

The Postcoloniality of Being: Understanding the Mimic and the Diasporic Identity in Naipaul's "B. Wordsworth"

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Susan Spearey in her essay 'Shifting Continents/Colliding Cultures' invokes the words of Michael de Certeau who in his discussion of the significance of the name that the public transport in modern Athens has been given – *the metaphorai* – remarks "[T]o go to work or come home, one takes a 'metaphor' – a bus or train. Stories could also take this noble name: everyday they traverse and organize places; [...]. Every story is a travel story - a spatial practice" (Goonetilleke 89). Any discursive analysis of spatiality thus becomes very important in the context of the multicultural and diasporic postcolonial world that constitutes the social reality of the twenty first century. The word 'postcolonial' conjures for us the image of a collective entity which somehow manages to hold together disparate societies and cultures along with their individual narratives of colonial histories and struggles for decolonization. While postcolonialism can be, at times, construed as a fairly homogenous term, it nevertheless asserts heterogeneity, difference and alterity on a discursive level. For a writer like V. S. Naipaul who stands at the crossroads of two socio-cultural realities – he is the Trinidadian son of Hindu indentured labourers - addressing the issue of spatiality and the transcultural nature of a migrant identity becomes an important part of the narrative. *Miguel Street*, is a collection of short stories that Naipaul had written for the BBC between 1954 and 1956 and, was later published in 1959. It is set in Trinidad and Tobago, and the stories mostly draw their inspiration from the author's childhood days spent in Port of Spain. The street in question apparently refers to Luis Street where Naipaul had lived with his family in the 1940s. This anthology makes an attempt to explore the political, cultural and existential implications of a composite existence and thus it features characters whose lives are marked by their efforts to succeed and bridge the gap between their aspirations and the reality they inhabit, but in the end the latter proves futile for them. The characters "get nowhere, but not because of lack of effort or desire. They are stymied by the conditions of the 'street' itself. If they wanted to go somewhere, they couldn't start from there" (Charles 23). The characters represent the inherent dichotomy of a diasporic identity that is reflected in their names as well. For instance, the eponymous protagonist of the story in question in the context of this paper is B. Wordsworth who is quite obviously named after the Romantic poet William Wordsworth and he is joined in Miguel Street by a tailor named Bogart who in turn is named after the veteran Hollywood actor Humphrey Bogart. Aaron Eastley in his essay titled 'Naipaul's Children: Representations of Humor and Ruin in 'Miguel Street' labels most of the inhabitants of Miguel Street 'mimic men' (Eastley 51). Indeed the idea of the 'mimic' becomes an important trope for Naipaul to problematise the diasporic identity of the characters that inhabit his literary narratives.

It is important to remember that the stories of this anthology represent a time in Naipaul's life when he had moved from the predominantly insular Indian community settled in the countryside to the comparatively more multicultural community of Port of Spain. This sense of constantly being on the move can be perceived in the way life is delineated in *Miguel Street* as houses continually change their ownership and the people always seem to be in transit. A case in point is the short story selected for this paper - 'B. Wordsworth' - where the boy narrator regularly meets beggars who throng to his house in the afternoon asking for alms and not surprisingly they are always seen to be on the move as if a sense of unbelonging has cast its pall upon them. At the end of the story the house of B. Wordsworth is seen to be demolished so that no trace of his existence can be found to linger. The story 'B. Wordsworth' is not so much about the diasporic existence as it is about the ideological gap between the perceived imperial centre and the margin. In the story Naipaul writes about the existential trials and tribulations of a black poet, ironically named B. Wordsworth and Naipaul's mordant irony stands out in that the 'B' in the name stands for 'Black'. So the poet in question is Black Wordsworth and in so naming him Naipaul plays on the politics of nomenclature as the character's name itself becomes a signifier of his racial identity and the consequent socio-cultural space he is designated to by virtue of his black or Creole identity in the broader western cultural discourse. We must remember that the story is set in Trinidad, a place for which Naipaul famously harbours ambiguous sentiments, and the protagonist's racially marginalised identity implicates the colonial history of the region. The marginal Creole identity is a product of the trans-Atlantic slave trade which had forcefully brought over several hundred thousands of Africans to the Caribbean islands who were then resettled in the islands through a violent process of the extermination of indigenous Carib people and the subsequent deracination of the diasporic African community.

An important point to be noted is that the failure of B. Wordsworth as a poet does not come as a surprise in the context of Naipaul's anthology as most of the other characters - or the 'mimic men' - taste failure of one kind or another. To put things in perspective, the tailor Bogart who imitates the accent of the American movie star of the same name is never actually seen to sew a suit - "and I cannot remember him making a suit" (Eastley 52). Similarly in 'B. Wordsworth' the boy narrator admits to never having seen the self-proclaimed poet pen a single line. Aaron Eastley aptly describes them as people who 'adopt roles or titles such as those that might be held by professionals of various sorts in England and America, but who in various ways are revealed to be fakes or shams, unable to deliver on the implied promises of their occupational titles' (Eastley 51-52). Although V.S. Naipaul's most complex handling of the trope of mimicry comes in his later novel *The Mimic Men* (1967), in *Miguel Street* Naipaul problematizes the idea of literary mimicry - that is, "the colonized subject responding to the English literary canon thrust upon him by colonial education and an imposed foreign culture" (Beck 175). Indeed Naipaul himself has been able to surmount the redoubtable problem of following in the footsteps of the British literary tradition by indegenizing the English fiction. 'B. Wordsworth' thus essentially becomes a story of 'not' - not being able to find one's true identity and not being able to live with an imposed construct that has been forcefully thrust upon. Mimicry in this sense indicates a vulnerability that belies the apparently strong foundations of colonial dominance that has the potential to destabilize the sense of one's identity. The desperate attempts of the racially defined Black Wordsworth to watch the bees and flowers in order to unleash the frenzy of creative inspiration too seems shallow and devoid of purpose. In trying to study nature to get poetic inspiration, he is only giving a pitiful performance of mimicking his English counterpart, more commonly alluded to as the 'nature poet'. Rather than being a simple reproduction of the assumptions and principles of the colonizer's culture, mimicry thus gives rise to an ambivalent sense of being that more often

than not ends in the complete annihilation of one's identity. To quote Bruce King, "[T]he status symbols and educational system in colonial Trinidad are inappropriate to the reality. Its Britishness is mimicry" (Strongman 83).

Naipaul's writing in general is pervaded by a sense of unbelonging and it locates a weakness in the composite identity that a diasporic existence inherently involves. The Black Wordsworth of Naipaul's short story is unable to synthesize the opposing halves of his self – the cultural habits of the colonizer and his abortive quest for his very own cultural genesis – resulting in his ignominious death that compels him to tell the boy narrator that all his poetic aspirations were lies – "All this talk about poetry and the greatest poem in the world, that wasn't true [...]" (Naipaul 4). The question of 'where' one comes from thus becomes a very important part of Naipaul's narratives and it is because he does not want to absolve his writing of the duality of a diasporic existence. The term diaspora itself comes from the Greek word 'to disperse' or 'to scatter' and it refers to the voluntary or forcible movement of people from their homelands into new regions and essentially all diasporic studies are bound to be an analysis of the relations between homelands and host countries and it aims to re-examine the international and trans-state aspects of diaspora activities. In this context, let me mention a workable definition of diaspora as put forward by the editor of *The Global Intercultural Communication Reader*, Molefi Kete Asante, "What then is a diaspora? [...]. I define a diaspora as an identifiable group residing in a geography other than its place of origin that experiences not only physical displacement but cultural hybridity; a yearning for the homeland; alienation from the so-called hostland; a complex structural relationship among homeland, hostland, and diaspora; and a collective identity defined largely by the relationship between homeland and hostland. These six criteria not only synthesize various existing definitions of diaspora and may be used to define various diasporic populations" (Asante 307). So the diasporic individual inhabits this so-called interstitial space and is permanently entrenched in the sense of in-betweenness. Originally the concept of diaspora only applied to the removal of the Jewish people from their ancestral homeland of Judea and it was only much later that the western discursive practices took note of the necessity of forging a new critical methodology to subsume the postcolonial diasporic identity. Commenting on just this point, Rogers Brubaker argues, "Most early discussions of diaspora were firmly rooted in a conceptual 'homeland'; they were concerned with a paradigmatic case, or a small number of core cases. The paradigmatic case was, of course, the Jewish diaspora; "some dictionary definitions of diaspora, until recently, did not simply illustrate but defined the word with reference to that case" (Boyarin 27). So it was not until the emergence of postcolonialism as an academic discipline in the latter half of the twentieth century that the predominantly Western intellectual discourse actually began to examine the socio-cultural dislocations of resulting from the African trans-Atlantic slave trade or say, the expulsion of the Southern Chinese or the Hindus of South Asia during the coolie trade.

We are still struggling to come to terms with the idea of multiculturalism that is an inherent element of all globalised social structures. It is difficult for us to theoretically do away with a unitary narrative of homeland and a homogenous racial identity. That is to say that till perhaps the onslaught of imperialist enterprises beginning in the early part of the 17th century narratives of racial and national identity have always been essentialist in nature, but the colonialist ventures and their social, economical and cultural repercussions of the last four hundred odd years have heavily problematised the very concept of 'identity' – be it racial or national, purely because the profound nature of socio-cultural dislocations resulting from a wide gamut of causes like histories of indentured labour, transatlantic slavery and the expulsion of indigenous people from their ancestral lands have called into question the ideological construct of

'nation' and 'race' – indeed, a nation is merely an 'imagined community' to recall Benedict Anderson's words.

So situated in this context, what indeed is the identity of the diasporic writer? And indeed we need to explore and address the broader political and epistemological nuances of naming their artistic representations as strictly 'diasporic'. I would like to mention Victor J. Ramraj's observations on the duality of diasporic writers in the article 'Trapdoors into a Bottomless Past: V.S. Naipaul's Early Ambivalent Vision of the Indo-Caribbean Experience' where he writes about the significance of Naipaul's omission of any mention of Trinidad (where he was born) in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech where he described himself as an Indian and a British writer. Ramraj goes on to say, "[m]any thought this omission conveys unambiguously his partiality for India and Britain and a denial for Trinidad of which he said very early in his career [...]: "I had never wanted to stay in Trinidad. (Ramraj 33). Postcolonial diaspora writers are as a rule caught between their indigenous and their adopted communities. Ngugi wa Thiongo sees himself as a duplex man with African and European identities whereas Mulk Raj Anand sees himself burdened by the Alps on one shoulder and the Himalayas on the other. In his Foreword to *India: A Wounded Civilization*, Naipaul's ambivalent identity as a diasporic writer is symbolised through the image of a trapdoor when he says, "[i]n India I know I am a stranger, but increasingly I understand that my Indian memories, the memories of that India which lived on into my childhood in Trinidad are like trapdoors into a bottomless past" (Ramraj 33).

Keeping in mind this history of violent resettlement and the manipulation of the social and cultural identity of the Caribbean people, it is hardly surprising to note that Naipaul's black Wordsworth's voice is not heard by the masses and he dies an anonymous death, a death devoid of any purpose and consequences. With his death, his poetry too faces the ignominy of oblivion and it is only the efforts of the little Trinidadian boy who he accidentally befriends that attempt to keep alive the memory of his mentor's identity as a poet. Unlike his English counterpart who occupies the place of privilege in the haloed house of the English canon. Naipaul's racially defined Wordsworth could never have achieved to have his voice heard by the mainstream popular culture, not only that of the British metropole but unavoidably that of his native country too, if one can call that Caribbean homeland of his native that is.

The inherent idea of linguistic imperialism too comes into play in Naipaul's narrative as Black Wordsworth speaks in the tongue of linguistically marginalised and hybridised Creole/Pidgin and his failure as a poet is entrenched in the perceived inferiority of the cultural discourse that his language epitomizes. In the story while Naipaul does not examine the direct experiences and social interactions of first hand diasporic accounts, he certainly tries to identify the existential crisis of an individual's racial and cultural identity under the unitary narrative of diasporic experience.

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<<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00144940209597703?journalCode=vexp20>>

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