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## Acculturation in the Novels of V.S. Naipaul

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### Abstract:

V.S. Naipaul, a twice removed diasporic writer, succeeded in exploring the culture of East Indian communities in Trinidad and their desire to strike roots and attain an authentic selfhood. He depicted the changes that occur in members of a minority group in contact with another dominant culture. Cultural alienation, acculturation and homelessness became recurrent themes in his novels. He created unlimited incidents and memorable characters, and through them he succeeded in depicting the plight of Indian diaspora. The immigrants succumb to the pressures of the dominant culture; once they leave their homeland to settle in foreign lands, they begin to adopt the beliefs and behaviour of the dominant group.

### Keywords: Acculturation, Assimilation, Diaspora, Hubshi, Kali

Emigration from South Asia has been a dominant behavioural pattern on the subcontinent for centuries. Emigration has its origins in the Indus valley civilization whose merchants frequented other lands. Prominent movements began after the death of Buddha (563-483 B.C.), when his disciples travelled to Eastern and Central Asia to propagate his teachings. The nineteenth century brought a radical change to the character of India's diaspora: small scale emigration became a mass movement to provide cheap labour for Britain's colonies. Conditions of abject poverty in certain sections of India or the prospect of gaining wealth overseas motivated people to sell themselves into servitude. Since India gained her independence in 1947, emigration has continued; it has not been limited to England and the new Commonwealth, but has spread to the United States, Australia and the Middle East.

When India obtained independence in 1947, many Westerners greeted the event with scepticism. The departing British were certain that Indians would be begging them to come back and rule their country within a year. But India is one of the few countries which, having achieved independence, has maintained a relatively stable government. India is a country with diverse cultures: three major racial groups, four prominent religious communities, and many language categories. An important fact about the country's development is that beginning with Jawaharlal Nehru and continuing under Dr. Manmohan Singh, India has embarked on an ambitious programme of industrialization. As the country has developed industrially and technology, emphasis on education has enabled India to produce highly educated and technically qualified people. However, India cannot employ them, thus many

have emigrated and now provide their expertise not only to the western countries, but also to Africa, Asia, and the Middle East.

Indians go to these countries with dreams of success, wealth and grandeur, and most of them achieve them. They appear to have no difficulty assimilating into the society they live in: professionals dress in tailored suits and have meticulous haircuts and sophisticated manners: they host parties and entertain colleagues and bosses in a manner that is acceptable within the highest levels of that society. However, underneath that exterior of adjustment, lies a tension that is manifest only to those of their own kind. They often feel that they have traded the solidity of their Indian culture for the tinsel and inferiority of western ways — they may have traded heaven for hell. When an emigrant leaves his/her country he goes through acculturation in order to assimilate into the new society and at the same time deculturation takes place i.e., loss of the original culture. However, when he returns to his/her native land — either to contribute or he/she is fed up with the new environment — he/she has to go through reculturation i.e., to learn again what he/she had learnt through enculturation (first learning).

Many writers have written about the Third World countries but Naipaul has been writing with a difference. Isolated due to displacement and by temperament from the allegiance to any country, community or creed, Naipaul examines the world with an open eye. Displacement from India and Trinidad are the two predicament forces operating behind his vision. Naipaul's strength lies in his ability to create unlimited incidents and memorable characters like Biswas, Mrs. Tulsi, Beharry, B. Wordsworth, Harbans, Ganesh, Ralph Singh and Willie. Through them he succeeded in exploring the culture of East Indian communities, their desire to strike roots and attain an authentic selfhood. In his works we discern the changes that occur in members of a minority group in contact with another dominant culture. These immigrants after a period of time try to adapt themselves to new conditions of life.

Cultural alienation, acculturation and homelessness become recurrent themes in Naipaul's novels. In *In a Free State* (1971) we find all the characters all the time on the move. They appear to be uprooted, moving about 'In a Free State'. Their ability to accommodate themselves in their societies makes them feel that the environment is hostile to them. Their predicament involves a sense of loss. "One Out of Many", the first of three short stories of the book, is an indictment of the activities of the blacks in the United States. It deals with the liberation of Santosh, a servant from Bombay, is taken by an Indian diplomat to America. But soon he becomes involved with the *hubshi* who themselves are lost and live in an unreal world. He leaves his employer and becomes an illegal immigrant worried about deportation and marries a black woman to get citizenship. When his high expectations of an easy way of life did not materialize, he became disillusioned. His escape from Indian servitude, in a way, is a fall from innocence. The condition of liberation or freedom he thus achieves by breaking faith with the dependent relationship is similar to that of the once colonised territories. Of this victory or independence Santosh could only say, "The victory I had was not something I had worked for, but luck; and that luck was only fate's cheating, giving an illusion of power."<sup>1</sup>

Santosh's first halting steps towards the sense of individuality, which is pivotal to the survival in the new society, come in response to sexual interest. A *hubshi* woman finds him attractive so he goes to the mirror to find out why. The discovery of an individual identity predictably yields an intense self-preoccupation, which, arguably, is anathema within his inherited cultural framework and endemic within his host society. The discovery that he has a face — unique and handsome — coincides with the recognition that he inhabits a racialised

body. This, in turn, generates a frenzy of comparison with culturally determined, representationally ossified televised images of American beauty. The same applies to clothing. His domestic garb, neither clean nor dirty, is an appropriate signifier of his situation in the old world. In the new culture, it speaks of strangeness, filthiness and poverty.

The recurrent motifs of Santosh's psychical displacement are helplessness and claustrophobia. As he gradually becomes acquainted with the metropolitan maze, he hovers in what Turner terms an ambiguous threshold state. In his nightmarish wanderings, he vacillates between humility, nothingness and a sense of tentative potentiality to become and even perchance to belong. Santosh, who has not been homeless on a Bombay pavement now is cast adrift seeking a context within which to locate himself. He learns painfully that identity is first mirrored by community and subsequently appropriated by an individual. His caste sensibility imparts the fear of contamination that hinders from making contact with the other.

Santosh wanders in and out of potential sub-cultural communities; mainstream culture remains hermetically sealed behind the televised screen. His initial encounter is with a friendly *hubshi* cashier who teaches him his first English words: 'Me black and beautiful'. The pronominal reference is ambiguous but one can infer from this an invitation to locate himself as a 'soul brother'. The second phrase invites him to adopt a stance that is oppositional and adversarial to the dominant authority structure. The entire formula is "Me black and beautiful .... He pig."<sup>2</sup> He wanders into cafes without shoes only to be rejected as a hippie; in the hippie café he is welcomed but atavistically sniffed because he carries the pervasive odour of hashish. Eligibility for access to each potential community is cast in negatives — he is not white like the *hubshi*; not a soul brother because he cannot identify with their struggle; not non-conformist like the bare-footed weed smoking hippies; not disguised (externally) like the Mexican waiters dressed to provide Indian authenticity at the restaurant.

It is in his relationship with Priya that Santosh's most valid option for community emerges. Priya, who has successfully maneuvered the bitter sweet phases of transition and has attained a viable hybrid identity, emerges as a guide and model of acculturation. Blending divergent stereotypes, he retains that marvellous, linguistic meandering and philosophical bent of India, astutely combined with the hard-headed business acumen of America. Moreover, Santosh names him as an individual and potentially as a friend.

The high point of Santosh's perception of his radical racial difference and horror at being defiled by contact crystallizes in his obsession with the African-American whom he signifies as *hubshi*. Underlying the obsession is the strong sense of sexual fascination/revulsion which steadily accumulates. It is not surprising then that an overpowering female figure surfaces in the African-American woman with whom he eventually defiles himself through sexual union. Santosh's fear of violation with the *hubshi* is based on the belief in Karma and transmigration.

It is written in our books both holy and not so holy, that it is indecent and wrong for a man of our blood to embrace the *hubshi* woman. To be dishonoured in this life is to be born a cat or a monkey or a *hubshi* in the next!

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With the growing recognition of the individuality and freedom to act comes an imperative to accept responsibility for action. It is here that the Santosh's environment with the *hubshi* woman (whom he constructs as Kali) as a consort takes on dual significance.

There is much to support an interpretation that his sexual union with the *hubshi* betrays his basic inability to move into an individuality and responsibility. The incident is narrated with subtle shifts in voice that reveal how Santosh rejects responsibility for the act.

The smell was too much; so was the sight of her armpits. I fell. She dragged me down on the couch. I saw the movement, helplessly, as one of dishonour. I saw her as Kali, goddess of death and destruction, coal-black, with a red tongue and white eyeballs and many powerful arms. I expected her to be wild and fierce but she added insult to injury by being very playful, as though, because I was small and strange, the act was real. She laughed all the time. I would have liked to withdraw, but the act took over and completed itself. And then I felt dreadful.<sup>4</sup>

The *hubshi* woman bears the symbolic weight of Santosh's fear and resistance to the Indo-American hybrid identity that is inexorably emerging. But there is an even deeper denial. The dual significance of Kali myth and symbolism poses another alternative. Santosh's caste sensibility imparts virulent, deep-rooted fear of despoliation generate a desperate and extreme vulnerability. Yet to gain citizenship, Santosh eventually marries the *hubshi*. In yielding to the black woman's flesh, Santosh is saying yes to death; death of the old self. Yet tacitly, he is acknowledging, as all migrants must, the possibility of rebirth of a new hybrid self. On the physical plane, his union can potentially say yes to life, to sensuality, to procreation and to the other face of the dark goddess: "Kali's dark, voluptuous, bloody presence is similarly wet... immodest in her nudity and aggressive in her sensuality, she represents the ever fertile womb from which springs the eternal throb of life... the throb of life gone out of control..."<sup>5</sup> He is caught in a malestorm of change, unable to return, afraid to proceed. Santosh's mating with Kali/ *the hubshi*, represents the potential to take to his bosom the forbidden thing which encapsulates all his fears — loss of self, language, order, framework of meaning, caste and ritual pollution.

V.S. Naipaul often uses the satiric mode while presenting the Indian in Trinidad. In *The Middle Passage* (1962), he reflects his observations upon his visits to Trinidad after several years in England. After reading *The Middle Passage* (1962), it can be understood that Naipaul wants us to realise that absurdity, distortion and self-interest are the forces that control the behaviour of the Indian community in Trinidad. Naipaul criticizes his people's corrupted politicians and their understanding of democracy by caricaturising the socio-political aspects of their lives. Another point that he criticises in his work is 'pseudo-whiteness' of the Indian community in Trinidad. As the people are not loyal to their community and their family, they are not loyal to their ethnicity and cultural heritage. They try to adopt a white's perspective and also to the other minorities. They like to behave as if they belong to the superior race. This is reflected in *The Middle Passage* (1962) as:

The Negro has a deep contempt... for all that is not white; his values are the values of white imperialism as it most bigoted... Like monkey pleading for evolution, each claiming to be whiter than the other, Indians and Negroes appeal to the unacknowledged white audience to see how much they despise one another. They despise one another by reference to whites.<sup>6</sup>

There is a bitter constraint behind the Indian immigrants. In *The Mystic Masseur* (1957), there are several examples to depict Indians' envy for whiteness. However, the most significant one is Ganesh's changing his name, as a refusal of his ethnic identity. Ganesh is "so ashamed of his Indian name that for a while he spread that he was really called

Gareth.”<sup>7</sup> Actually, the reason why he is so ashamed of his ethnic identity is because of the other boys’ making fun of him. Otherwise he does not realise that he looks funny at all. What is more, when his father made wear khaki suit and khaki toupee, he felt that he ‘looked important’. However, when he encounters others’ reaction he feels ashamed of whatever makes him an Indian: his toupee, khaki suit, name, skin colour, etc. By the way, as for the ones who are making fun of him are not the white but they are the Negro. They see the right to make fun of Indians no matter how both the races are despised by the whites.

Both Indians and Negroes try their best to resemble the white. However, this end cannot be achieved by either of them. Ganesh changes his surname to the name of a British historian “Ramsay Muir”, and omits his Hindu first name. Naipaul used his change of name and address to symbolise the acculturation of the West Indians to pseudo-western pattern of life. Naipaul writes about acculturation of Indians with bitterness, despair and regret. Their desire to be white symbolises their desire to get rid of their ethnic identity. Like Ganesh, Naipaul himself eliminated both of his names that are long and hard to pronounce and he used only the Initials of his name i.e. V.S. Naipaul mocks at the attendees of the dinner at Government House, because of their attempt to resemble the white. Several of the guests including Ganesh, do not know how to use their knives and forks properly. Naipaul describes such people in *The Middle Passage* (1962) as being “like monkey pleading for evolution.”<sup>8</sup> He ridicules their bad grammar, lack of taste and social grace. The main point that Naipaul criticises is their ridiculous attempt to be white. Through this depiction of Indian and Trinidadian society in Trinidad, Naipaul shows how people adopt themselves to the new environment in non-native places.

Almost all the characters in his novels are found to be striving for acculturation in order to attain the ultimate goal i.e., the identity they lose in non-native lands. However, acculturation helps them to a great extent but in the end, the face that is reflected in the mirror remains unrecognisable. The pains of acculturation are poignantly portrayed by Naipaul. In all expatriate writers the dilemma to choose between the adopted land and homeland is the central driving force around which move issues such as racial discrimination, cultural conflict, the persistent sense of loss and a desire for a home. This inevitable conflict has its own ramifications at individual as well as universal level.

Naipaul’s comments on the immigrant community clarify the picture. Although their journey from India to Trinidad was an uprooting from the native soil, they were carrying India with them in their consciousness. As a result, they were able to recreate Uttar Pradesh or Bihar wherever they went. However, it was an imaginative India, an India without caste and in the course of time, India could be seen to be no more than a habit, a self-imposed psychological restraint. Acculturation takes place in such societies. It is interesting to note that this is what happens in Part 2 of *A House for Mr. Biswas* (1961). The well-knit Hindu family organisation yields to the overwhelming pressures of changing circumstances. Owad, Anand and Savi go abroad, Shekhar marries into a Presbyterian family and leaves the fold, Govind and the Tuttles are both transformed by American money — all this symbolised unbridled ambition and brought about uncertainty. For some time, certain things like the temples, the food, the rites and the names remain unchanged. However, in the course of time, Indian names get anglicised and are not easily recognisable to the people in India. The Shama coolbal and Permesar are such changed versions of the more familiar Shyama Khoobal and Permeshwar which indicate increasing of distance from the original culture of their homeland.

Truly speaking, Naipaul is a global interpreter of human maladies and struggles of both the individuals and the societies to come to terms with their unsettled destinies. Through his characters Naipaul succeeds in depicting the plight of Indian diaspora. The immigrants succumb to the pressures of the dominant culture; once they leave their homeland to settle in foreign lands, they begin to adopt the beliefs and behaviour of the dominant group. Assimilation of one cultural group into another may be evidenced by changes in language preference, adoption of common attitudes and values.

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