

Themes Prevalent In The Novels Of V.S. Naipaul

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Naipaul's works take the reader on a journey of experiences from the local to the global and from a narrow perspective to a broader and more encompassing vision. This chapter will discuss some of the prominent themes in Naipaul's fiction. Mr. Naipaul's works are set in many places and explore many themes, but he is best known for his knowing depictions of Trinidad, where he was born and reared; for his explorations of modern-day India, his ancestral land; and for his bleak, unsparing portraits of postcolonial countries in Africa, Asia and South America. His fiction is often highly autobiographical, returning again and again to the themes of alienation, the burdens of the past, and the confusions of the present.

In a rare moment of self-revelation during his acceptance lecture for his Nobel Prize in Stockholm, Naipaul notes:

"I said earlier that everything about me is in my books. I will go further now. I will say I am the sum of my books. Each book intuitively sensed and, in the case of fiction, intuitively worked out. Stands on what has gone before, and grows out of it. I feel that at any stage of my literary career it could have been said that the last book contained all the others.

It's been like this because of my background. My background is at once exceedingly simple and exceedingly confused. I was born in Trinidad. It is a small island in the mouth of the great Orinoco river of Venezuela. So Trinidad is not strictly of South America, and not strictly of the Caribbean. It was developed as a New World plantation colony, and when I was born in 1932 it had a population of about 400,000. Of this, about 150,000 were Indians, Hindus and Muslims, nearly all of peasant origin, and nearly all from the Gangetic plain."

William Walsh in his book V.S. Naipaul says,

"Themes to him assume the forms of action and ideas appeal to him only in so far as they satisfy him, as per Henry James, "the appetite for the illustrational." His vision is his own, unenervated by contemporary social clichés or political routines. He is engaged with the stresses and strains we recognize as crucial in our experience now. His writing is nervous and present. This, together with the mixture in him of creeds, cultures and continents, with his expatriate career, his being able to practice an art in and of totally dissimilar worlds, all gives him a peculiarly contemporary quality."¹

Trinidadian themes occupy a privileged place, underlying the majority of Naipaul's writings. The Mystic Masseur, The Suffrage of Elvira, Miguel Street, A House for Mr. Biswas, A Flag on the Island,

The Mimic Men, In a Free State, Guerrillas and the Enigma of Arrival, are all related to Trinidad, V.S. Naipaul's childhood home. Though the analysis of Trinidad is not an easy task, because V.S. Naipaul immigrated at an early age to Great Britain, where he has been living ever since.

His first published work The Mystic Masseur is an allegory of the history of the Hindu community in Trinidad. Ganesh, the hero of the novel is a representative figure of the East Indians in Trinidad and their move towards city life. One could sense a conflict between the Eastern and Western worlds in which Ganesh finds himself trapped. The novel describes the Second World War,

*"This was the beginning of the war.... The cultural upheaval already set in motion by the colonial education system, gained momentum through the modernizing forces unleashed by the Second World War. It is the rural society of Trinidad that Naipaul has tried to capture through the character of Ganesh."*²

The Suffrage of Elvira is a comic novel concerning the buying of votes in an isolated, predominantly Hindu community during the second election by universal adult suffrage in Trinidad. In this work Naipaul's critical eye is on the first general election held in a town where possibilities of democratic reform abort because of longstanding petty group enmities: Hindu- Muslim, Black- White, and Indian-Spaniard.

Naipaul describes the life of an indentured laborer, dogging by misfortune and humiliation in his masterpiece A House for Mr. Biswas. Through the character Mohun Biswas, reconstruction of his father's life and his own youth in Trinidad; he describes the life of East Indians taken to Trinidad as indentured laborers in the sugarcane fields.

In Trinidad every small issue turned out to be a big event for people. This psychology of people of Trinidad is depicted through a galaxy of characters during World War Two in The Miguel Street, a tribute to Naipaul's childhood home.

This is an image that also appears in the story "A Flag on the Island," where the reader can identify the unnamed island as Trinidad.

*"Red dust hung in a cloud above the bauxite loading station, disfiguring the city and the hills."*³

In addition to this, some novels and short stories do not longer refer to Trinidad as such, but replace it with islands. But, there are many elements like geographical, historical and ethnic which reflect the multicultural character of Trinidad.

In Helen Hayward's opinion, Naipaul "returns repeatedly to his origins, to tell the story of his life over and over again in a variety of forms."⁴

DISPLACEMENT, ALIENATION AND ROOTLESSNESS:

V.S. Naipaul has spent a lifetime pondering his place in the world, trying to square his own ancestral culture with that of England, the country he adopted as his home.

Alienation is usually defined as a feeling of separation or isolation, associated with minorities, the poor and other groups of periphery who have limited power to bring about changes in society. Mr. Biswas, the protagonist of A House for Mr. Biswas, is the unaccommodated man representing the outcast's symbolic quest for a place in the hostile universe. A sense of place and self, which was difficult for East Indians in Trinidad to have.

It is difficult in Naipaul's case to define, 'home.' The word home is linked with identity, so his works often centers on identity, quest and displacement. Naipaul's writings frequently carry references to his cultural heritage, rooted in; Trinidad (birth place), India (ancestral place) and Britain (place of education). Naipaul says,

*"The English Language was mine, the tradition was not."*⁵

This problem of displacement is depicted in *A House for Mr. Biswas*. Mr. Biswas, portrayal of Naipaul's own father, a man caught up in three cultures. It depicts Naipaul's own cultural dislocation and displacement. Naipaul's strongest vision of destruction of identity through geographical displacement is found in his novel *In a Free State*. The story rotates around the protagonist, who attempts to reach a 'free state.'

In *The Enigma of Arrival*, Naipaul again comes to terms with his own cultural dislocation and displacement.

".....a rootlessness which matches his own, is equally what Naipaul has discovered in Mr. Stone," in Mr. Stone and the Knights Companion.

Thus Naipaul's plot of most of the novels has a dominant theme of Alienation, Displacement or Rootlessness.

POST- COLONIAL THIRD WORLD:

V.S. Naipaul has always represented a denial of the third-world spirit. Naipaul has represented societies that have recently emerged from colonialism. He describes the way these societies function in the post-colonial order. Though imperialism has passed and the colonies have attained an independent status, but these nations of the Third World faces a lot of problems like economic, social and political. Damage is also done to the psyche of the colonized people, through the subtle process of cultural colonization.

V.S. Naipaul is termed as a West Indian novelist of the colonial experience. As a post- colonial novelist, Naipaul concentrates on major themes related to the problems of the colonized people. As an observer and interpreter of the ex- colonies, he exposes the inadequacies of such societies. In his novels, *The Mimic Men*, *Guerrillas*, *A Bend in the River*, *In a Free State* etc., the themes acquire a universality and observes and presents the fragmentation and alienation happen to be the universal predicament of man in the present day world. Some eminent Third World critics concentrate mainly on Naipaul's development as a creative artist who picks up issues relating to the Third World. His works throw light on the Post-colonial and post- imperial realities that have shaped the contemporary societies and provides important insights relating to them. Naipaul's novels lead to a better understanding of the problems that are faced by the post- imperial generations.

DISORDER AND ESCAPE:

Robert Boyers has observed,

*"Naipaul is our primary novelist of disorder and breakdown."*⁵

A large part of Naipaul's fiction is set in the independent states of America and Caribbean, with a pessimistic view. The natives of such places are unable to establish order.

Naipaul, in his very first published work *Miguel Street*, depicts the conditions of disorder in Port of Spain, Trinidad. Boyers remarks that Naipaul,

*“Seems more interested in a spiritual or psychological state than in the machinery of action”*⁶

Thus Naipaul uses a spiritual and psychological state as well to show the conditions of disorder and escape.

*“To be born on an island like Isabella.....was to be born to disorder.”*⁷

A VARIATION ON THE THEME OF VIOLENCE AND ANTAGONISM:

Violence is a thoroughly used tool in the novels of V.S. Naipaul. The violence in his stories is not exclusively physical, but it is also intellectual. This violence stand for a barrier against self- realization. This violence is shown to violate the integrity of a society. It becomes a vicious cycle, into which Naipaul’s characters find themselves engaged, which takes them from the state of submission to that of revolt against this violence.

In the social, political and cultural context Naipaul’s characters evolve in makes of antagonism, in all its forms; an essential characteristic of any relationship. Antagonism and Violence are overwhelming in *Miguel Street*. They are a galaxy of characters, fighting for the recognition of their status in the street.

Works Cited:

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5. Robert Boyers, “V.S.Naipaul,” in *The American Scholar*, Summer 1981, p. 118, 366
6. Keith Garebian, “V.S. Naipaul’s Negative Sense of Place,” *Journal of Commonwealth literature*, p.23-24
7. John Thieme, *The Web of Tradition*, p. 34
8. Peter Hughes, “Brennpunkt Der Illusionen,” 1993, p. 28-29