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The Theme of Alienation in V. S. Naipaul's 1970s Novels

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Abstract

V. S. Naipaul's conscious extension of localities, cultural and historical horizons in his 1970s novels (*In a Free State*, *Guerillas*, and *A Bend in the River*) seems to be paradoxical with his inward-looking exploration of alienation. This paper draws on the theories of alienation of Fritz Pappenheim and Richard Schacht to divide Naipaul's representation of alienation into two categories: alienation with others and self-alienation. The overarching theme of alienation in Naipaul's 1970s novels is analysed in the realm of postcolonial concepts like displacement, migration, otherness and Diaspora. By doing so, it can be concluded that Naipaul develops the sense of alienation to a universal phenomenon for all human beings in the postcolonial world.

Key words: Alienation; Naipaul; Displacement; Otherness; Postcolonialism

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INTRODUCTION

The complex concept of alienation has not had an absolute definition since Socrates. Generally, the term is associated with loneliness, aloofness and imperviousness. Fritz Pappenheim (1968) points out that especially after World War II,

Restoring cities and bridges, technological equipment and economic-financial institutions, seems to go faster than rebuilding the spirit of a world which has undergone the destruction of modern war...In spite of the amazing speed with which the physical reconstruction has been carried out, it seems that gloom and despair still retain a strong grip on European thinking. (p.19)

The pessimism, or "prevalence of belief—belief in the greatness of man, the infiniteness of progress, and the sovereignty of reason" (Pappenheim, 1968, p.19) after modern war brings out the awareness of alienation of modern man, that is, man cannot be himself, and he is destined to remain a stranger in the world where he lives.

This essay draws on Pappenheim's argument to analyse the recurring theme of alienation in V. S. Naipaul's 1970s novels: *In a Free State*, *Guerillas* and *A Bend in the River*. Suman Gupta (1999) famously concludes that these three novels "are gradually dislocated from their obvious territory (the Caribbean, England, India), and extended to a more cosmopolitan arena" (p.42). The insularity of Trinidad and disillusionment with England presented in Naipaul's previous works give way to broader cultural and historical horizons in these three novels. However, in contrast with his outward-looking impulse is his desire to consistently look inwards, to tell contemporary stories of alienation from consistently outside perspectives on an almost existential level. The stories in *In a Free State* are "short glimpses into the state of alienation" while the displaced characters are "inextricably trapped by their situation" (Anderson, 1978, p.515). The vision of alienation in *In a Free State* develops into a full-length novel, *Guerrillas*, in which Naipaul explores alienation and otherness in the context of race and gender. *A Bend in the River* mainly illustrates alienation from the perspective of a solitary subjectivity in the postcolonial world. Exploring alienation in relation to the postcolonial concepts of displacement, migration, otherness and Diaspora, Naipaul's cultural critique and historical

observations show that alienation has become a universal phenomenon in the world at large.

1. DISPLACEMENT AND ALIENATION

Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin (1989) argue that

a major feature of post-colonial literatures is the concern with place and displacement. It is here that the special post-colonial crisis of identity comes into being: the concern with the development or recovery of an effective identifying relationship between self and place. (p.9)

This displacement “resulting from migration, the experience of enslavement, transportation, or ‘voluntary’ removal for indentured labour” (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 1989, p.9) produces the alienation of vision and the crisis in self-image. All these factors can be found in all the three novels of Naipaul. For him, it is the emergence from one society to another that induces alienation that implies loneliness, terror and inferiority complex. Frantz Fanon (2001) has already told us that the colonizers create the alienated feeling of the colonized by the implantation of the wealth and supremacy of Western values, the white men’s values (p.33). When the colonized subject is displaced from the Third World to the First World, his alienation will become even stronger because he is much closer to the Western values there.

As migration and travel play an important role in displacement, the travel experiences of Naipaul’s characters in his 1970s novels can illustrate the state of alienation of immigrants uprooted from their own societies and cultures and immersed in other ones, especially the more powerful ones. It is important to notice that alienation associated with the mobility of aeroplane appears in all these three novels. Jane in *Guerrillas* reflects that the aeroplane journey “obliterated past and distance; the memories—more like dreams than memories of actual events—of getting off at various airports, brilliantly illuminated; excitement then going, fatigue deadening response; so that, just hours away from London, she felt she had entered another life” (Naipaul, 1975, p.38). The aeroplane takes one to another totally different world from where it takes off, no matter whether from the metropolis to a postcolonial Caribbean country (as from London to the tropical island in *Guerrillas*), or from the former colony to a metropolitan city (as from Bombay to Washington in “One out of Many” and from West Indies to London in “Tell Me Who to Kill” in *In a Free State*). What Jane calls “fatigue” here seems to imply that the new place contributes to alienation, because when the aeroplane arrives, “an awareness or feeling of the ‘otherness’ of something” (Schacht, 1971, p.40) immediately occurs. Absorbed in one’s new-found distinctness, the individual comes to regard the new place

as something completely “other”, as something external and opposed. The new place has become alien in his eyes. For Santosh in the first story “One out of Many” in *In a Free State*, the otherness even begins as early as at Bombay airport when he realises his bundles shame him. On the plane, he finds out that

no one among the Indians or the foreigners looked like a domestic. Worse, they were all dressed as though they were going to a wedding and, brother, I soon saw it wasn’t they who were conspicuous. I was in my ordinary Bombay clothes, the loose long-tailed shirt, the wide-waisted pants held up with a piece of string. (Naipaul, 1971, p.18)

Santosh thinks he feels terribly uncomfortable on the plane because he has a glass of champagne, but actually it is his realisation of his otherness that makes his journey quite miserable.

The sense of otherness and alienation brought about by the aeroplane reappears in *A Bend in the River* when Salim reflects on his first aeroplane travel experience:

I was in Africa one day; I was in Europe the next morning. It was more than travelling fast. It was being like in two places at once. I woke up in London with little bits of Africa on me—like the airport tax ticket, given me by an official I knew, in the middle of another kind of crowd, in another kind of building, in another climate. Both places were real; both places were unreal. (Naipaul, 1979, p.268)

Salim then begins to understand Indar’s words that “the aeroplane had helped him to adjust to his homelessness” (Naipaul, 1979, p.268). The displacement effected by the aeroplane suggests that

For displaced people, however, just as there is no longer anywhere to return to, there is no possibility of arrival. Their journey is an attempt to re-capture an innocence which existed in a past it is impossible now to re-enter. The transference of self-knowledge, the knowledge of alienation and emptiness, is an integral part of life. (Anderson, 1978, p.515)

Once people are displaced to a new place, it means that they must abandon their home location. The displacement brings them into solidarity with one another and an awareness of non-belonging or non-sharing that reflects the exclusion from social and cultural participation. That could explain why the narrator of the second story “Tell Me Who to Kill” in *In a Free State* stresses his non-belonging again and again. He stresses that he does not like the moment when the train stops in London: since everyone else can see where they are going, he cannot, because “the mystery land is theirs, the stranger is you. None of those houses in the rain there belong to you” (Naipaul, 1971, p.75). The experience of the new place always reminds him of his alienation and the sense of otherness, because he is a displaced stranger there.

2. SELF-ALIENATION

If the alienation related with displacement is equal to being a stranger or outsider with the sense of otherness

in a new place in *In a Free State*, the alienation Naipaul explores in *Guerrillas* and *A Bend in the River* is more of self-alienation depending on the relationship with others. Man always locates himself in the eyes of others. When he cannot find a proper position in his relationship with others, he is quite likely to fail to know himself, so that self-alienation may occur.

2.1 Otherness, Fantasy, and Self-Alienation in *Guerrillas*

In *Guerrillas*, Jimmy's alienation from his true self is reflected in the novel he writes, in which much fantasy is involved, based on his sense of otherness in the context of race. In his novel, Jimmy is described as a saviour who "understands and loves the common man" and

knows how to keep his own counsel. He lives in his own rare world, his head is full of big things, he is carrying the burden of all the suffering people in the world, all the people who live in shacks and grow up in dirty little back rooms. (Naipaul, 1975, p.33)

Through the imaginary narrator, a white girl Clarissa, he is regarded as

a man of good blood, only someone of my class can see that, to me he is like a prince helping these poor and indigent black people, they're so shiftless no one will help them least of all their own. (Naipaul, 1975, p.57)

In his fantasy, Jimmy, respected by the white, gets rid of his half-black, half-Chinese racial status, and scorns the black while in reality he is looked down upon because of his race and he pretends to fight for the rights of the black.

Jimmy is alienated by his true self in his fantasy, but his homosexual relationship with Bryant, "the loveless, the rejected, the lost" (Naipaul, 1975, p.61), always reminds him of the "abandoned side of himself that crouches in fear and indulges in self-pity rather than in illusions of triumph" (Wirth-Nesher, 1984, p.539). Therefore, Jimmy's self-alienation (or we can even call split personality) finally leads to a violent murder.

2.2 Particularity and Self-Alienation in *A Bend in the River*

In *A Bend in the River*, Salim's self-alienation is also reflected in his relationship with others. Salim can be regarded as what Richard Schacht (1971) calls "one who conceives of himself solely in terms of his own particularity" (p.42). The particularity comes from the recognition of otherness which acquires an awareness of one's distinctness from others. This kind of self-alienated individual "seeks to develop his particular nature and character, and to assert his independence, as completely as possible" (Schacht, 1971, p.42).

Salim always emphasises his difference from others: The Africans, his Muslim family, and the Indian Diasporas like Mahesh. He undoubtedly regards himself as different from the Africans because he "places black Africans at the lowest rung of the human species" (Cocks, 2000, p.50).

Salim's distinctness from his family when he realises the fatalism of his family echoes Schacht's (1971) argument that "dissatisfaction with one's particular group of associates is quite compatible with a feeling of solidarity with them by virtue of shared tastes and values" (p.159). Salim reads magazines to receive knowledge about the world, not like Mahesh, "without deeper ambitions", who "suited the place; he would have found it hard to survive anywhere else" (Naipaul, 1979, p.105). Reflecting on his alienated solidarity, Salim says that:

I didn't see myself spending the rest of my days at that bend in the river, like Mahesh and the others. In my own mind I separated myself from them. I still thought of myself as a man just passing through...I was waiting for some illumination to come to me, to guide me to the good place and the "life" I was still waiting for. (Naipaul, 1979, p. 110)

Salim's self-alienation from the others is not the type of failed attempt to establish meaningful contact with others: he himself chooses to live alone. He may feel lonely, and may long for the companionship he denies himself, but the fact that his isolation is of his own choice gives his alienation a quality that sets it apart from those whose isolation is not chosen.

What is more important is the fact that it is the longing for Englishness, "an occasionally dull and alienating but nevertheless active, self-possessed and affirmative cultural formation" (Gupta, 1999, p.32) that leads to Salim's self-alienation and separation from his surroundings and the groups among which he lives. It occurs because Salim, a successfully colonized victim characterized by what Fanon (2001) calls "cultural estrangement", is convinced that only the superior culture of the whites can light the darkness of the colonized (p.169).

Discussing self-alienation, Schacht (1971) also suggests that "'alienation from oneself' consists of something like the loss or lack of a 'sense of self,' and of spontaneity and individuality" (p.131). It reflects man's fear that individuality will be destroyed, that he is living under conditions which compel him to become estranged from his own self. However, as the external events have a stronger impact on the individual, self-alienation is inevitable, because "when the identifications of the individual appear to be subject to social or natural forces over which he has no control, he perceives himself as alienated from important aspects of his personality" (Kaplan, 1976, p.120). Salim leaves his Muslim family on the east coast of Africa because he realises the fatalism of his family. He feels disappointed when he observes of his father and his uncles that they are "buried so deep in their lives that they were not able to stand back and consider the nature of their lives. They did what they had to be done. When things went wrong they had the consolations of religion" (Naipaul, 1979, p.18). However, in the European town in central Africa, he just carries on like his family. He realises that "we who remained—outsider, but neither settlers nor visitors, just people with nowhere better to

go—put our heads down and got on with our business” (Ibid., p.99). He lives with the knowledge that “we were expendable, that our labour might at any moment go to waste, that we ourselves might be smashed up; and that others would replace us” (Ibid., p.100). Although Salim longs for London, he clearly knows that “any life I might have anywhere—however rich and successful and better furnished—would only be a version of the life I lived now” (Ibid., p.48). He has no power to control or change the happenings around him; life has become meaningless to him. He even gets involved in smuggling, a proof of his violation of his principles and thus self-alienation. It is similar to the existential sense of insubstantiality and futility of Roche’s circle in *Guerrillas* when Meredith writes that “the life being described is the life the speaker lives or a life he has already lived. The setting may change, but no one will make a fresh start or do anything new” (Naipaul, 1975, p.148).

CONCLUSION

Naipaul’s 1970s novels describe a world in which people, especially those from the Third World, suffer from alienation, insecurity and rootlessness. While convenient free-floating transportation makes migration and travel easier, the sense of alienation of immigrants and exiles becomes even stronger, as displacement, mobility and migration only bring about identity crisis, inferiority complex, and terror. For Naipaul, it is the influence of

(post) colonialism that can explain his own sense of uprootedness as a colonial exile and the alienated feeling represented in his works. The theme of alienation in his 1970s novels reveals Naipaul’s pessimism on the one hand, and shows his humanistic concern about the human race on the other hand.

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