

A STRANGER IN HIS HOMELAND- IDENTITY QUEST OF VS NAIPAUL

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Introduction

"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. 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 favorite 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."

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. 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*) 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". (Critical Perspectives)

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.

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. 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.

To conclude this brief 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.

References

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