethnic competition. Interestingly, the expulsion of the Indian community from pockets of Africa and the West Indies also coincided with the withdrawal of colonial forces or the end of colonial authority. Naipaul, therefore, is within his rights to resist and distrust the use of postcolonialism as an umbrella. He recognizes the reality of postcolonialism, but insists on factoring in specificities of history and location of displacement and diasporic settlements whenever we talk of migrant communities and their reception.

Naipaul's work concentrates on 'historicizing' homelessness, first triggered by colonial rule and trade—when hundreds and thousands of people leave their homelands to work in English colonies in Africa and the West Indies—and then heightened by the uncertainty of life in their adopted homelands. He sees the brutality of power that transforms the lives of millions, but chooses to foreground corruption and servility as figures of domination in the colonial world. Naipaul also sees the rise of revolutionary politics across Africa and the Caribbean islands as the condition and consequence of the end of colonial rule in the colonies. However, he repeatedly highlights the disintegration—moral, political and social—of these newly independent countries.

It is an extreme world where the migrants are ritually humiliated and robbed of their possessions with a degree of brutality that is matched only by the indifference of those who do it. Interestingly, it is not only those in power who do this. Even the poor and the marginalized sections of the indigenous people—historically victimized by colonial and presently victimized and exploited by what Fanon describes as “the new bourgeoisie”—emerge as agents of oppression insofar as the migrants are concerned. So the history of Freedom and Revolution, seen from the point of view of the non-native migrant, is a record of multiple erasure and victimhood. The migrant rues the destruction of the colonial order and leads a life of anxiety as the newly independent colonies start nation building.

The aim of this thesis is to examine Naipaul's reading of identity formations and shifts in what he calls the 'colonial detritus,' which, in effect, is the postcolonial detritus. Naipaul's fiction explores the diasporic and migratory experience in the light of shifting subject positions. The entire corpus of Naipaul's writings including fiction and non-

fiction reveals a preoccupation with the problems of colonization, liberation and its aftermath. It is not just the colonized who are displaced and fragmented culturally and intellectually, but also the colonizers who find themselves in uncertain and indefinite positions or undefined spaces. This project examines the fictional works of Naipaul in the light of what emerges as a de-homogenizing world-view.

Studies in diaspora and migration have raised questions about the nature of the (post)colonial detritus and the role of postcolonial critics in the construction of diasporic consciousness. In an increasingly migratory and globalised world, multicultural mixes resulting from diverse trans-continental movements have created enabling conditions for migrant postcolonial literature. Diasporic writings deal with discordant amalgamations of relationships, nationalities, classes that produce conflict and negotiation of spaces between the old and the new, between home and the new country. The cross-cultural interaction that takes place in the space of *in-between*, in this sense, forms and transforms the subject positions.

This project seeks to examine how the postcolonial subject tries to negotiate particular social, political and geographical dislocations. From his own position of displacement, Naipaul turned his attention to other dispossessed individuals in the 'half-made' societies of the world. His works deal with the trauma of uprooted individuals, their psychic turmoil, their quest for identity and the overall postcolonial confusion. Naipaul's fiction deals with the articulation and negotiation of multiple identities which results in a critique of the stereotyping of non-whites and diaspora. Other categories such as class, ethnicity and the heterogeneity of interests of the diasporic people in an alien territory question what may appear to be the fixed, essential quality of diasporic existence. Naipaul's fiction also hints at the heterogeneity and hybridity at the heart of essential European identity. But the emphasis on the suffering of displaced Europeans is not intended to undermine the predicament of the colonized people. Rather, this project focusses on the destabilizing of colonial subjectivity, foregrounding the 'adulteration' and mutual transformation of colonizer and the colonized.

## II

It would be interesting to examine how and why Naipaul takes it upon himself to visit and revisit what Derek Gregory calls the "colonial present." Gregory, for instance says:

“[W]e live in a colonial present, but the colonial present of the 21st century differs significantly from that of the 19th and 20th centuries” (qtd. in Lau 2). What Gregory and after him Lisa Lau suggest is that the idea of looking at decolonization as one homogeneous global project of resistance is both contentious and frivolous. Yet, allowing for the heterogeneity of the resistance, it makes sense to see Naipaul as part of what Lisa Lau calls ‘Re-Orientalism.’ Lau rightly suggests that in spite of the difference in colonial resistance projects in different parts of the world, there is at least one attribute that stands out. Living in the colonial present “... takes as its starting point the salient fact that by the 21st century, the East has increasingly seized the power of representation; however, this representation is not exempt from being partial and skewed, and, moreover, it is still Western-centric and postcolonial” (3). The answer to living in this long colonial present lies in a self-representation that is simultaneously a way of ‘re-orientalizing’ the west. This is done by way of returning the gaze or by re-visiting the centre from which the west visited the orient and subdued it. Naipaul’s work is at once an illustration and critique of this kind of gazing.

It is necessary to point out here that Naipaul’s fiction and non-fiction are not mutually exclusive categories but consolidate and illustrate each other. No study of his fiction would be complete without drawing attention to some of his non-fictional texts, writings that combine travel and autobiographical writing. Both kinds of writing dwell upon the predicament of colonialism and the hegemonic domination of cultures which in the Caribbean is seen to be not absolute but a hybrid combination of the cultures of both colonizer and colonized. Books like *The Middle Passage* (1962), *The Loss of El Dorado* (1969), *The Overcrowded Barracoon* (1973), and *Finding the Centre* (1984), are of seminal interest to any study of Naipaul’s work.

A brief description of Naipaul’s novels will not be out of place here to show the unmistakable thematic continuity. *The Mystic Masseur* (1957), based in Trinidad, is about an unsuccessful East Indian writer who becomes a politician after a dubious career as a masseur with mystic curing abilities. This novel is about the transformation of Ganesh Ramsumair, an East Indian post-indenture survivor into G. Ramsay Muir. Ganesh’s journey is a journey from the anonymity of the Indian peasant community to metropolitan recognition. *The Mystic Masseur* exemplifies the attempts of East Indians in Trinidad to re-create their ancestral homeland through re-enactment of Hindu rituals.

*The Suffrage of Elvira* (1958), also based in Trinidad, is a satirical account of corruption within a democracy. It shows how politics in Elvira is mixed with racism, religion, superstition, greed. Exploitation, corruption, bribery, tricks and cunning are well defined in this novel. Although it features mainly the East Indian community, the novel also looks at the complex and assorted religious socio-cultural situation in multi-racial Elvira.

*Miguel Street* (1959), is a collection of linked short narratives based in Trinidad and Tobago during war time. The street is believed to be a fictionalized version of the street where Naipaul spent his early life. The stories depict the uncertainty of the West Indian society in which the individuals try to get away from the immediate reality of the landscape into a world of fantasy. The inhabitants of the society have chosen to escape from their realities. Alienated from the landscape, the only option left to the inhabitants is to imitate other cultures, other values. There is no national consciousness among them. They lead their lives without any purpose. It is a conglomeration of people from different social, cultural and racial backgrounds where identities are repeatedly lost, reclaimed, challenged and re-furbished.

*A House for Mr. Biswas* (1961), is the story of Mohun Biswas who marries into the powerful Tulsi family and finds himself hemmed in to the extent that he decides to have his own house as a sign of his independent identity. Naipaul's novel deals with Mr Biswas's search for identity in the multi-racial society of Trinidad and the cultural and religious disintegration of the Hindu culture of the Tulsi family under the impact of westernization. Under the influence of a materialistic western culture the sacred Hindu religious practices gradually lose their sanctity. The Hindu rites and rituals are still practiced but the meaning has gone out of them, which also means a certain way of self-recognition is no longer available.

*Mr Stone and the Knights Companion* (1963), focuses on the last two years before retirement in the life of Mr. Stone, an Englishman. Although set in London with exclusively English characters, it has thematic similarities with Naipaul's early novels set in Trinidad in its treatment of the struggle of its protagonist to overcome his sense of alienation and displacement. The tensional relationship between Mr. Stone and the unfriendly surrounding environment acquires the dimensions of existential pain and

isolation. It also projects the inner turmoil of Mr Stone who is haunted by a sense of futility as a result of his living in isolation.

*The Mimic Men* (1967), is about an exiled East Indian politician from the Caribbean island of Isabella, currently trying to put his life in order by writing his memoirs. The novel is not in the form of a linear, chronological memoir. Singh constantly moves backwards and forwards, writes about his childhood and adulthood, his life in England, his political career and marriage and his education to give shape to the past and his experiences. Through writing he is at last able to take control of the fragments of his past and shape them.

*A Flag on the Island* (1967), is a collection of short stories and a novella. The stories depict the dilemmas of immigrants due to the erosion of their traditional structures. They show the disintegration of the Hindu family in the face of multicultural forms of life in Trinidad: a life of meagre opportunities, life in the colonial school, ambition thwarted due to poverty. The stories present the lives of the colonials ironically, reflecting their peripheral existence in an alien world.

*In a Free State* (1971), is about people far from their home country. The work shows the floating lives of homeless migrants who live in a fractured world. They are in a “free state” in the sense that they are free from the control imposed upon people by one’s native country. However, their freedom is also a paradoxical one as they remain uprooted and unanchored and live a life of exile. *In a Free State* consists of five pieces all of which are interrelated through the idea of homelessness and exile.

*Guerillas* (1975), centres round Jimmy Ahmed, Peter Roche and Jane who carry within them a sense of loss, desolation and sterility. The opening of the novel exposes poverty, waste and chaos in post-colonial Caribbean. The unnamed Caribbean island is marked by its poverty and backwardness, the naked children, the heat, and the racially divided world. This sense of dereliction is felt by all the characters of the novel. The narrative shifts between the familiar and the strange, between fact and fiction. As Jimmy points out, he holds the lesser threat of uniting the black people on the island without posing a serious challenge to any capitalist government. If Jimmy feels the people need him he needs them equally. He tries to present himself as a thinker and writer with some sway over the people through the strength of his ideas. Interestingly, he turns his back on

England but some of the methods he adopts appear to be influenced by the West, if not wholly Western.

*A Bend in the River* (1979), is about a newly independent state in the heart of Africa. There are a few Belgians, some Greeks, Italians and Indians who occupy a small town at the bend in the river. These Arabs, Persians and Indians are estranged from their ancestral homes—Arabia, Persia, India. On the other hand, they also fail to identify themselves fully with Africa. So, they fluctuate in spirit at least, between two locations—Africa and the ancestral homelands. Their dilemma increases when under an indigenous ruler these erstwhile migrants are forced to give up ownership rights over their business and property.

*The Enigma of Arrival* (1987), records Naipaul's serious engagement with the pain of being unanchored, the paradox of freedom, the process of change and decay, his own sense of loss and alienation. Believed to be mainly autobiographical, it is a philosophical meditation on the issue of loss and renewal.

In *A Way in the World* (1994), Naipaul fuses socio-cultural, autobiographical and political elements. From his own sense of rootlessness Naipaul turns his attention to examine other displaced individuals who have become victims of colonialism. This work combines autobiography and fiction as Naipaul tries to revisit some of the areas and figures he tackled in *El Dorado*.

*Half a Life* (2001), is about Willie Somerset Chandran, born to Indian parents—a Brahmin father and a Dalit mother—who moves from India to London to study and then on to Africa to live with Ana, a half Portuguese girl. After eighteen years, Willie moves back to Europe to live with his sister in Berlin. In the novel *Half a Life* Naipaul deals with the dilemma of uprooted individuals and their struggle to discover their identities. The novel mainly recounts the life of Willie, his quest for identity, his experiences and his realization of halfness in life. The novel records Willie's exiled life and his search for self-knowledge. Willie's search for a stable identity takes him across three countries—India, England and Africa—and still leaves him unfulfilled.

*Magic Seeds* (2004), is a sequel to *Half a Life*. As the novel *Magic Seeds* opens Willie has left Africa and is living “in a temporary, half-and-half way” with his sister Sarojini.



He is aimlessly drifting in search of meaning and a sense of selfhood. To escape from the half life in London, Willie goes to Africa seeking solidity and meaning in his disordered life. Following Sarojini's advice, Willie decides to go to India and thereafter joins a revolutionary movement. He gradually realizes his mistake and surrenders to the police. His sister manages to bail him out and he returns to London where he gets some of his stories published. He drifts into a middle class life in London, his earlier questing nature in check.

These novels are more often than not inversions of narratives of self-preservation and self-renewal. The anti-*bildungsroman* pattern suggests that the empire pushes the colonial subject into subjugation and despair and forces postcolonial identities from expected into unexpected trajectories of alienation, ambivalence, compromise, hybridity and mimicry. The reversals are ironical, to say the least.

### III

In all his novels Naipaul is concerned with the paradoxical and multivalent nature of realities in contractual spaces generated by mobility, migration and displacement under the long shadow of colonialism. To the extent that identities shift and mutate under displacement, this dissertation works with the following hypotheses:

- (a) that the postcolonial subjects' negotiation of identities in a new geographical and cultural context produces multiple subject positions;
- (b) that, the transcultural narrative of the postcolonial migrant novel is concerned with an 'in-between' space of cultural ambivalence which questions the ideology of a unified cultural norm; and
- (c) that, ambivalence and hybridity disrupt the certainties of colonizer/colonized dichotomy through a reworking of the binary.

This study seeks to explore the 'political' positioning of the postcolonial subject(s) in the texts chosen for analysis. Certain shifts in the narratives of those texts legitimize the provisional aspects of signification whereby identity is endlessly deferred by a scenario in which the narrating subject encounters self-estrangement and dislocation.

The validity of the thesis comes from the fact that studies of the postcolonial detritus in Naipaul have not sufficiently addressed the predicament of the colonizing subject amidst the hybridity surrounding the colonized subject-object. Such a study would push the frontiers both of Naipaul studies and postcolonial criticism. Also the fact that Naipaul has been seen both as a defender and critic of Empire—polarizing critical opinion in the last twenty years or so—requires a thorough examination of Naipaul’s world, especially of the detritus as fact and as figure wherever possible.

The anger and anxiety caused by Naipaul’s early work on India and the Islamic world may have prompted Said to call Naipaul “a witness” of the West’s dark intent (see *Intellectuals* 79). In his essays and remarks on Naipaul, Said refuses to accommodate him in the canons of colonial resistance (see *Exile*). This dissertation does not always agree with Said’s position on Naipaul. In a perceptive essay, Leela Gandhi tries to link the essence of Naipaul’s work to Raymond Williams’ thesis on the country-city opposition in England:

The unwelcome surprise of finding East Africa in London is consistent with the material logic of the colonial pastoral, or, more specifically, with the reverse journeys provoked by its narratives. In *The Country and the City* Williams sees in successive rural emigrations to London, evidence of the dispossession produced, and long repressed, by the material practices underpinning pastoral poetry. The same reading, he writes, applies to the scene of colonial ‘arrival’ into the imperial metropolis.... (*England* 142)

She goes back to the anger and hostility of a section of the postcolonial academy against Naipaul and asks:

Could it be that the reverse migrations foregrounded and lamented in Naipaul’s books also register the savage inequities produced by empire? In other words, might we read his anger with the thirdworlding of poor London as an anger about the repressed realities of the colonial encounter? There is enough in his prolific career that would suggest so. (142)

Gandhi draws conclusion draws from the work of John Thieme, Stephano Harney and Gordon Rohlehr, Sara Suleri, Michael Gorra and Ian Baucom, and seeks to alter our

reading and reception of Naipaul's work. This thesis is an attempt to offer a comprehensive reading of the unevenness of Naipaul's postcolonialism.

Chapter 1, titled "Framing Postcolonial Subject Positions: From Mimicry to Mutation," discusses the notions of identity as a constructed one rather than unified and finalized. The mixture of diverse relationships, mentalities, nationalities, and classes in a hybridized world gives rise to transnational models of identity and belonging that question older notions of fixity and rootedness. The notion of hybridity challenges the validity of any essentialist cultural identity. The diasporic subject is permanently adrift between two different realms of significance: the homeland and its new home in which a definite meaning is a permanent deferral. In the postcolonial world, instead of totalizing perspectives, we are encountered with hybrid and border-crossing identities as a result of new approaches to culture and identity. It is the indeterminate space and in-between subject positions that disrupt and displace established patterns and cultural practices. It also questions essentialist notions of identity and conceptualization of purity and the originary in culture. The cultural assimilation that takes place in a transitional space forms and transforms the subject positions.

Chapter 2, titled "Unlocking the Dispossessed: *The Mystic Masseur*, *Miguel Street* and *A Flag on the Island*" aims to analyze the colonial mimicry and the peripheral existence of dispossessed individuals in these novels. Naipaul's preoccupation with the colonized society's lack of order in *The Mystic Masseur*, *Miguel Street* and *A Flag on the Island* explore the predicament of peripheral figures, and psychological consequences of being colonized. The novels generally depict the dilemmas of immigrants due to the erosion of their traditional structures. The impoverished colonial society where they inhabit provides little opportunity to fulfill any dream and aspiration. Alienated from the landscape, the only option left to the inhabitants is to imitate other cultures, other values. Lack of strong social bond among the inhabitants and the burden of a borrowed culture debar them to engage with the surrounding in a rational way. The chapter aims to examine the struggle of the dispossessed individuals to overcome the wretchedness of their limited lives in a new socio-cultural environment.

Chapter 3 entitled "Reading Hybridity: *A House for Mr Biswas* and *The Suffrage of Elvira*" addresses how the displaced individuals live, narrate and make sense of

multicultural experiences. The multicultural mixing of these people in a changed geographical and cultural climate forces them to negotiate with their hybrid identities. In *A House for Mr Biswas* and *The Suffrage of Elvira* fixity of identity and purity of culture are questioned through a continuous process of cultural negotiation. The aim of this chapter is to examine how westernization, acculturation and a continuous process of hybridization lead to crisis of identity. Both the novels portray the disintegration of the society of Indian immigrants under the influence of borrowed culture, of mimicry and hybridity. The concept of hybridity questions older notions of identity and belonging. Through its emphasis on border crossings, exchanges and negotiations, hybridity diminishes oppositionality and suggests cross-cultural interchange. The concept of hybridity occupies a central place in postcolonial discourse where fixity of identity and purity of culture are always questioned through a continuous process of cultural negotiation.

Chapter 4, titled “Alienating Geographies: *Mr Stone and the Knight’s Companion* and *The Enigma of Arrival*” examines how varying social, political and cultural contexts produce differential articulations of displacement and alienation. *Mr Stone and the Knight’s Companion* deals with alienation and disillusionment of Mr Stone in his native English environment. *The Enigma of Arrival* is about the quest for the writer’s self and the growing understanding of his surrounding in England and his encounter with people who carry their own displacement. In the case of the migrants, the exilic condition is primarily a product of geographical displacement which has psychological and spiritual effects. They always find themselves in a contradictory position between the memories of the old country and uncertainty in the new location. Their physical dislocation became a psychological alienation, and the lost homeland became a geographical territory in the mind. Naipaul’s fiction also shows alienation as an existential problem, as, in the novel *Mr Stone and the Knight’s Companion*, Mr Stone, the protagonist of the novel feels alienated and disillusioned in his own homeland.

Chapter 5, titled “In Contested Spaces: *A Bend in the River*, *The Mimic Men* and *Guerrillas*” examines how the postcolonial migrant individuals celebrate and resist cultural fluidity in the ‘in-between’ spaces where the real and the metaphoric, the literal and the symbolic elements contest and negotiate. This chapter shows how ambivalences intrinsic in those transitional spaces are negotiated in Naipaul’s *A Bend in the River*, *The*

*Mimic Men* and *Guerrillas*. Transnational mobility of people across the globe challenges taken-for-assumptions about identity. The juxtaposition of migrants, diasporas and other groups marginalized in a transnational space provides scope for understanding identity, its meanings and its limitations. The spaces in which these characters inhabit are presented in a continuous process of negotiation and change. The chapter also aims to examine how constant cultural interventions challenge the myth of places having fixed immutable identities. A geographical location does not stand for only one absolute notion. It is characterized by plurality of vision, coexistence of diverse ways of life, multiple identities. A place is not simply a physical location, but also a product of imagination.

Chapter 6, titled “Towards a Contractual Space: *In a Free State, A Way in the World, Half a Life, and Magic Seeds*” examines how mixing of cultures and identities lead to mutual transformation of people from both colonizing and colonized cultures. Colonialism produces crises of identity which affect not only the colonized but also the colonizer. The displacement of European settlers into colonial time and space raises issues regarding the reconfiguration and ‘adulteration’ of Western/colonial identity. The encounter and mutual transformation of people from both colonizing and the colonized cultures in a contractual space of ambivalence, questions the binary oppositions in imperial discourse.

The contractual space intervenes in older notions of identities and challenges unity and fixity of culture. Through its emphasis on negotiation and transaction, it debars us from taking up any stable subject position and opens up the possibilities of heterogeneity of positions. It shows that each position is determined by multiple other positions which questions essential notions of identity. In contractual space binary opposites no longer remain separate. Rather, they coningle and conflict.

It is commonplace to stress Naipaul’s Indo-Caribbean roots, but no study of Naipaul’s work would be complete without examining the repeated transformation of identities around him, especially under the shadow of colonialism and postcolonialism. Irrespective of whether one is dealing with Said’s culture-and-imperialism thesis or Negri and Hardt’s idea of ‘Empire,’ there is no cut-and-dried formula to examine the complex and layered nature of human mobility, oppression, survival, identity and

difference, all under the long shadow of colonialism. This thesis seeks to explore this aspect of mobility and migration through the powerful and transformative novels of Naipaul.