

Post-Colonial Review of V. S. Naipaul's Fiction

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Abstract: V.S Naipaul is acknowledged as one of the most talented writers dealing with postcolonial themes for his fictions. As a Nobel Prize winner author, he has written a number of fictions such as *A House for Mr Biswas* (1961), *A Bend in the River* (1979), *Miguel Street* (1959), *An Area of Darkness* (1964), *In a Free State* (1971), *The Mimic Men* (1967), *India: A Million Mutinies Now* (1990) and so on. The article presents a review of his postcolonial fictions with a thorough thematic analysis. Naipaul treats the themes of pessimism, identity crisis, social fragmentation, diaspora and internal struggles of immigrants. He also presents the futility of designing a new Westernised identity by discarding old roots. The political, social and cultural upheavals and its critical impact is also illustrated by the author.

Keywords: V.S Naipaul, Postcolonial Fiction, Identity Crisis, Cultural Identity, Pessimism, Indian Immigrants, Decolonisation Era

I. INTRODUCTION

V.S Naipaul, Nobel prize winning writer, renowned for his intellectually sound and culturally diverse perspective expressed in his fictions. Naipaul's fictions are largely categorised as postcolonial fictions, dealing with the complicated lives of people lost in the crowd, seeking to find a concrete identity and space for themselves. Postcolonial fictions are marked by the description of decolonisation and its after-effects on politics, culture and society. The lives of subjugated people, facing torture and racism for centuries, are exposed to a new world of freedom yet that freedom fails to provide them with a sense of true belonging. The impact of British imperialism on the politics, culture and society of India is described by the author, presenting an elaborate picture of personal conflict and its interaction with worldly conflicts. In this paper, an elaborate postcolonial review of V. S Naipaul is conducted, addressing the critical concepts found in his writings that emphasises his position as a postcolonial author, voicing stories of indeed fragmentation, crisis, diaspora, immigration and cultural barriers. The postcolonial fictional space thus created by the author reveals hints of truth interwoven with the fictional characters, representative of flesh and blood individuals.

II. V.S NAIPAUL AS A POSTCOLONIAL FICTION WRITER

V.S Naipaul, born in Trinidad in 1932 was an Indian immigrant who turned his dexterity in the creation of postcolonial fiction. Being a witness of cultural conflicts as an immigrant, Naipaul's awareness of the world around him is revealed in his fictions as well. His works such as *A House for Mr Biswas* (1961), *A Bend in the River* (1979), *Miguel Street* (1959), *An Area of Darkness* (1964), *In a Free State* (1971), *The Mimic Men* (1967), *India: A Million Mutinies Now* (1990) and so on are part of his vast sphere of fictional works. Since the beginning of his career, he had set the tone for himself, debuting his writing career with *The Mystic Masseur* (1957), dealing with the colonial Trinidad. Naipaul was addressed by Edward Said as "a witness for the Western prosecution" (Newindiaexpress.com, 2018,[14]). Thus, his legacy remains preserved even after his death as millions of readers around the world continue to appreciate his unapologetic stance in literature.

Viewed as a postcolonial writer, Naipaul expresses his opinions through his characters while highlighting the quest of freedom each individual may aspire to undertake despite being politically "free". The concept of freedom, according to the author, is malleable. As stated by (Harris, 2020, [10]), within a postcolonial world, the traces of imperialism are starkly vivid. The author, being aware of the futility to call political freedom as the ultimate means of independence, rejects this mainstream idea. *Half a Life* (2001) describes the story of an Indian immigrant travelling through England and Africa, leaving a piece of his soul across foreign terrains. He won the Nobel Prize in 2001 for uniting diverse perspectives to highlight the presence of history suppressed by the grand narratives (Economicstimes.indiatimes.com, 2019, [7]). He had also received the Booker prize earlier for *In a Free State* (1971), Trinity Cross in 1989 and knighthood in 1990 in England (Economicstimes.indiatimes.com, 2019, [7]). Thus, his importance as a postcolonial writer is undeniable as he contributed significantly to the development of postcolonial literature that treated intricate issues of independence, imperialist history and personal struggles together.

III. DIASPORA AND FRAGMENTATION OF POSTCOLONIAL FICTIONS BY V.S NAIPAUL

Understanding the postcolonial structure is a critical process as the cultural and societal implications can be more permanent than the political one. The grip of the British imperialists on the world's resources dramatically impacted the quality of lives of the colonised population.

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According to (Bannerji, 2020, [4]), from the late 18th to the early part of the 20th century, British sovereignty over world economics strengthened their position in the world. Gaining independence is considered as great a struggle as breaking free from the cultural subjugation. Thus, Naipaul explores the nature of true freedom, questioning whether the political leave of British from colonised countries truly resolved the issues of oppression, forced subjugation, racism and cultural insensitivity. Fanon in his works *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) and *The Black Skin White Masks* (1952) evaluates the colonisation structure based on racial identities, commenting that “colonialism forces the people it dominates to constantly ask themselves this question: In reality, who am I?” (Gökçen, 2021, [8]). Thus, the author, in alignment with this assertion, presents themes in which his characters feel confused and alienated with the world, seeking to find an identity for themselves.

A Bend in the River illustrates the theme of alienation in a postcolonial world. The pain faced by Indians trying to migrate to another geographical location and facing diaspora resurfaces the notoriety of colonialism since the Indian immigrant identity is faced with racism. As stated by (Biswas, 2020, [5]), diaspora disjoints the perception of individuals, intensifying their longing to find a root that cannot be retrieved. Yet the agony to leave their roots and find a new one in a world full of strange cultures and customs is defined by the author to indicate the precarious position of Indians. The protagonist of the novel Salim, found himself alienated in a place in the interior Africa where he along with other Indians are treated as outsiders. The devastated Indian community, stranded in a foreign place, longing to be united with their roots.

Contrarily, the novel also points to the impossibility of finding a home, a root when none is truly there. The themes of societal fragmentation, political racism and diaspora become prominent in *A Bend in the River*, as in the end of the novel, Salim is advised to leave Africa. As articulated by (Ilyas, 2018, [11]), the concept of diaspora becomes critically painful for communities who are treated as outsiders by everyone around them. Hence, the racial and cultural difference in a postcolonial world stands as a reminder of violence that cannot be escaped by those unfortunate people who had no means of escape. On the other hand, *Miguel Street* in the backdrop of World War II describes a port in Spain where seventeen short stories are presented by the author living on Miguel Street. The street acts as the tying knot for diverse characters as the author presents a tone of pessimism. For example, in the third chapter of the novel, the main character George is an abusive man who fails to turn his home into a warehouse after his wife's death. In Chapter 7, the main character Bigfoot is portrayed as a bully only to reveal that his inclinations towards violence is a result of his abusive parents. Though at first glance, these stories seem to be pessimistic and rather simple, yet a closer inspection reveals that each character represents the dark hidden side of human beings in a postcolonial world.

IV. EXPLORATION OF NEW HORIZONS AND TONE OF PESSIMISM IN POSTCOLONIAL FICTIONS BY V.S NAIPAUL

V.S Naipaul shows dexterity and acumen in the exploration of new horizons in postcolonial literature. His fictions are unique and thought-provoking, elevating the minds of the readers while simultaneously critiquing and questioning the way of the world. The author realises the ruthless nature of the world and he paints his characters in a similar manner. Thus, the traditional notion of a happy ending is discarded by the author and in its place, he presents a reality that is conflicting to historical views of postcolonialism.

In *A House for Mr Biswas* the author presents the inner dilemmas of Mr. Biswas, the protagonist. He relentlessly strives to enter a modern way of living while he finds himself stuck in a communal life of his wife's community. As articulated by (Jiménez, 2022, [12]), the quest for finding freedom by Mr. Biswas establishes him as a modern man within a world that contrasts him in all aspects. The tone of pessimism is observed here as well, as the protagonist's lifelong struggle comes to an end, leaving the readers to question the success of his goals. On the contrary, (Babakir, 2021, [2]) articulates that the characters of V.S Naipaul emerge from darkness to light to find an alternate way to survive. In essence, Mr. Biswas achieves his goals however, his ability to truly enjoy the fruits of his labour remains unanswered. Regardless, his quest for reaching a new horizon is representative of the author's personal inclination to present characters who are accurate representations of flawed characters. His characters face the harsh world and become hardened themselves, in order to survive.

Through the exploration of new horizons, the characters of *Miguel Street* try to create a new identity as well. However, the author seals their destiny, denying them wish fulfilment to indicate that the harsh realities of the world are cyclical and escaping them can be impossible. Further analysis of Naipaul's works presents the theme of pessimism. Especially in *An Area of Darkness* the author introduces the theme of disillusionment. This disillusionment is inspired by the personal feelings of the author, as he was disappointed to see the true colours of India upon his first visit. The ancestral homeland of the author is represented in a clear light in the novel, facing the burdens of poverty and corruption left in the postcolonial world. In essence, the new horizon explored here is intertwined with pessimism and disappointment. On the other hand, his characters in *A Bend in the River*, face disillusionment as the protagonist tries to find his roots in a place where his existence is threatened. The complicated themes of postcolonialism presented by the author is demonstrated through layers of concerns, confusion and the devastation of dreams. Therefore, with each work of Naipaul, a new horizon of pessimism is explored, giving the characters the unwanted strength to survive in an unjust world.

V. IDENTITY CRISIS IN POSTCOLONIAL FICTIONS BY V.S NAIPAUL

The theme of identity crisis is explored critically by the author in his postcolonial fictions, presenting the complexities of cultural fragmentation of identity. Regarding British colonists as superior, the characters in his novels long to embody the Western sentiment. Identity fragmentation leads to alienation of characters, steering the narrative in a complex sphere of rootlessness. As stated by (Shunmugapriya & Thamizhmani, 2018, [16]), the theme of identity crisis in Naipaul's fictions highlights the mental dilemma the colonised people had to face. In essence, the inclination to mimic the Western sentiments as seen in *The Mimic Men*. The protagonist, Ralph Sign in this novel by Naipaul presents critical issues of being dissatisfied with his own identity and trying to assume a European identity during his exile. The political implications present in the novel further solidifies the critical nature of the identity crisis faced by individuals. Their moment of disillusionment is presented by the author as they face reality in a foreign land.

The conflict of the inner self presented by the author illustrates his realisation that within a postcolonial world, the marks of cultural and racial hierarchy is still intact. These characters who are flawed, isolated and frustrated with their lack of wish fulfilment struggle to accept the harsh realities of the world. Their inclination to change themselves to gain superiority and acceptance is futile as they cannot escape their cultural origin. Contrarily (Chan, 2022, [6]) states that the colonisation brought about a strong sense of global identity. In other words, Indians who were stranded across different parts of the world longed to be acknowledged as global citizens rather than being limited to their geographical and cultural origins. However, tolerance is yet to be generated to view immigrant Indians as global citizens. As seen in *A Bend in the River*, Salim faces an identity crisis when he finds himself as an outsider on African soil. Despite his longing to remain in Africa, the political and racial unrest condemns him to leave, leaving behind his identity of an immigrant trying to settle down in a foreign land peacefully. The author is able to understand the dilemma and internal conflicts an immigrant Indian faces in a postcolonial world. Thus, his descriptions of the identity crisis due to social, political and cultural fragmentation holds a mirror to an intolerant society divided by racial binaries.

VI. AMALGAMATION OF FACT AND FICTION IN POSTCOLONIAL FICTIONS BY V.S NAIPAUL

V.S Naipaul shows literary expertise in illustrating the historical events intertwined with fictitious characters. His characters are presented in the midst of important historical events, indicating the shifts in the postcolonial world and how they impact the lives of marginalised people. Amalgamation of fact and fiction is thus seen in his works, highlighting the often-disregarded individuals who suffer without reason. British colonialism was responsible for creating racial and cultural binaries which lingered after their departure as well. In *A Bend in the River* the author reviews the political upheaval in Africa as these patriots try

to drive out Indian immigrants as well as part of their nationalist movement. Thus, the critical position Indian immigrants had to occupy during times of freedom fighting is a concrete fact that ruined the lives of many such immigrants.

The postcolonial fiction by Naipaul further illustrates the general dissatisfaction and an urge to change in *Miguel Street* set during the Second World War. As articulated by (Zilberstein et al., 2020, [17]), the struggle to survive during the second world war was regarded as futile after which the existential literary movement was initiated. The proponents of existentialism viewed life as a cycle of frustration and dilemma. Additionally, (Gustafsson & Krickel-Choi, 2020, [9]) stated that existentialism as a philosophical outlook on life rendered everything meaningless where the value of human lives and their notions of human centrism was rejected. These views can be traced in the works of Naipaul as well by virtue of his narratives that repeatedly fail to acknowledge that the reality is often disappointing. In *Miguel Street* the author depicts seventeen unique stories and each story is highly realistic. In essence, these stories are not ornamented by false hopes and extravagance or character portraits of heroic human beings. Rather these characters are flawed, devastated and constantly struggling to find themselves under their vices and flaws.

In *An Area of Darkness*, the author reveals his moment of disillusionment as he is faced with the reality of an India that participates in corruption and disharmony. This narrative thus provides the untold situation of India in a postcolonial era, struggling to fight against poverty, crime and hunger. As demonstrated by (Mondal, 2019, [13]), the postcolonial era in India saw the emergence of political and economic instability. The reality of such instability is described in this work, intending to present an unaltered picture of a nation that is as flawed as the individuals originating from it. Contrarily (Allouche, 2019, [1]) states that gaining political freedom led to the development of a unique Indian identity. This identity is however missing in the characters of Naipaul. As an immigrant, the author is able to translate his feelings of dissatisfaction through his characters who are striving to become a part of the world that rejects them. Their own dreams reject them as seen in *A House for Mr Biswas*. The amalgamation of facts and fiction is translated in his postcolonial works aptly through his demonstration of flawed human characters faced with negativism. The narrative presented by the author describes the postcolonial dilemma of being and belonging. Most of his characters are devastated and exhausted by trying to survive in an unjust world. As articulated by (Balfour, 2007, [3]), postcolonial literature deals with the nuances of oppression of marginalised voices. The characters in Naipaul's fictions are oppressed in the same way. These people are representative of the real people who were faced with exile and exclusion. On the other hand, (Saini & Begum, 2020, [15]) states that the manifestation of individual freedom after decolonization was a major source of disillusionment. Thus, the author projects historical facts and includes fictional characters to show the reality of a fragmented world.

VII. CONCLUSION

Naipaul enriches the wealth of postcolonial fiction with his highly intellectual, innovative and critical portrayal of the postcolonial world. His personal life provides ample inspiration for him to pen down a narrative relating the unexplored stories of exiled and immigrant individuals. Through the above analysis it is seen that as a postcolonial author, Naipaul established narratives that are an amalgamation of facts and fiction. His works such as *A Bend in the River*, *A House for Mr Biswas*, *The Mimic Men*, *An Area of Darkness*, *Miguel Street* and others are reviewed to illustrate the themes of social, cultural and political fragmentation, diaspora, isolation, exclusion and its impact on the lives of marginalised characters. His characters are faced with an identity crisis as they are exposed to the harsh reality of an unjust world.

Reviewing his postcolonial fictions thus reveals various nuances and underlying thematic elements that may not reveal themselves upon a general reading. V.S Naipaul not only presents an exceptional portrayal of immigrant individuals but he also raises questions of belonging that they lack. Each postcolonial fiction by Naipaul showcases a theme of pessimism through which the internal conflicts of characters are projected. In essence, the postcolonial fiction by the author generates a sense of understanding of the postcolonial era and its corrupted and unjust nature among the readers. Therefore, it can be concluded that V.S Naipaul's postcolonial fictions are rich literary sources of social, cultural and political representation of immigrant Indians struggling to find new roots by rejecting their old roots.

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