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A study of placelessness in V.S. Naipaul's life and works

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ABSTRACT

This paper entitled *A Study of Placelessness in V. S. Naipaul's Life and Works* focuses and analyzes with great sovereignty how the fire of getting a place fulgurates repeatedly in V. S. Naipaul's own life and his works. This theme, directly or indirectly, has been smeared by him in some of his fiction and non-fiction works. The paper analyzes uselessness, rootlessness, placelessness, selflessness and unsuccessfulness of his characters. Place becomes burning issue in his own life also. In Naipaul's works, his characters deliberately get staunch support by him as they personally feel a lack of a suitable place to affirm and confirm their presence in the mundane world. This paper is an attempt to give answer why is called Naipaul rootless despite of having his good roots not only in Trinidad but also in the other countries of the world and why his characters feel suffocation and seem taciturn. Naipaul gave vent to his accumulated anguish or grief through his characters in his works. Naipaul, a noted raconteur, to what extent remains successful in his endeavors with regard of the concept of place, is the key concept of this paper.

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Introduction

This paper analyzes Naipaul's rootlessness and placelessness in his life. It is a study of the concept of place in V. S. Naipaul's life which emerges in many fictions and non-fiction works in his credit. Many characters endure the agony of placelessness in Naipaul's fictions, non-fictions and travelogues. The first wave of the native born authors like Naipaul, Lamming, Selvon, Césaire and Glissant have spent a long time of their lives abroad and that's why a question of a place is posed in their mind. Here the place is symbol of their identity in a foreign land to make them part of the world. Before the analysis of his works, first of all, it is important to peep into Naipaul's life. Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul, known as V. S. Naipaul, is born 1932 on the Caribbean island of Trinidad—then a British colony of East Indian Emigrants—a Hindu orthodox Brahmin family whose forefathers came there as indentured labourers to work on the vast sugarcane estates. Gradually, Naipaul's grandfather acquired status, wealth, land and a place for them to live a happy and satisfied life as a pundit or a religious Hindu scholar. V. S. Naipaul's life and career go side by side. He travels to different places not with an objective to reach far-off countries but to see life in a new way. He is a great novelist, short-story writer, historian, essayist and travel-writer whose writing career spans more than 50 years in which he has won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2001 and many prestigious awards and literary honors. He has written more than twenty five fictions and non-fiction works. Life in fictions is fictitious and it is much far from the reality. That's why Naipaul chose travelogues not to reach remote destinations only for the sake of his interest in travelling but to strike a balance to give authenticated details as he found the fiction an inadequate vehicle to express authenticity of events and dialogue-delivery. The concept of place is not only centered to Trinidad, India, or England but also with different characters in his works in the different countries of the world. He is considered master of English prose and the postcolonial genre. His father got

education and he lived with his wife's extended joint family in two homes, one 'Lion House' in Chaguanas and another in the capital of Port of Spain. These two houses have been depicted as Hanuman House and the Tulsi's city residence respectively in the novel *A House for Mr. Biswas*. Anand Biswas, in the novel seems to be Naipaul himself who was sent to attend the best high school of the Trinidad at that time, Queen's Royal College. Then he went to Oxford for higher education on a scholarship. In 1954 when he had earned an English degree, he felt placeless because he had to embattle British xenophobia and he had to strive a lot to make his own place as a writer in a foreign land. The symbolic representation of the place stands for the identity in a foreign world. The place is an amalgam of both natives and emigrants. V. S. Naipaul is dissatisfied with his life due to the issue of placelessness in his life. When the question of place was asked from Naipaul, he replied that he wanted to go to a prettier place, "I just wanted to go to a prettier place... I just felt I was in the wrong place" (Levin 93). His infestation with a new place is implicit and marked by his leaving the homeland Trinidad and going to England for further studies. These ideas of place are prevailed in many of the fictions, non-fictions and travelogues written by Naipaul. Naipaul is dissatisfied with his birth-place Trinidad as to Naipaul; it is not a developed and modern state because it has socio-cultural problems such as racial prejudices, political corruption and different living and eating-habits. Naipaul has doubt on the independence of Trinidad and Tobago even after the declaration of their independence when he notices the people are still mentally handicapped and in dilemma what to do. Naipaul calls Trinidad and Tobago a 'materialist immigrant society' with no political or cultural orientation and doubts whether the inhabitants can ever become truly independent (MP 49). Trinidadian people think British Empire their true identity, "it was only our Britishness, our belonging to the British Empire, which gave us identity" (MP 37). Naipaul's obsession for travelling led him to many countries of the world. His interest in these places is implicit from his persistence in

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writing travelogues and short-stories. Naipaul is interested in these places since his childhood. The cultural-clash of these places has been seen by him since his childhood. That's why as he got time he penned down those memories in the form of his works. His earlier works such as *Miguel Street*, *The Mystic Masseur*, *The Suffrage of Elvira*, *A House for Mr. Biswas* and *The Middle Passage* are related with the cultural-clash and a fight for a place for oneself whether a male character or a female one in the Caribbean.

In Naipaul's first novel, *The Mystic Masseur*, Ganesh Ramsumair is dissatisfied with his life and he tries many professions to enjoy a status and his place in the society. He marries with Leela and tries to write a book but this book fails to win him recognition. Then he becomes a spiritual healer to occupy a high position in the society. But here too he does not succeed much. Ultimately, Ganesh participates in the election campaign of 1946 and becomes the President of the Hindu Association. Later he becomes Member of the British Empire, a public figure of great importance. He feels shame in his previous name, and to hide his previous identity, he changes his name to G. Ramsay Muir. Naipaul's second novel, *The Suffrage of Elvira* is a story of Mr. Surajpat Harbans who stands for elections in Elvira, a small village at Elvira Hill. He tries to make his identity as a political leader and tries every tactics to win in the elections. The British colonial education in Trinidad presents a sense of dichotomy between the Trinidadian and British-culture and place, "I developed a fantasy of civilization as something existing away from this area of barbarity. The barbarity was double: the barbarity of my family and the barbarity outside" (Levin 93).

His first return to the Caribbean is the form of *The Middle Passage* (1962), a travelogue in which Naipaul dismissively contends, "Though we knew something was wrong with our society, we made no attempt to assess it. Trinidad was too unimportant and we could never be convinced of the value of reading the history of a place which was, as everyone said, only a dot on the map of the world" (MP 36). Trinidadian people consider British Empire their identity, "it was only our Britishness, our belonging to the British Empire, which gave us identity" (MP 37). In Trinidad, people's identity is embodied in 'belonging to the British Empire' (MP 37). Wilson Harris, Derek Walcott, Jamaica Kincaid etc. writers criticize Naipaul's stance against the marginalized world which he calls 'the primitive societies' (Hardwick, 1997 45). Naipaul's concept of the marginalized world in *Miguel Street* is flawed, "It is wrong to have an ideal view of the world" (MS 294). V. S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas* is related with a colonized man Mr. Biswas' sense of place. Mr. Biswas could not take birth in his own home due to a quarrel between his parents when the time arrives for his birth. He opens his eyes in his maternal grandparents' home. Even the starting of the novel makes Mr. Biswas devoid of his place at his own home when "Bipti had taken her three children and walked all the way in the hot sun to the village where her mother Bissoondaye lived" (HFMB 11). Mr. Biswas' individual identity is constructed in relation to place in the form of a dream cherished by Mr. Biswas.

Naipaul's first return to Caribbean is *The Middle Passage* (1962) that is a travel book in which he expresses his disappointment with what he views in Trinidad no culture, "Though we knew something was wrong with our society, we made no attempt to assess it. Trinidad was too unimportant and we could never be convinced of the value of reading the history

of a place which was, as everyone said, only a dot on the map of the world. Our interest was all on the world outside, the remoter the better; Australia was more important than Venezuela, which we could see on a clear day" (MP 36). To Edward Said, Trinidad is unable to progress fully into a developed country, "a world no longer sealed within watertight compartments of art of culture or history, but mixed, mixed up, varied, complicated by the new difficult mobility of migrations, the new independent states, the newly emergent and burgeoning cultures" (Said 471)? Fanon speaks against cultural and racial displacement and Edward Said writes against geographical displacement. In *Out of Place* (1999), he says that "Along with language, it is geography—especially in the displaced form of departures, arrivals, farewells, exile, nostalgia, homesickness, belonging, and travel itself that—is at the core of my memories" (Said 16). To Naipaul, India had never been his home though it has been it is reminiscent of his culture and childhood. As he contends in *An Area of Darkness*, "India had been, in a special way, the background of my childhood. It was the country from which my grandfather came, a country never physically described and therefore never real, a country out in the void beyond the dot of Trinidad; and from it our journey had been final. It was a country suspended in time" (AD 21). He calls India a country of tumult and chaos, "India is a country of chaos, both bureaucratic and social." (AD 21). In the final section of this travelogue 'Village of the Dubs' when Naipaul visits the nineteen acres of his grandfather's land; he realizes that he is exilic now and India cast no magic on him, "India had not worked its magic on me. It remained the land of my childhood, an area of darkness; like the Himalayan passes, it was closing up again, as fast as I withdrew from it, into the land of myth; it seemed to exist in just the timelessness which I had imagined as a child, into which, for all that I walked on Indian earth, I knew I could not penetrate. In a year I had not learned acceptance. I had learned my separateness from India, and was content to be a colonial, without a past, without ancestors" (AD 274). Naipaul's state of placelessness can be judged from these lines, "The world is illusion, the Hindus say. We talk of despair, but true despair lies too deep for formulation. It was only now, as my experience of India defined itself more properly against my own homelessness, that I saw how close in the past year I had been to the total Indian negation, how much it had become the basis of thought and feeling. And already, with this awareness, in a world where illusion could only be a concept and not something felt in the bones, it was slipping away from me" (AD 290). The character of Naipaul's another novel *Mimic Men*, Ralph Singh writes memoir to search his place and identity, "He realizes that his experiences and his feeling of abandonment and displacement cannot be separated from his colonial backgrounds" (MM 50). When he goes to London to negotiate with Lord Stockwell about labour problems and sugar estate, then Stockwell refuses even to talk seriously with him. He considers him a child and says that he has got nice hair. He is badly humiliated by him and the minister, "You can take back to your people any message you like" (MM 224). From the heart, Singh was alienated from the society and this incident was a true loss for him, "My sense of drama failed. This to me was the true loss. For four years drama had supported me; now, abruptly, drama failed. It was a private loss ..." (MM 221). Ralph Singh travels to different places to give him some solace from his feeling of loneliness and isolation but he is unable to forget his 'imminent homelessness' (MM 249).

Naipaul thinks the inhabitants of African countries failures who like the protagonist of his African novel in *A Bend in the River*, named Salim, are forced to think “how incapable we had become of understanding the outside world” (BR 165). Even attempts made for change have no value because Africa, to Naipaul, ‘has no future’ (Hardwick 49). Chinua Achebe in his work *Hopes and Impediments: Selected Essays: 1965-1987* contends that the Negroes or the Blacks are not considered equal human beings by the Europeans. He argues, “Because of the myths created by white men to dehumanize the Negro in the course of the last four hundred years—myths which have yielded perhaps psychological, certainly economic, comfort for Europe—the white man has been talking and talking and never listening because he imagines he has been talking to a dumb beast” (Achebe 15).

In *The Enigma of Arrival*, Naipaul questions on the grandeur of England as it is due to its richness in resources. He comes to make a proclamation here that all places are subject to transformation, change, modification or decay. The two novels *Half a Life* and its sequel *Magic Seeds* are about an Indian immigrant’s quest for home in India, Africa and England. In these two works Naipaul explores and questions why people are prone to settle abroad why they not feel at home when they get chances to settle there. The issue of hybridity, cultural clash and socio-economical problem has been posed by these works. Naipaul has fear of not only placelessness but extinction also that he inherited from his father as he writes in *Prologue to Autobiography*, “His fear of extinction. That was his gift to me. That fear became mine as well” (P.A. 111).

Naipaul’s characters, like him, are to some extent ‘victims of colonization’ and that’s why the terms displacement, dislocation, rootlessness, placelessness, cultural denigration etc.

can summarily be used in context with his works. Naipaul and his characters remain in the state of in-betweenness and they are unable to raise their voice against imperialism which makes them placeless and rootless. On this Said contends, “The state of being in-between things ...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 87).

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