Twice –Displaced: Naipaul's Assimilationist Experience

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Abstract

This essay examines the the unresolved tensions in the diasporic consciousness that shape Naipaul's works. One of the aspects of early indo-Caribbean experience is the indo-Caribbean's sense of marginality in their adopted homes—whether it is the Caribbean itself or any of the European or North American countries to which they migrate. In the Caribbean they were "late arrivers" since their deeply rooted culture kept them apart from and prevented easy assimilation into the dominant British culture that was imposed on the colonies (Victor Ramraj 77). The loss of India and consequently the absence of home generated two different responses: the desire for cultural separation and the opposing urge toward creolization. The resultant tension between the

two is central to a definition of the indo-Caribbean experience. My papers studies the articulation of the Indian migrant's ability/inability to relate to the wider society in the Caribbean, in Naipaul's earlier works, The Mystic Masseur, The Suffrage of Elvira and Miguel Street and how that "explains" in Naipaul's opinion, his desire for a migration. Apart from elaborating on the tension that characterizes indo-Caribbean experience, this essay will also examine a number of other interrelated questions for the purpose of which I have selected The Mimic Men and The Enigma of Arrival. Does Naipaul's sense of colonial dislocation remain constant in his subsequent publications? If so, then what relation does this have to the experiences of those indo-Caribbeans (like Naipaul himself) who migrated to Britain, perceiving London to be their capital and their journey there as a sort of homecoming? What are the issues, social and political, that prevented any easy assimilation in Britain and if at all then in what ways does it contribute to Naipaul's insistence on an identity shaped by exile? The essay will also interrogate whether Naipaul's fiction then takes account of a 'homing desire' as distinct from a desire for a 'homeland' and in that is suggestive of the concept of the diaspora as a critique of discourses of fixed origins.

The term 'diaspora' derives from the Greek—*dia*, 'through' and *speirein*, 'to scatter.' Literally, the word refers to dispersal—the scattering of people and was first associated with the dispersion of the Jews after the Babylonian exile. Here then is an "evocation of a diaspora with a particular resonance within European cartographies of displacement; one that occupies a particular space in the western psyche, and is emblematically situated within western iconography as the diaspora par excellance" (Avtar Brah 181). More recently, diaspora has been used in the context of a variety of transnational ethnic experiences. In all its contexts however,

the word embodies a notion of a centre, a locus, a 'home' from which dispersion occurs and as a concept remains problematic for it raises complex questions regarding the meaning of a number of related terms such as nationality, ethnicity and migrancy. This in turn necessitates a broader definition such as the one offered by William Safran who suggests that "the concept of diaspora be applied to expatriate minority communities whose members share several of the following characteristics: they, or their ancestors, have been dispersed from a specific original "center" to two or more "peripheral," or foreign, regions; they retain a collective memory, vision […] about their original homeland—its physical location, history, and achievements; they believe that they are not—and perhaps cannot be—fully accepted by their host society and therefore feel partly alienated and insulated from it […]" (William Safran Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies 1 quoted by Emmanuel S. Nelson ix-x).

Since at the heart of the diaspora is the image of a journey, and because not every journey can be understood as diaspora, as a concept it needs to be examined, to consider the ramifications of what it connotes and denotes. Diasporic journeys are "essentially about settling down, about putting roots 'eleswhere'" (Brah 182). In the sense of distinctive historical experiences, diasporas are often composite formations made up of many journeys to different parts of the globe, each with its own histories, its own peculiarities. What then is essential to take into account, are the socio-economic, political and cultural conditions that mark the course of these journeys. Equally important is to analyze the regimes of power such as colonization, which inscribe the formation of a specific diaspora as for instance, the formation of African and Asian diasporas in the Caribbean that resulted from the capture or removal of a group through slavery or systems of indentured labour.

The circumstances of 'arrival' and 'settling down' are as relevant to an understanding of the diaspora as are the circumstances of 'leaving.' Movement to a new location results in a shift in identity and a kind of realignment as it were, occurs at both the individual and at larger group levels. Migrants whether individually or in groups are open to new influences. Many of these new influences challenge the earlier self-perception and self-images and "through such challenges the compositional elements of multiple identities may be redefined" (Paul White 3). Changes resulting from migration may include attempts to recreate elements of former lives, or to integrate or assimilate completely, or the creation of a new identity characterized by a feeling of independence from both the society of origin and that of migration; whether to compromise via symbolic events while at the same time adhering to the new on an everyday basis. The choices that are made, depend not only on the individuals involved but also on the constraints of the situations in which the migrants find themselves. There exist many axes of differentiation— those of class, gender, race and sexuality—in the country to which one migrates. In addition, the regimes of power existing in that country, operate to differentiate one diasporic group from another; to represent them as similar to or different from, to include or exclude them from constructions of the 'nation.' In other words, different diasporic groups become in Brah's words "relationally positioned" in a given context (Brah 182). Therefore, the manner in which "a group comes to be situated in and through a wide variety of discourses, economic processes, state policies and institutional practices [becomes] critical to its future" (ibid 182).

This essay examines the aforesaid by studying the unresolved tensions in the diasporic consciousness that shape Naipaul's works. One of the aspects of early indo-Caribbean experience is the indo-Caribbean's sense of marginality in their adopted homes—whether it is the Caribbean itself or any of the European or North American countries to which they migrated.

In the Caribbean they were "late arrivers" since their deeply rooted culture kept them apart from and prevented easy assimilation into the dominant British culture that was imposed on the colonies (Victor Ramraj 77). The loss of India and consequently the absence of home generated two different responses: the desire for cultural separation and the opposing urge toward creolization. The resultant tension between the two is central to a definition of the indo-Caribbean experience. I shall begin by reviewing the articulation of the Indian migrant's ability/inability to relate to the wider society in the Caribbean in Naipaul's earlier works *The Mystic Masseur*, *The Suffrage of Elvira* and *Miguel Street* and how that "explains" in Naipaul's opinion, his desire for a migration. Apart from elaborating on the tension that characterizes indo-Caribbean experience, this essay will also examine a number of other interrelated questions for the purpose of which I have selected *The Mimic Men* and *The Enigma of Arrival*. Does Naipaul's sense of colonial dislocation remain constant in his subsequent publications? If so, then what relation does this have to the experiences of those indo-Caribbeans (like Naipaul himself) who migrated to Britain, perceiving London to be their capital and their journey there as a sort of homecoming? What are the issues, social and political, that prevented any easy assimilation in Britain and if at all then in what ways does it contribute to Naipaul's insistence on an identity shaped by exile? The essay will also interrogate whether Naipaul's fiction then takes account of a 'homing desire' as distinct from a desire for a 'homeland' and in that is suggestive of the concept of the diaspora as a critique of discourses of fixed origins.

The first four of Naipaul's novels are set in a transitional period of the Caribbean society, when older hierarchical structures were breaking down and new cultural loyalties and standards were yet to be framed. In their primary concern of the assimilation of East Indian Trinidadian in a changing world order, they work out such themes as the way impoverished lives and the

chaotic mixing of cultures result in corruption at all levels. *Miguel Street*, is a collection of stories, each focused on a specific character living in a deprived neighbourhood in the Port of Spain; their individual aspirations and disappointments carefully disclosed. These tales are reflective of a time when Naipaul's family had moved from the Indian world of Chaguanas to a more ethnically varied Port of Spain, described as the "white- Negro-mulatto town" (*Finding the Center* 18). Miguel Street is a racially mixed community, predominantly black, brown and Indian together with Spanish, Portuguese and some 'whites.' Although to the boy narrating the stories, the men lounging on the streets represent community standards, the people seem in transit and houses rapidly change owners. Naipaul attributes this to the beginning of the decline in British imperialism and the emergence of the U.S.A. as a new power block.

> It was wartime. The migration of my own family into the town had become part of a more general movement. People of all conditions were coming into the Port of Spain to work at the two American bases [...] the street was busy; the yards were crowded [...] our room sheltered a succession of favored transients, on their way to better things. Before the big family rush, some of these transients had been outsiders [...]

Most of the stories evolve from the boy narrator's admiration of the pretences of those around him; stories that expose the failures of each of these pretentious people. There are characters like Elias a serious student, aspiring to be a doctor, who fails to pass most of the examinations and ends up driving a scavenging cart or, his tutor Titus Hoyt whose school clubs are earnest but hollow gestures at community organization. His real ambition finally proves to be his desire for recognition in newspapers, by writing letters to them on behalf of his students

attesting to his own excellence, regardless of how self manufactured it may be. B. Wordsworth, where B. denotes Black, is a poet who by his own admission, shares White Wordsworth's heart:

> White Wordsworth was my brother. We share one heart. I can watch a small
>
> flower like the morning glory and cry […]   (*Miguel Street* 46)

Unfortunately, he never manages to sell any of his poems. Man-man tries to re-enact Christ's crucifixion, but is unsuccessful and is swiftly removed from the community to an asylum. Man-man, like other characters in the stories, is "driven by an inner need to find a social role through creating an imposing identity to compensate for the limitations of his life" (Bruce King 22). It is the last section of Miguel Street, which underlines the retrospective view of these stories. The boy narrator, by now an adolescent, leaves school and turns to drinking and whoring.

> "You are getting too wild" my mother said. I paid her no attention until the time I
>
> drank so much […] when I sobered up, I made a vow neither to smoke nor drink
>
> again. I said to my mother, "is not my fault really. Is just Trinidad. What else
>
> anyone can do here […   ]

He sees the world of Trinidad as a world of failure, of talk rather than achievement. The characters are themselves not responsible for their fates: these stories are not meant as accounts of personal failure but of entrapment in a condition of cultural vacuum. Even the desire to be a doctor or a teacher, or for that matter to be in love, all seem meaningless. Thus the humiliations, the eccentricities, brutality and failure: a result of Trinidad being a colonial backwater, a place without the means to enable a better life. Much later in *The Enigma of Arrival* Naipaul wrote that he denied himself things for months lest he lose his scholarship "which was not a wish, so much to go to Oxford as a wish to get out of Trinidad […]" (115)

In the *The Mystic Masseur* and *The Suffrage of Elvira*, which are in a manner of speaking, stories of success, Naipaul's cultural critique of Trinidad and his examination of its colonized condition continue. The mystic masseur is Pundit Ganesh, a mediocre and displaced individual who assumes a variety of roles in an attempt to achieve success. Starting his career as a schoolteacher, Ganesh capitalizes on his education by combining it with his pretensions to being a pundit after he inherits his uncle's Sanskrit texts. In order to become a recognized psychic and healer, he also takes advantage of his clients' superstitions. Ganesh's response to the boy who thinks that a black cloud is pursuing him is a case in point. He "cures" the boy by a clever application of popular psychology along with elaborate theatrical gestures of exorcism that pay lip service to the practice of obeah and attains immediate prominence. As such there is no "official" report of this incident in the newspapers. Yet within two weeks all Trinidad is "informed" about Ganesh and his powers and soon Ganesh starts receiving more clients than he can attend to.

Peoplw find Ganesh endearing both for his mystic powers and for his apparent kindness. He does not demand anything, accepting whatever is offered. Yet he possesses the ability to acquire from people, (without actually having to ask) what he wants, all along managing to impress them; insisting that they never "strain" themselves yet accepting graciously every preffered "reward" (ibid 135).

For Naipaul, Ganesh typifies a community, which is,

> money minded […] spiritually static because cut off from its roots, its religion
>
> reduced to rites without philosophy, set in a materialistic colonial society […]

Granted that Ganesh is an embodiment of qualities that are not really virtuous but these turn out to be, within the given socio-political context, indispensable, in fact, most suitable for any

individual to taste success in the Caribbean. In other words, Naipaul's attack is not against the individual. Rather, it is directed at a society suffering from a deep sense of inner void. The target of his satire is the misuse of the Hindu tradition's religious practice. It is in turn, also a comment on the "factionalism that its deployment within Trinidad's transition to decolonization causes, precluding the possibility of a "nationalist" rubric" (Mustafa 51).

The period between 1910 and 1936 witnessed a rapid growth in the political consciousness in Trinidad and in its desire for self-determinism. Many factors contributed to it. Trinidadian Indian organizations, representing Indian interests had existed since the late nineteenth century.[1] When talk of independence came to Trinidad, the Hindu Indians felt insecure. They feared being abandoned by the British under the domination of black communities, which had by now organized themselves politically and which, concentrated in the cities and having gained access to English language and education, staffed the police and the civil service. The British Labour Party wanted decolonization and favoured such black intellectuals as Eric Williams, who had studied in England. But for the Trinidadian Indian, the rhetoric of decolonization was furnished with such notions of black deliverance as Black Nationalism, and pan-Africanism and Marxist models of single party states. In such a situation, the Hindu Indian was an outsider, the marginal, and "the opposition to those who feel destined to inherit the apparatus of the state of independence" (King 11).

Pundit Ganesh rises to the occasion and is accepted as a representative of the Hindu community in Trinidad. He expands his sphere of influence,

> He held no election meetings, but Swami and Partap arranged many prayer
> meetings for him […] quite casually, in the middle of a lecture, he would say in

> Hindi, "it may interest one or two of you […] that I am a candidate for the elections next month"

Thus he succeeds in getting elected as a member of the Legislative Council and is eventually distinguished by an MBE. The "mystic masseur" ultimately makes an appearance in London as a colonial statesman passing under the name G. Ramsay Muir. *The Suffrage of Elvira* concerns 1950 and the second general elections under universal franchise when, "people began to see possibilities" (*The Suffrage of Elvira* 13). "Possibilities" implies the many ways people can gain, financially and socially from politics. The bringing together of many cultures in Trinidad produced what Bruce King calls "free-for all spoils" (35). In *The Suffrage of Elvira*, Surujpat Hans, makes a bid for elections to the Legislative Council from Elvira and emerges victorious. The novel gives a detailed description of this "election" process, which is a carefully planned line of action whereby blocks of votes are bought from leaders of ethnic communities. It involves placating Baksh (the controller of Muslim votes) by enlisting his son as campaign manager and promising to marry Harbans' son to Chittranjan's daughter (who controls Hindu votes). The novel delineates the incongruities of colonial Trinidad:

> Things were crazily mixed up in Elvira. Everybody, Hindus, Muslims, and Christians, owned a bible; the Hindus and Muslims looking on it, if anything, with greater awe.

A similar "crazy mix up" was also articulated in *The Mystic Masseur* through such specific pictures as the Negro woman with white powder on her face, Leela's fridge (visible from the road) stocked with Coca-Cola, and the American servicemen dispensing gum to the children of Fuente Grove, where they have come for spiritual advice.

Nonetheless, the successes of *The Mystic Masseur* and *The Suffrage of Elvira* are really meant to be profound failures. Ganesh's general and especially his political career is nothing but a series of continuous accommodations to predetermined social attitudes and expectations. He subtly changes images to deftly fall into roles allocated to him by a society that is class, caste, race and religious community conscious, until he loses his identity to the fake 'G. Ramsay Muir.' Likewise, the description of the electoral politics in *The Suffrage of Elvira* is that of a political ethos which is entirely devoid of any kind of ideological convictions or commitments. Here too, the political strategies are determined by the given structures of society. The two racial groups— black and coloured—together with the communal groups —Christians, Muslims, and Hindus— are unalterably fixed in their given communal and racial alignments. The thought of their ever rising above these can be mooted. Naipaul "[gives] the impression that he seeks to vindicate his decision to leave Trinidad by proclaiming that to remain is to condemn oneself to absurdity and frustration" (Helen Hayward 10).

This remains one of the peculiarities of the assimilationist experience of the migrant indian community in the Carribean. The indentured immigrants came to the Caribbean initially perceiving themselves as temporary dwellers and later realised that they were in the Caribbean to stay and therefore must learn not to simply relate to the culture beyond theirs but do so in order to facilitate their 'social survival.' But despite their life on the periphery, they, like Naipaul's father, would hesitate if actually offered repatriation.

> They could not speak English and were not interested in the land where they lived; it was a place they had come to live for a short time and stayed longer than expected. They continually talked of going back to India, but when the opportunity came, many refused […]

Finding the Center records how, as a boy, Naipaul's father refused to return to India when his family was approved for repatriation there. On the day of departure, he hid on the docks "until his mother changed her mind about the trip back to India" (62). Even the traditionally inclined indo-Caribbeans, who sought repatriation to India, which for them was a "dream of home, a dream of continuity after the illusion of Trinidad," ultimately rejected India. On reaching there, they waited at the harbour for a ship to take them back to Trinidad: "all of India that they had found was the sea and the Calcutta docks" (ibid 61).

Significantly, Naipaul's indo-Caribbean protagonists do not travel or contemplate traveling to India.[2] This does not imply that none of them 'escape' Trinidad. It only implies that India is definitely not the place they wish to escape to. The cosmopolitan Ralph (*The Mimic Men*) soon discovers after arriving in London that it is not the home he envisaged as a schoolboy in the Caribbean. He returns to his island only to learn once more that he belongs neither to his extended Hindu family nor to the Creole world. Having lost "the game of politics at the margins, and nearly everybody does" Ralph has no alternatives (Ashcroft 89). "There is only one course: flight" (ibid 11). Nevertheless when Ralph 'arrives' in London, he is marginalized in a boarding house. His aspiration to write a history of the British Empire is a futile aspiration but one which shows him still yearning to move from the periphery to the center. He records a sense of the unreality of his education and of his peripheral condition and calls the likes of himself the "mimic men of the world" (ibid 175).

Ralph expresses his sense of abandonment by occasionally employing the 'shipwreck' image. The image is comparable to the scene depicted in the de Chirico painting, which Naipaul describes as the germ of *The Enigma of Arrival*.

At this point, it would be worthwhile to review the conditions of 'arrival' or 'settling down' in England. The arrival of the "Windrush Generation," the West Indian immigrants in the late 1940s and 1950s, is usually understood to denote the beginning of multicultural, or as it is sometimes called, 'multiracial' Britain. Black people had lived in Britain for generations and notably in well-established communities. But the 'Windrush Generation' signified, metonymically, a new generation of commonwealth migrants recruited to fill unskilled vacancies. It was part of the broader movement of labour migrations in Europe from the ex-colonies during the 1950s. Immigrants from the West Indies, as from other ex-colonies, viewed England not merely as a land of opportunity but also as a kind of home, a country whose history, culture and literature was familiar to them from their school textbooks. On looking closely however, things were different.

Of his experience of migration to and arrival in England, George Lamming writes,

> I was among those who took flight from failure […] In the desolate, frozen
>
> heart of London […] I tried to reconstruct the world of my adolescence […]
>
> migration was not a word I would have used to describe what I was doing when I
>
> sailed with other West Indians to England in 1950. We simply thought that we
>
> were going to an England which had been planted in our childhood consciousness
>
> as a heritage and a place of welcome. It is the measure of our innocence that
>
> neither the claim of heritage nor the expectation of welcome would have been
>
> seriously doubted […] (274)

The inability of the likes of Lamming and Naipaul and the consequent sense of displacement, of their feeling "shipwrecked" resulted from the insensitivity of the "mother" culture, the British, to cultural diversities. In "The New Empire Within Britain," Rushdie voices his concern over the

failure of Britain to embrace the inevitable fact of its postcolonial future, and sees this as "a crisis of the whole culture, of the society's entire sense of self" (129). The immigration policies of successive governments, in the post-war era, mark Rushidie's concern well founded and unravel the sources of the host culture's hostile attitudes.

The British Nationality Act of 1948 confirmed the right of entry to the Britain for the citizens of Empire, who were deemed British subjects. Ever since then, "there has been a steady attrition of these rights" (Dominic Head 163). The 1962 Commonwealth Immigration Act ended the post war 'open door' policy and introduced a system of employment vouchers subject to quota. The Immigration Act of 1971 saw a further restriction, limiting domicile to those born in Britain or whose parents or grandparents were of British origin. But it was the 1981 British Nationality Act that most significantly redefined nationality and citizenship. Designed to restrict naturalization of immigrants' children, the act abolished the automatic right to British citizenship for children born in Britain.

Both Ralph and Naipaul, twice 'removed' from their 'origins,' come to England as third generation South Asian Caribbeans. Neither has any connections with the land of his ancestors, nor has either ever truly adopted the Caribbean. They epitomize those for whom England is the logical progression of their development. As stated earlier, their definition of what entails to 'become English' is sadly located in textbooks and literature studied in their colonized 'homeland.' Naipaul in *The Enigma of Arrival* continues Ralph Singh's futile search for home in London. This time the scene is shifted to the locale of Salisbury Plain where Naipaul hopes to find 'heritage' and 'roots' by establishing a connection between himself and the trees and plants of his adopted country; though on reviewing his life, concludes that he is in a state of

detachment, of not belonging. Naipaul's first night on landing in New York on his way to Britain is emblematic of his experience of 'abandonment' and the ensuing sense of "unbelonging."

> A man from the British Counsulate should have met me. But the plane had been
>
> so delayed he had gone home, leaving this letter which gave me only the name of
>
> the hotel he had booked me into. He should have protected me. He left me at
>
> the mercy of the taxi driver […] the driver cheated me, charged too much […]
>
> (*The Enigma of Arrival* 112)

He is first abandoned by the British (Empire) and subsequently cheated on foreign land. It speaks of not only one individual experience, but also a collective one: of the many indentured labourers who were forsaken by both the Empire and India only to be later 'duped' by foreign (England) lands.

Accordingly, the question—what or where is 'home'—needs to be addressed. If 'home' is a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination, then, it is a place of no return (as seen with many indo-Caribbeans such as Naipaul's father) and, even if it is visited, (like Naipaul did), then it is only a geographical territory which is seen as the place of origin. If home is the lived experience, then, it is linked intrinsically to the manner in which processes of inclusion or exclusion operate, thereby taking into account personal subjectivities. These can be very varied even for a single individual at different points of his life. In Naipaul's case, for instance, there is his early experience of England to make note of, one that caused him to conclude that he is yet to grasp the "enigma" of his perpetual state of arrival. 1990 witnessed his knighthood by Queen Elizabeth—definitely a 'marker of inclusion' by British politics. It may then, appear rather perverse on Naipaul's part not to find himself at home in either Trinidad, or India, but more importantly not even in England. But in Harish Trivedi's words, this "only [goes] to show that

one cannot really shop around and choose one's home […] for [it] is equally a part of one's proto-history. And once "unhomed" is to be always and forever after unhomed, if by home one understands an apt location in history, community and culture […] Naipaul's contrariness in rejecting each of his three countries as not being home […] is a recognition of this home truth" (149-50).

Endnotes

1. East Indian National Association and East Indian National Congress were both formed in 1909 and were middle class organizations.

2. Naipaul himself admits that in India he is 'a stranger" and that he does not see it as home though he knows that he "cannot reject' India or "be indifferent to it" (*India: A Wounded Civilization* ix).

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