



AN APPROACH TO V. S. NAIPAUL'S AESTHETICS OF MARGINALITY

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Received: 10/07/2017

Edited: 16/08/2017

Accepted: 22/08/2017

Abstract: *Naipaul has emerged in the twentieth century as one of the most authentic voices to create a comprehensive vision of history and experience of different places. In most of the ex-colonial societies, communities and men that he presents, almost everything in their experience can be traced back to the deep psychic trauma that makes up the identity of the colonized. Naipaul visualizes colonialism as a system and experience which has turned nations, societies, political systems and individuals into mimic societies and mimic men of the West who exist without vision and hope. His originality lies in the denial of any authentic identity to his characters and his insistence on derivation as the essence of culture born of colonialism.*

Keywords: *Non-western, Portrayed, Paradigms, Post-colonial, Celebrate, Marginality, Fiction.*

Naipaul, to date, has been a relentless critic and commentator in his keen observations of Third World Societies, their histories and the human predicament therein. Indeed, Naipaul has emerged in the Twentieth century as one of the most authentic voices to create a comprehensive vision of history and experience of different places and people alike. His works show a world on the fringes of marginality and denial. He equips his observation and satirical technique with a keen political sense in order to project the idea of cultural dismissal, something which is a result of the destructive influences such as colonialism, imperialism, racism and cultural-economic discriminations which have disfigured the meanings of contemporary history. In most of the ex-colonial societies, communities and men that he presents, almost everything in their experience can be traced back to the deep psychic trauma that makes up the identity of the colonized. Naipaul visualizes colonialism as a system and experience which has turned nations, societies, political systems and individuals into mimic societies and mimic men of the West who exist without vision and hope. Naipaul has been writing a kind of 'psycho-history' of these marginalized, derelict Third World societies which he sees vulnerable and weak because of their historical and

colonial past. Likewise, the idea of the oppressor-oppressed, centre-periphery, inclusion- exclusion and that of the colonizer-colonized is closely related to Naipaul's presentation of history as it influences the present situation of man.

The most important phase of the outward and dominating thrust of Europeans into the world beyond Europe was the Nineteenth century (which has been discussed by Edward Said in *Orientalism and Culture and Imperialism*). Paradoxically, however, imperial expansion has had a radically destabilizing effect on its own preoccupation and power. In pushing the colonial world to the margins of experience the 'centre' pushed consciousness beyond the point at which monocentrism in all spheres of thought could be accepted without question. Alternatively, one could say that the alienating process which initially served to relegate the post-colonial world to the 'margin' turned upon itself and acted to push the world through a kind of mental barrier into a position from which all experience could be viewed as decentred, splintered, pluralistic and multifarious. Marginality thus became an unprecedented source of creative energy and the quest for self-identity (ref. recent studies within Post-Structuralism, Marxism, Feminism and Post-colonial theory). Writers as diverse as George

Lamming, Dennis Lee, Wilson Harris, Robert Kroetsch, Salman Rushdie, Marquez, Ngugi and Wole Soyinka have argued that not only is the notion of authentic experience as false as its validating concept of 'centre', but that the inauthentic and the marginal is in fact the 'real'.

Marginality is the condition constructed by the posited relation of one (or society or a clan or class) to a privileged centre, an 'othering' directed by the imperial centre. But it does not involve the construction of an alternative focus of subjectivity—a new 'centre'. Rather the act of appropriation in the Commonwealth or Post-colonial text involves the embracing of that marginality as the fabric of social and personal experience. The 'marginal' and the 'variant' thus characterize post-colonial views of language, culture, history and society as a consequence of the process of abrogation. The syncretic is validated by the disappearance of the 'centre', and with no centre the marginal becomes the formative constituent of reality. The variations of the experience of marginality are complex and fraught with the widest possibilities in cultural, historical, sociological, philosophical and other terms.

Naipaul does not celebrate marginality in his fiction or even in his non-fictional works unlike some of the African and West-Indian novelists. On the other hand, his technique functions to project and thus lay bare the interconnections and the complex relationships of European history with the non-western man. For Naipaul, thus, the marginal position of his characters (and his own as a writer writing from the margins or without a creative tradition) is given by the peculiarity of the historical time, the geographical space, and the cultural links at a certain point of time. The vital point is to articulate the meaning of all these.

Naipaul has portrayed different types/paradigms of colonial experience in the successive works, *The Mystic Masseur*, *Miguel Street*, *A House for Mr. Biswas*, *The Mimic Men*, *in a Free State*, *Guerrillas*, *A Bend in the River*, *The Enigma of Arrival* and *A Way in the World*, which are based on the

idea of dislocation, marginality and the loss of authentic modes of life. These are related to the social, economic, historical, political and cultural barriers, which are now part of the emergent Third World. In his successive works he also penetratingly explores the idea of freedom with all its complexities, ironies and imponderables.

Few writers of fiction have documented marginality as well as Naipaul. His originality lies in the denial of any authentic identity to his characters and his insistence on derivation as the essence of culture born of colonialism. In his major fiction, Naipaul portrays characters who are marginalized on the basis of race, economic and cultural subordination, class, nationality or colour, all of which are understandable in terms of intersecting dialectics of slavery and the impact of imperialism and colonization. Naipaul portrays men who can not construct a coherent self and the reasons for this malady lie deep in the pattern of subordination and existential split suffered by them under a system that recognized no difference, humanly or culturally in its ruthless drive to hegemonize everything. As Peter Hughes has commented, "*Above all, because the writing out of the narrative of decline and fall, of disorder and lack of authority, involves, the discovery of a void at the heart of the world. Such a void lies at the heart of Naipaul's world and it has been discovered through his writing*" (Hughes, 1988: 11).

In a very important sense, Naipaul's work marks a turning-point in English literature that concerns itself with colonialism in complex and profound ways, for in addition to depicting its effects on the imperialists and colonizers, he also portrays its devastating effects on the native civilization. For Conrad, Forster and Orwell, Naipaul's predecessors, the Empire consists of dark places on the earth that call into question the norms and conventions of their own civilization. Whether it is the darkness of the up country in Congo, or the echo of the Marabar Caves in India, the outer reaches of the Empire touch the inner darkness, and journeys to these outposts become journeys within. Both Conrad and Forster are deft in portraying the

compulsions of European behaviour in an alien environment.

But each, in his own way, portrays the native as the 'symbolic other', whose sole function is to shake the solid foundation of Christian European Enlightenment, in short, of civilization.

When it comes to depicting the colonized society in English literature, the line that begins with Kipling, Conrad and Forster leads to Naipaul. For Conrad, the native never becomes more than a shadowy presence, a vaguely defined alter ego. He is not seen as a part of alternative civilization as much as of anti-civilization. For Forster, Muslims and Hindus are seen within the context of alternative cultures, but it is the inclusive quality of the latter, and its indifference to order and hierarchy that so unnerves the European.

With the emergence of Naipaul, the romantic edge of colonial literature and a positive quest in colonial consciousness has disappeared entirely. In dealing with a much later stage of colonialism and post-colonial phase, Naipaul is no longer concerned with the first traumatic encounter of the European with what he judges to be other than what he has known, the non-European. Instead, he writes about the persistence of colonialism in the era of political independence. He depicts what Frantz Fanon has termed "false decolonization", legal independence without breaking down the colonial, social and political structures. In this context, most of his major works such as *The Mimic Men*, *In a Free State*, *Guerrillas* and *A Bend in the River* are illustrations of the meaninglessness of cultural, political and economic freedom in the absence of real freedom that must come from within the depths of one's self and native consciousness. The oppressive machinery of colonization, still operating in the post-colonial era in new nations, has destroyed human lives and moral order in societies and nations which as a result of the former's huge presence, have failed to come to terms with their problems. It is therefore not surprising that Naipaul's characters suffer from the effects and overall decadence that surrounds

their bleak and de-vised lives. Again, their self-awareness is derived entirely from culture that perceives them as 'other'. They efface the reality of their collective past of the historical break, and when it comes to the understanding of the knowledge of themselves as objects in society, it brings about a feeling of shame and self-contempt.

Naipaul has brought colonial literature to a new imaginative phase where experience is marked by a sense of derivation, of identity permanently blighted by being entirely derived from the culture that oppresses it (e.g. In *A Free State*, *Guerrillas* and *A Bend in the River*). Indeed, the disorienting and far reaching impacts of colonial history have surfaced in Naipaul's fictional technique and imagination as a "metaphor" in the sense that colonial experience is now no longer limited to actual slavery but has taken different forms in modern life, that it is an ineluctable part of experience in the twentieth century. For that reason it is pertinent to state that authority, power, oppression, marginality as states of being, and alienation, exile, displacement and metaphorical subservience as states of experience are present in complex and multi-dimensional ways in Naipaul's fiction. The entire Naipaulian fictional form is related to the human encounter (s) with the changing colonial authority and setting and its wide-ranging effects.

In speaking out the truth, Naipaul has beaten a lonely track, without many admirers or co-fellows and too many detractors. The subjects that Naipaul has dealt with have been representative and typical of the marginality of the post-colonial world and by handling these issues with a quality of feeling he has made his mark as an authentic writer. However, the areas and the issues Naipaul has traversed also come down to an idea, of a cluster of attitudes and beliefs compacted into a structure of ideas, of what we think our world was, and what we would like it to be, understanding the hostilities we have to face in the present. Ideology is tailored in a reductive way to increase its functional or political value for the present. Ideology is the politics of culture, in a culture which with pre-emptive aggressions, sees

everything as political. Since Naipaul has traced the politics of culture, history, language and experience in marginal, post-colonial societies, his work has a deep relation with both intellectual and ideological configurations of different structural and experiential layers therein. In a colonial society where most of the visible and invisible structures of oppression are political and may be traced to the deep trauma of the psychological make-up of the colonized (as brilliantly espoused by Frantz Fanon, Mannoni, Memmi, Kovel etc.), there is every reason why almost every detail of one's inheritance, environment prospects, should be subjected to a reevaluating glance of suspicion. But ideology, its interpretations or conclusions are not always helpful. On the other hand, the left-wing or the right-wing parties' own conflicts in the West have ironically helped our understanding as to how the things are in the world. Or for that matter, revolutions and ideologies help in bringing about change through cultural and literary revolutions, like the Romantic Movement in Nineteenth century. A writer has therefore, a lot of straitjacket material to *unlearn* through his own experience in order to see his people honestly, truthfully. But this unlearning also requires discrimination to be free from cliché's, with the exclusion of oneself from the maze of things. Naipaul had to extricate himself from these cliché's of imperialism and ideological logic to rehearse for himself the truth within the West-Indian society and history, among others. In this way the writer was able to get closer to his experience of Trinidad, of the squalor, poverty, mimicry and the relationship of people with its past. This itself goes a long way towards explaining the mode of subjective psycho-history that Naipaul presents in *The Middle Passage*, *The Loss of El Dorado*, *An Area of Darkness* and *Finding the Centre*. Ultimately his fiction has to do with barriers, physical, social, historical, with a sense of negation and emptiness which such a barrier-sense imposes and this is made clear in his own withdrawal from his own world and subjectmatter—Trinidad. Naipaul later stepped into others' territory by shaping it into an imaginary setting of the colonial

or the post-colonial 'theatre', in *The Mimic Men*, *In a Free State*, *Guerrillas*, *A Bend in the River* and even in *A Way in the World*. Finally, Naipaul's new associations after decades of his literary career splintered within the same frame of reflection—denial, deprivation, colony, blackness, with the non-rational, the de-vised, the non-western. Naipaul has abandoned a historical frame, a particular type of oppression or subjugation, and now finds the world a typological purgatory that includes a multi-geographical focus on races and nations.

Naipaul's work and the inner realities it touches upon are relevant to a study of post-colonial poetics and the way in which the colonial 'other' can be perceived from a complex of perspectives. One of the most legitimate points has been how a Naipaul text could be in danger of getting branded as an 'English' or a 'Universal' text, especially in view of its "difference of language, historical and other underlying qualities, e.g. a novel like *A House For Mr Biswas* with its special stress on the East-Indian historico-cultural compulsions in West Indies" (Tiffin, 1989: 119).

This could still be branded as a universal text for its underlying quest for identity and place. In much the same way, post-colonialism suffers the process of hegemonic re-incorporation by which the interior/western centre actually draws subversive elements back into itself. One of the most insidious denials of the validity of post-colonialism is the suggestion that it demonstrates the outworking of a worldwide spread of post-modernism, and thus becomes simply another manifestation of a European cultural movement. The attitude itself is far more widespread than any organised or written expositions of the idea would suggest, but because it has the status of a prejudice, it is much more insidious.

In a study of black writers' works and the special language and experience in their text, including Naipaul, it is important to dig out the meanings, signs and signifiers with a colonial resistance in reading the texts. As Stephen Slemon

observes, "*The basic manoeuvre in this approach is to focus on some pattern of textual echoing or repetition in post-colonial literary documents and to examine the way in which those texts 'work', the linguistic and narrative patterns (Pile imperial centre through a complex rhetoric of intertextual quotation*" (Slemon 1991: 35).

Further, in dealing with as sensitive and important an area as the colonial discourse and the colonized experience, it is essential for such anti-authoritarian discourses as post-colonialism to be aware of the ominous intellectual, orthodox post-structuralism has become in the last two decades. It is by a proper decolonizing of the text, language and experiences that one could read and reflect upon it without the Eurocentric intellectual hegemony. And ironically, it is again a politics of literature and knowledge that Naipaul is acknowledged as a "leading English novelist" and his works are incorporated into the existing literary channel and structure as a way of keeping them marginalized. Similarly, writing post-colonial 'place' is not writing lineaments of some geographical given but writing out of a difference which seeks to dismantle the binary structures in which the colonial margin is systematically negated. In fact, the notion of

placelessness is a crucial feature of the discourse of place in post-colonial societies, and this is as much about Naipaul's understanding of placelessness as of home and rootlessness. This binary approach, i.e. European, needs to be countered by working out a text/language which affects a radical disruption of its base, the well-known West Indian writer Dennis Lee says, "*The colonial writer does not have words of his own. Is it not possible that he projects his own condition of voicelessness into whatever he created? That he articulates his own powerlessness, in the face of alien words by seeking out fresh tales of victims? Perhaps the colonial imagination is driven to recreate again and again, the experience of writing in colonial space*" (Lee, 1995:399).

This is close to Naipaul's own position as a writer. Words and their usage, their alien tradition stood between him and his experience, and as Dennis Lee says, "The language was drenched with our non-belonging and words had become the enemy" (Lee, 1995 : 400).

In this context, it is important to see Naipaul's concentration on the viability or the lack of cultural identity and the central forces which in his works are the symbols of power, of literary, cultural or political domination.

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