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RESEARCH ARTICLE



Thematic Study of Naipaul's Selected Works


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Abstract

Theme defines a major subject, idea or underlying meaning that is being discussed or a writer explores in a piece of writing. It is the suggested view taken on the main idea or message of any fictional, dramatic or nonfictional story. For instance, love can be the subject but desire for love might be the theme. The setting, characters, plot, dialogue are combined together to convey the theme of any piece of writing. Theme is not only the storyline or description but also something more than it. It is the center of any narrative that runs throughout a plot. Betrayal, love, life and death, courage, good vs. evil, revenge, beauty, family etc. are some of

the common themes in literature. Important concepts and messages encountered by the characters and the setting of a tale are communicated through themes. A story without a theme is just a collection of random characters and events. It serves as the component that gives a tale or poem its meaning. This article discusses different kinds of themes used within the works of V.S. Naipaul. The main themes in his writings are escapism and disillusionment, Exile and alienation, displacement or migration, the search of a stable sense of personal identity, rootlessness and many more.

Keyword: Themes, Escapism, Disillusionment, Personal identity, Displacement, Rootlessness

V.S. Naipaul is regarded as one of the most influential diasporic authors from the contemporary literary world. He is associated with both the colonial and post-colonial literature. Born and brought out in Trinidad, he hated the narrow, brutal life with limited possibilities and religious conflicts where he lived. The sense of displacement and migration created insecurity within Naipaul and he travelled many countries including India, the origin of his grandfather. He wrote more than thirty books in his career. He won Booker prize for his novel *In a Free State* (1971). He received Nobel Prize in literature in 2001. Naipaul is associated with colonial and post-colonial realism. He is the leading novelist of English-speaking Caribbean Island. Naipaul himself stated, "The colonial world was pretty awful world. People have now forgotten it but I still carry it with me a little bit. I grew up in at the far end of imperialism. It is very unpleasant... I haven't written about personal psychosis at all, I have written about real things" (Singh 22). This chapter discusses some of the important themes in the works of Naipaul. Naipaul's novels are placed in different locations and covers many themes, but he is famous for his portrayal of Trinidad; for his examination of contemporary India; his native land; portrayal of post-colonial countries in Africa, Asia and South America.

Trinidadian Themes

Trinidad being Naipaul's childhood home is a place where many of his novels are set. *A House for Mr. Biswas*, *Mystic Masseur*, *Miguel Street*, *The Mimic Men*, *The Suffrage of Elvira*, *In a Free State*, *Guerillas*, and *The Enigma of Arrival* are the novels related to Trinidad. *The Mystic Masseur* (1957) is a narrative about the Trinidad's Hindu Community history. Ganesh, the story's protagonist is a representative for Trinidad's East India Community. He found himself caught in the struggle between the Eastern and the Western Worlds. This novel described World War II (1939-1945):

This was the beginning of the war... The cultural upheaval already set in motion by the colonial education system, gained momentum through the modernizing forces unleashed by the Second World War. It is rural society of Trinidad that Naipaul has tried to capture through the character of Ganesh. (Naipaul 150)

Miguel Street (1959) exposes the follies and absurdities of Trinidadian society. The novel takes place during the period of World War II on Miguel Street in Port of Spain, the nation's capital. Each and every small topic turned out to be the large one in the eyes of the Trinidadians. This mentality among the natives is depicted in the novel by means of a group of

characters. The same psychology is found in the story of chapter named A Flag on the Island, where the unnamed island was identified as Trinidad.

The Suffrage of Elvira (1958), a fictional book set in colonial Trinidad, is a satire of democratic process and the consequences of political change. The story revolved around election in a small town named Elvira, it discussed the transition phase of Trinidad from British Rule to democracy.

Naipaul described the life of indentured labourers, dogged by hardship and shame throughout his master work *A House for Mr. Biswas*. This work records the East Indian immigrant's struggle living in Trinidad to become part of the national community. Ideal goal for an inhabitant of Trinidad was to possess a personal home. Hence, the possession of one's own house was the goal of the protagonist Mr. Biswas.

Guerrillas (1975) had a dejected depiction of an unsuccessful revolt on a Caribbean Island. The Island is modeled upon Trinidad, Naipaul's birthplace. It is a novel of colonialism and revolution. It showed a problem in public life that culminated in private violence. The novel emerges with immense force from its core which is a serious moral awareness of the condition of the world.

Exile and Alienation, Displacement or Migration and Rootlessness

Homi K. Bhabha an Indian scholar in his work, *The Location of Culture* points out:

The study of world literature might be the study of the way in which cultures recognize themselves through their projections of 'otherness' where once, the transmission of national traditions was the major theme of a world literature, perhaps we can now suggest that transnational histories of migrants, the colonized or political refugees – these border and frontier conditions may be the terrains of world literature. (Bhabha 12)

Historical migration of the population of humans started with the motion of *Homo erectus*, an extinct species about 2 million years ago. According to *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* the term 'Diaspora' stands for "the movement of people from any nation or group away from their own country". The terms exile, diaspora, migration, alienation and displacement are synonymous and have a vague status of both a displaced person and a diplomat. In Indian context, it has so many reasons operated by various conditions like employment, marriage and others. Every immigrant experiences a genuine and strong sensation of homelessness.

Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas* (1961) is regarded as one of the most important works which illustrated the theme of exile and alienation. Mr. Biswas, the protagonist of the novel, frustrated with his life leaves his ancestral land and became an indentured labour. In search of yearning to own a house of his own, a firm structure which symbolizes independence, he becomes rootless. The house linked with identity, quest and displacement. The question of displacement in *A House for Mr. Biswas* was portrayed through Naipaul's own cultural displacement. 'And the house did not fall' (Narrator, Epilogue) – These lines denote importance of a place where one can live with respect and without any dependence on others.

The novel *In a Free State* (1971) depicts displacement, the desire for good place in someone else's land. Destruction of personal identity in the process of geographical

displacement dominates the novel. The story revolved around the protagonist, Bobby who attempted an effort to enter the free state. The line below shows geographical displacement, “We should have known from the first day that the country wasn’t for us, and we should have taken our courage in both hand and gone back Rome” (Naipaul).

A Bend in the River (1979) deals with the themes of personal exile and political and individual corruption. Some of the characters are geographical displaced and some feels alienated from the cultures they grew up in. The novel closely associates the phrase “Carry on” with Salim’s friend Mahesh. The phrase for Mahesh is the way that has allowed him to survive numerous political firestorms and repel uprising. Salim’s version of “Carrying on” tends towards passivity.

Another work of Naipaul that deals with the theme of displacement is *Half a Life* (2001). It has the theme of personal and geographical displacement and a fear of lacking individuality. The central character Willie Somerset Chandran undergoes displacement he leaves India to go London for studies. His displacement occurs as his father gave him dual identity. Willie makes another migration for the sake of her love. He followed a black African girl who is Portuguese to her country, a Portuguese colony in Africa. The novel also delineated Willie’s continuous displacement from India, Africa, England and Germany moving in the direction of self-affirmation.

Enigma of Arrival (1987), an autobiographical novel of V.S. Naipaul, describes Naipaul’s experiences migrating from Trinidad to Britain in 1950s. He comes in the process of his own cultural displacement. “...a rootlessness which matches his own, is equally that Naipaul has discovered in Mr. Stone” (Naipaul).

Escapism and Disillusionment

Naipaul’s *Miguel Street* (1959) is the best example of Escapism. The characters in the novel use escapism to cope with the futility of their lives, their failures and their relationships. Escapism is prevalent in the character of Bogart. He tries to run away from the fact that he has two wives. The title of the novel *Miguel Street* is a place where he tries to escape and the place where he thought will not be caught by the law for bigamy. Disillusionment is found in another character of the novel *Miguel Street*. Elias felt discouraged by his failure to pursue a career in medicine. Morgan was also discouraged by his failure in making people laugh through his humorous acts. Laura became disillusioned with her life choices seeing her daughter following her footsteps by becoming pregnant. Hence, the novel *Miguel Street* is full of characters that use the themes of escapism and disillusionment profoundly.

Quest for Identity

Quest for Identity refers to the existential struggle of men in the process of attaining meaning and value of his life. The theme of sense identity is found mostly in all the works of Naipaul. Some of the novels discussed on the theme of identity are *A House for Mr. Biswas*, *Magic Seeds*, *Half a Life*.

A House for Mr. Biswas (1961) tells the story of its central character, Mr. Biswas his life from birth to death in different phases, and the problems of his own identity. Naipaul portrays the complex of the relationship between a man and his ancestors and his incapability

to escape from it. However, Mr. Biswas looks for his own identity, “I am just somebody, nobody at all” (Naipaul 68). Mr. Biswas starts his life as a shopkeeper and later as a sign painter unlike his father’s and brothers’ identity as labourers. Tulsis, his in-laws wanted total change of his identity providing him shelter in their house. Mr. Biswas doesn’t wish to give up his identity as a sign painter, “Give up sign-painting? And my independence? No, boy: My motto is: paddle your own canoe?” (Naipaul 42)

Novel *Magic Seeds* (2004) has the theme of search for identity. The character of the novel Willie Somerset Chandran, describes his destiny as a chain of unusual events, “My life has been a series of surprises”. (Naipaul 172). The statement synthesizes his whole existence. The novel tells the story of how identity is built and changed and rebuilt.

Half a Life (2001) is replete with crisis of identity as the characters in the novel live half-lives as exiles are positioned in an ambivalent in between space. The novel records Naipaul’s life in exile in a diverse culture and his identity issues. The novel recounts the life of Willie Somerset Chandran, his quest for identity and his realization of halfness in life in the multi-dimensional socio-cultural environment. His search for identity begins at an early age where he questions his father about his middle name, Somerset. The line stating the quest of identity, which Willie asks his father about his name “Willie Somerset Chandran” is:

Why is my middle name Somerset?

He says that boy at the school have just made out and they are mocking at me. (Naipaul 1)

Having settled in Africa, Willie comes to know the fact that loss of one’s identity is an unavoidable aspect of being colonized which afflicts both the colonial power as well as the colonized. He stopped to make fool of himself after having lived for eighteen years in Africa. He made a firm decision to leave the shadow of ‘Ana’s London man’ and tells Ana, “I mean I’ve given you eighteen years I can’t give you any more. I can’t live your life any more. I want to live my own” (Naipaul 136).

Conclusion

V.S. Naipaul takes himself as a Diaspora writer as twice displaced from his ancestral land. The theme of Diaspora and migration is connected to his own experiences. His life’s journey has included periods of rootlessness, estrangement from Indian cultural heritage and self-definition through colonial works. Naipaul’s shifting and changing identity was examined by ‘I’. This view of ‘I’ shows that there is an ‘Identity’, which is not his society. Alienation is taken up as one of the themes which Naipaul presents through various characters in his novels. It is separation resulting in possibilities. It happens to human beings only because of their loss of property, loss of lovable ones or loss of status in the society. The cause may be rootlessness.

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