V.S. Naipaul: Themes of Migration

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Introduction

Migration has been a defining factor in the development of our societies and cultures since the very early period of human history. While on one hand human migration has led to the rise of great cultures, on the other it has been the reason for the demise of many ancient societies. Even in the world today, migration continues to play a part in the way we live, but the world today is post-colonial, and when studying migration in the post-colonial setting, the highly influencing aspects of colonization need to be factored in. In this paper, I intend to examine the themes of migration in the works of V.S. Naipaul and try to understand what migration means for the former colonial subject in the post-colonial world.

One of the major motifs in Naipaul's works is the crisis of identity faced by the migrant. This identity crisis stems from the sense of uprootedness experienced by a migrant. Uprootedness for a migrant is both physical and psychological, for migrants have not only been displaced from their ancestral land to a life of landlessness in a new unfamiliar world, but they have also been displaced from their familiar social and cultural settings. Such displacement fuels the migrant to develop a new social system (which typically borrows traits from the migrant's previous social structure) that coalesces itself to the existing socio-cultural settings of his/her new home. The migrant in other words tries to carve a niche for himself in his/her new society. Such efforts are often met with resistance from the existing social setup, especially if the migrant emigrated to a former imperial nation which is yet to accept its brutal colonial past. This results in migrants facing alienation in the new world. The difficulties faced by migrants trying to merge with the new social setting and the resultant alienation faced by them is also a major motif in Naipaul's works.

The following sections of this paper discuss the above-mentioned motifs and how they affect the characters in Naipaul's works.

Migrant Identity Crisis

When people emigrate, not only do they physically leave behind their land, but they also leave behind traditions, shared histories, cultures and social understandings. Migrants therefore find themselves to be truly rootless. They face a constant struggle, as they sort through the rubble of

their heritage and try to construct a new social identity. As migrants go about building their new identities, they also have to undergo the trouble of identifying which heritage to choose from to construct their new identities, for a migrant has a residual heritage that he/she shares with his former home and also has a new heritage to adopt from his new home. How a balance between these heritages is struck is a great migrant dilemma. A migrant is thus stuck between two different heritages, and this only adds to the sense of rootlessness. A good example of a migrant adopting a new tradition to fit in to the new social setting is given by the actor/comedian Russell Peters in his stand-up routines. Peters takes the example of his father, who moved from India to Canada when Peters was a kid. Peters' father believed that to mingle with the Canadian populace, his family must organize and participate in activities that he understands to be typically Canadian. Peters' father, who had seen social gatherings around backyard barbeques in Canada, organizes one to mix in. He also adopts the tradition of Halloween so that his family does not stand apart in his adopted home. Peters states that while on one hand he grew with South-Asian migrant values, on the other he participated in traditional Canadian social activities as his family tried to blend in.

While migrants face the emotional turmoil of uprootedness, they along with it may also face the physical turmoil of landlessness. Landlessness, or being without a house, in a foreign land, is a theme Naipaul touches often in his works. In Naipaul's seminal work, A House for Mr. Biswas, the uprootedness felt by the central character, Mohun Biswas, is based on his state of landlessness. Biswas feels that any settlement of his soul solely depends on him being able to acquire a house that he can call his own. Biswas sees landlessness as the core of his migrant problems. He states that he has always felt like a stranger since he was a small boy. This is because he moved from the house of one stranger to another. The alienation that had settled in was only removed when Biswas acquired his own place. How important this was is evident from the following statement from the novel.

> …he was struck again and again by the wonder of being in his own house, the audacity of it: to walk in through his own front gate, to bar entry to whoever he wished, to close his doors and windows every night, to hear no noises except those of his family, to wander freely from room to room and about his yard, instead of being condemned, as before, to retire the moment he got home to the crowded room in one or the other of Mrs Tulsi's houses, crowded with Shama's sisters, their husbands, their children. As a boy he had moved from one house of strangers to another; and since his marriage he felt he had lived nowhere but in the houses of the Tulsis, at Hanuman House in Arwacas, in the decaying wooden house at Shorthills, in the clumsy concrete house in Port of Spain. And now at the end he found himself in his own house, on his own half-lot of land, his own portion of the earth. That he should have been responsible for this seemed to him, in these last months, stupendous. (2)

A similar crisis is also portrayed in Naipaul's 'A Bend in the River'. Although based in a very different part of the world, (while 'A House for Mr. Biswas' is set in Trinidad and Tobago, 'A Bend in the River' is set in Africa). the turmoil that the central characters undergo are very similar. Salim, the central figure, is an individual of Indian descent living in Africa. This is during a period after the withdrawal of the colonial forces from the African continent. In this novel, the African public is just recovering from the colonial onslaught on their bodies and minds. Left without their former identities, the public is trying to build a comprehensible social structure, a structure that returns African lives to some sort of normalcy. Caught in this revamp of the social order, is Salim. He himself is a man trying to find his place in the social structure. Throughout his quest for identity, Salim is reminded that he is not an African man, but an outsider. Although Salim works with the African community, and also comes to their aid when possible, he does not manage to become a part of their communal structure. When the power shifts hands in Africa, his disassociation from the African people is very evident. Salim who had acquired a business and property in Africa, loses it during the power shift. Salim, because he is considered and outsider, is not deemed to be eligible for stake in Africa's wealth. His property is confiscated and redistributed among the native African people. Salim's life lies uprooted in his adopted home, and subsequently he is asked to move out of the continent if he wishes to not face any potential backlash.

The postcolonial identity crisis also plays out in the lives of native African's in 'A Bend in the River'. After the colonial powers leave, they leave Africa in ruins. Colonialism ravages Africa, for it succeeds in dismantling all traditional social and cultural systems. Africa, in the effort to form a new social structure, ends up in conflict over what identity must prevail. The powerful tribes try to annihilate the identity their not-so-powerful compatriot tribes. The struggle is such that many conflicts of varying identities lead to massacres and pillages as Africa plunges into the heart of postcolonial darkness, a darkness engendered by imperialism, a darkness from which the continent is still emerging in the new millennium.

In trying to develop a comprehensive understanding of the uprootedness faced by migrants, it is important to look at how the evolution of post-colonial neo-capitalism has defined the life of the migrant. In a 2005 paper, Silverstein states that "migration represented the ultimate violence of capitalist accumulation inflicted upon the poorest populations "up-rooted" from their lifestyles and displaced from their homes. As such, rather than the calculating laborer, the migrant was recategorized as the uprooted victim, an equally racialized and gendered subjectivity that contrasted with the "rooted" members of reified cultures turned citizens of modern nation-states" (Silverstein, 2005).

In addition, Silverstein borrows from the Marxist theories of Nikolinakos and states that:

> migration emerged primarily within the context of an internationalization of late capitalism and a burgeoning dependency relation between center and periphery. Ongoing

imperialism fostered the importation of temporary, cheap labor to the metropole, which ensured the internal disunity of the working class, and, most importantly, stabilized the regime of capital accumulation through the maintenance of an industrial reserve army of cheap, renewable labor. (Silverstein, 2005)

The displacement of people to fulfil the needs of cheap labour, and the resultant uprootedness of the migrant labour can be seen as a theme in Naipaul's works. In his work 'In a Free State' the character of Santosh encounters similar conditions when he is forced to move to the United States leaving his world behind in Bombay. Santosh struggles to survive on his meager allowances whilst living in a cupboard at his employer's place in Washington. He also finds it difficult to cope with the capitalistic society which looks at him as an outsider, a person who does not belong (although he is an integral part of the labour force). In Bombay, although Santosh worked as a domestic help for cheap, he did not feel forlorn and alienated, for Bombay provided him a support structure. This structure largely included other domestic helps (including drivers and gardeners) who would gather after their work and share issues of their daily lives. While in Bombay Santosh felt that he was among equals, in Washington he feels looked down upon. His statement to his employer sums up his migrant experience: "O sahib, but they can just look at me and see I am dirt" (28).

Alienation in the Life of Migrants

With uprootedness and an unclear sense of identity comes the feeling of not being at home. Add to this the fact that the world around you looks at you as an outsider, and a complete sense of alienation sets in. Alienation in this sense is the feeling of having lost your religion, culture, and even your social ground. Migrants also have to typically deal with poverty while already facing identity crisis and socio-cultural alienation.

In Naipaul's works, migrant alienation has a big role in the development of characters. Characters like Mohan Biswas (*A House for Mr. Biswas*) and Ganesh Ramsumair (*The Mystic Masseur*) tackle their sense of alienation as they evolve a modified migrant identity. In the process of developing their identities, the characters dextrously work with their adopted social systems and try to emerge as individuals not alien to the system. Working with the system involves not just adopting values and ideals from the system, but also involves giving up certain aspects of their old social and cultural values. Forgoing old values entail changes both small and large (in their developing but still nascent migrant individual identities). The characters typically emerge stronger in Naipaul's novels after they have constructed their new identities. Naipaul, in other words, uses alienation as a stepping stone to identity and character development.

Characters in Naipaul's novels are not weak, and more often than not they are individuals with a good understanding of their social surroundings. The modifications they make to their life, are therefore well thought out, for they understand what changes shall help them cope in the alien world they inhabit. Ganesh for example observes that changing your name helps you move up

the social ladder, and in his case, it does. Intelligent choices do not always bear the desired fruit though, for life in Naipaul's works is realistic and not a romanticised ideal. For Salim from 'A Bend in the River' this is the case. Salim in his quest for recognition aligns himself with the powerful new government, hoping that the right connections will help him move from the label of a migrant to that of a native. Things do not pan out as Salim expects though. The government in their effort to move away from colonial practices, snatches away Salim's land and possessions. They are subsequently redistributed among the native populace, and Salim is forced to flee the country.

For Mohan Biswas, the route to finding a respectable identity is the most complex. He has to move away from the complex Hindu-Brahminical setup of his wife's family (the Tulsis) in order to overcome the alienation he faces. He has to, in other words, move away from an established social setup, a setup he feels is forcing him to adhere to an alien identity, and in the process is emotionally strangulating him. The salvation for Biswas comes in the form of acquiring a new house. Here he is free to develop a new identity for himself and his family, away from the social bonds that the Tulsis imposed on him.

Naipaul's characters are also a reflection of the statelessness that Naipaul himself faced. The quest of his characters to overcome alienation and develop a new identity are a reflection of Naipaul's personal experiences.

> …the condition of the dislocated and dispossessed is especially poignant and complicated because they cannot find a "home" of their own. VS. Naipaul himself experienced, and repeatedly described in his fiction, this particular urge. Throughout his life he has desired a place to identify with. From genealogical mining, especially in his homeland (the Caribbean), through the quest for his cultural roots (India), and finally to his place of education (England) — he has attempted to search for his own identity. Being an Indian by ancestry, a Trinidadian by birth, and an Englishman by education, V.S. Naipaul possesses a multi-cultural background. As a colonial, he has always needed to locate his place in the world through writing. Prolific and critical in both fiction and nonfiction, he presents colonial anxieties in his quest for self-identity. (Leela, 35)

In addition to the personal experiences that Naipaul brings to his works, he also brings experiences of migration that he acquired in his travels. (For example, 'In a Free State' is based on Naipaul's experiences on his travel to Africa). These vast experiences of migration allow Naipaul to build characters who are vary varied from one another. The experience of migration of each character in his works are therefore unique. Naipaul is able to show how migration works differently for each character depending on the character's specific social, cultural and economic backgrounds. Not only do the characters experience migration differently, but they also resolve their migration related crises differently. Naipaul is able to show how the reason for migration is different for each individual, and also how the expectations of migration are varied. How class

has a major role to play in migrant identities and migrant expectations is also something that Naipaul portrays well. The following example from 'In a Free State' explains this point well. In the first story in this collection, Santosh is a domestic help, who works for an employer who is a government servant. When his employer is transferred to Washington from Bombay on government duty, Santosh accompanies his employer. This is where the issue of class becomes very vivid and clear. While the government servant is busy putting his best face in front of the American public, for he believes that he represents India, and any flaw in his character will be a blot on India's image. Santosh on the other hand is busy trying to come to terms with the new life. The new life for Santosh is that of financial hardship, social dis-acceptance and emotional turmoil. He is also left to stay in a cupboard with all his belongings. (When his employer finds out that Santosh is staying in a cupboard, he feels not for Santosh, but for how an Indian staying in a cupboard would hamper the country's image). His employer also tries to make his home look presentable, and decorates it in aesthetics of an elite Indian. Santosh does not find this to be any similar to home, and remains distant from it.

"My employer was a man of taste and he soon had the apartment looking like something in a magazine, with books and Indian paintings and Indian fabrics and pieces of sculpture and bronze statues of our gods. I was careful to take no delight in it. It was of course very pretty, especially with the view. But the view remained foreign and I never felt that the apartment was real, like the shabby old Bombay chambers with the cane chairs, or that it had anything to do with me" (74).

Santosh craves for the old Bombay atmosphere because he finds it to be more real and relatable. This episode shows the distinctions based on class lines, even among migrants. While Santosh is facing hardships which are related to his daily survival, his employer has completely unrelated concerns.

Conclusion

To conclude, Naipaul shows varied perspectives of migration through the eyes of individuals who come from different classes and socio-cultural structures, but each experience is presented in his works with a touch of post-colonial reality. This makes his works a magnum-opus for understanding, examining, and deconstructing migrant experiences.

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