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Searching Identity Beyond Generic Boundaries in V.S. Naipaul's *The Enigma of Arrival* and *A Way in the World*

Abstract:

This paper aims to explore that the purpose of V.S. Naipaul in synthesizing different features of autobiography, fiction, history, journalism, essay and memoir in The Enigma of Arrival and A Way in the World is the quest for his socio-cultural and aesthetic identities as a man and a writer. Naipaul acts as a historian, explorer, author, character, narrator and traveler, and changes the novel form in both these books to create a discourse which is placed in the uncertain spaces between fiction and non-fiction. Both the novels are hybrid creations in which Naipaul goes beyond generic boundaries to demonstrate the difficulties in identifying himself within a political, literary, and cultural tradition. This paper also analyzes that the fusion of multiple literary genres in both the novels is meant to describe Naipaul's persistent struggle to make his own world, to become a writer and to convert his personal experience into literary works.

Key Words:

Autobiographical Fiction, History, Identity, Postcolonial, Writing

Introduction

Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul wrote and published intermittently throughout half a century, from 1957 to 2004. His writings amount to nearly 30 titles, with many compilations and re-editions. He is one of the few contemporary writers, prolific in both fiction and non-fiction who have created and sustained a powerful literary voice. In his early seven novels from *The Mystic Masseur* (1957) to *A Flag on the Island* (1967), Naipaul mostly uses conventional fictional forms; however, he creates the effect of innovation by employing modern techniques of flashback, fragmented narration and interior causerie to indicate his characters' state of mind. After the publication of his early novels, Naipaul refreshed himself by travelling, from which his later works of fiction emerged which include the next seven novels from *In a Free State* (1971) to *Magic Seeds* (2004). There is an obvious change and marked difference in tone, technique and approach in the later novels. A broadening of vision is noticeable as Naipaul explores other countries and cultures. The well-known Naipaulian themes related to issues of identity and responsibilities of writer are analyzed in a broader perspective.

Naipaul consistently tries to extend the boundaries of genre as he attempts to determine the most suitable form for finding his own identity as a socio-cultural being and a creative writer. *Miguel Street* is something more than just a collection of interlinked short stories or even a novel. *The Mystic Masseur* blurs the borderline between the beginning and ending of tales

of the narrator and the protagonist, Ganesh; and even Ganesh's tale is a fusion of "spiritual thriller" and "autobiography" (Naipaul 1964, p. 119). In *A House for Mr. Biswas*, Naipaul keeps the picaresque mode of realist novel. (Bhabha 1984, p.104; Mustafa 1995, p. 221). *Guerrillas* shows the rhetoric of novel in itself and *The Mimic Men* demonstrates destructive metaphoric form. It is in this background of Naipaul's literary career, always trying to push the limits of genre that *The Enigma of Arrival* and *A Way in the World* review all these issues. Both these books simultaneously mark a significant break from and a remarkable continuity of

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what has been written before, both in style and structure, to demonstrate how important the issues of identity have been to the novels of Naipaul.

Autobiographical and Fictional Identities in *The Enigma of Arrival*

The Enigma of Arrival is a novel of synthesizing together different strands which interweave the author's knowledge of his existence in the world and manifests their reflection on construction of his postcolonial identity as a man and a writer. The novel carries on the reflexive mood initiated in the previous books, but it conceals the very clear, autobiographical elements under the apparently deceptive subtitle 'A Novel in Five Sections'. The novel is about its protagonist's development as a writer and about the evolution of his self-awareness through the process of writing. [Judith Levy \(1995\)](#) believes that the novel is actually the postcolonial life-story of the author and his obsession for searching the origin (p. 97). However, the story of *The Enigma of Arrival* focuses not only the inside but outside world as well. [Rob Nixon \(1992\)](#) observes that the novel focuses on the relationship between Naipaul and England (p. 39).

The Enigma of Arrival is a creative product of Naipaul's feeling of frustration and inadequacy – his feeling of man's weakness as human, trapped and cursed. He communicates a pressing need to regain his lost feeling of having a place. While trying to figure out the complexity and duality of identity, the author is driven deeper into disappointment. This is the sad condition of a man who strives hard for a meaning and understanding of himself in an enigmatic and even antagonistic world – a man searching in tension and darkness. The novel depicts the writer's vision, experience and understanding of human existence in entirety. Different subjects of his travelogues and novels – the significance of past, man's relationship to his natural surroundings, the fear of unavoidable death, the subject of arrival and departure, socio-cultural disintegration, man's longing for a harmonious self and the alienated and isolated human predicament – are all knitted into the fabric of this novel.

The Enigma of Arrival fuses together fictional and autobiographical elements. It describes Naipaul's long and consistent effort to make his own world, to become a writer, to convert his experience into creative works and his settling in England. As [Levy \(1995\)](#) writes: "The protagonist is both Naipaul, a writer and traveler of international renown, the facts of whose writing life are known and verifiable, and an unnamed, coming-into-existence being who is inserted into the cycle of history, life and death" (p. 97). However, Naipaul maintains an aesthetic gap between the relationship of fictional and autobiographical in the text. It would be unjust to term *The Enigma of Arrival* as an exclusively autobiographical novel since it includes such intertwined subjects as solitude, death, decay, exile, flux, change, the will of an individual to adapt with ambition and self-assertion, and with how the world changes shape. Naipaul synthesizes these subjects as skillfully as he blends novelistic with the personal.

The Enigma of Arrival is divided into five sections. These are titled as "Jack's Garden", "The Journey", "Ivy", "Rooks" and "The Ceremony of Farewell". These sections are further subdivided into 41 parts. The first three sections of the novel describe the narrator's stay in the English valley of Wiltshire, the fourth section is an account of the narrator's writing career, while the fifth section concludes the novel as an epilogue. The time sequence of the action in the novel is not linear as the major incidents are revealed gradually and the characters are delineated slowly, and as constantly incoming new information adds on the already built impression. This compels the readers to reevaluate their understanding throughout the novel till the end. The content as well as the form of the novel is highly complex.

The perplexing structure of the novel convincingly conveys that nothing in the world is absolute and that people change their perceptions constantly about the world. As the narrator reveals landscape, environment and his impressions of them step by step, the reader also steadily discloses the novel. Hence, the structure is effective in emphasizing one of the major themes embedded in the novel. The novel is, basically, a blend and fusion of different features of fictional autobiography, biographical fiction, non-fiction and fiction. The dissolution of generic borders reflects the problems in identifying the author with a political, literary, social

and cultural tradition. [Mark McWatt \(1989\)](#) notices a link between a propensity in West Indian novels to transcend the conventional form and the Caribbean reality. He particularly examines the fictional autobiography and proposes that the issue with fictional character as autobiographical self may emerge from the specific Caribbean experience (p. 16). *The Enigma of Arrival* is surely the novel wherein the generic boundaries of autobiography and fiction are confused and collapsed.

The confusion in *The Enigma of Arrival* lies in its ambivalently and ambiguously positioned storyteller who is Naipaul and the narrator at the same time. The personal pronoun or the autobiographical “I” in the novel makes a difference between the writing self and his self as perceived in the narrative. J.M. [Coetzee \(2001\)](#) rightly notices that autobiographical element runs deep in all the novels of V.S. Naipaul, but the representative characters of Naipaul have a complex relation with the creator. They are continuously in the process of transformation and renewal (p. 5). The uncertain “I” in the novel explains its confusing nature. Whereas it tries to identify who is observing, writing or travelling, at the same time, it acknowledges, as [Jones \(2000\)](#) says that facts can be distorted in autobiography but fiction tells truth about the writer (p. 96).

The Enigma of Arrival blends the energy and warmth of Naipaul’s earlier fiction with the control of later works. It depicts Naipaul’s whole journey from West Indies to the cottage on Waldenshaw Estate in Wiltshire, his pilgrimage from the fear of extinction to the acknowledgement of European rationality. Simultaneously, it is an acceptance of the enigmatic hollowness of arrival. In fact, it is Naipaul’s circular journey of departure and arrival. He comes back to Wiltshire every time after his visits to different places with evolving perspectives, new experiences, a sense of flux, refined perceptions and insights. The author says: “The story become more personal: my journey, the writer’s journey, the writer defined by his writing discoveries, his ways of seeing, rather than by his personal adventures, writer and man separating at the beginning of the journey and coming together again in a second life just before the end.” ([Naipaul, 1987, p. 309](#)). Journey is a significant symbol in Naipaul’s fiction representing man’s perpetual search for identity. It is the journey through the frustrations of placelessness and agonies of exile. This exposure or experience is both the condition and cause of the quest for identity.

The evolving identity of the first-person narrator is created in the portrayal of other characters in the novel. This adds not only to the impression that the novel is autobiographical but the whole text appears to be an effort to explain the identity of the main character. The narrator first portrays Jack’s character. Jack’s history in this specific place of England traces centuries back. Somehow, the narrator links the history of the place to this character, Jack but he will ultimately find that Jack arrives in England from some other place and that he is not originally native he believed he was. Despite the fact that the interest in Jack comes from the conviction that he is local, finding that Jack does not belong to the place and is an outsider and therefore fairly like himself, is somewhat consoling to the narrator. It strengthens his evolving belief in change and in himself as merely an individual to come and go. Everything is subject to change.

The serene landscape of Wiltshire valley provides the narrator physical peace, but it does not help him overcome his sense of estrangement and alienation. He continues to be an alien to other inhabitants of the place. Although the locals are also originally non-natives and outsiders like him, but they have other places, people and relationships to be in touch with. The narrator has no place or nobody to go to. He thinks he has found himself to be a perpetual foreigner and a perfect stranger who has left his people and country before growing up ([Naipaul, 1987, p. 220](#)). The wish of the owner of Waldenshaw Estate in Wiltshire to remain unvisited is comparable with narrator’s own desire not to be observed by him. Both of them belong to two different cultures though, they have the common need of aloofness. The narrator attempts to explain his place in comparison and contrast with other characters he portrays; the landlord, hire man Bray, Allan, the failed writer, the gardener Pitton, and Mr. and Mrs. Philip. He sees himself in them in bits and pieces. V.S. Naipaul informs Israel [Shenker \(1971\)](#) “As you grow older you understand people a lot more, you have greater sympathy with people. You enter into them much more” (p. 53). The young narrator observes his personality reflected in Allan. He notices his own imperfect life, vulnerability and isolation in the youthful writer. The

narrator shares with Allan his vision of inadequacy and ambiguity, but all the way he is conscious of the contrast between him and the persons around. They are safe and secure whereas he feels insecure, disoriented and lost.

Naipaul believes that he has lost much of his colonial self during the process of growing up and consequently, he has become more conscious of his vulnerability. His times, the England of his times, and the process of writing have driven him to greater growing and greater knowledge of the world. As he advances in age, he becomes conscious of a huge empty space behind him. Even the serenity of his landscapes does not give him a respite from the overwhelming sense of disorder and disintegration. Regardless of the fact that Naipaul is writing about people in Wiltshire, about his travels or about the third world, his main concern is the dilemma of a man trapped in the historical change. He observes everything with the eyes of an alien through the lenses of his unique sensibility and Indian ancestry. [Pathak \(1988\)](#) writes about Naipaul that he observes minutely and portrays the Caribbean world of hybrid and colonial society where people struggle to search their identity (p. 154). In order to search for his identity, the narrator takes to writing. Initially, he says that he hid behind comedy and humor, in life and in writing, in order to get rid of chaos ([Naipaul, 1987, p. 140](#)). Then he says that he had to discover himself first before achieving anything in writing ([Naipaul, 1987, p. 141](#)). For the purpose of defining himself, it is important to visit India, the country of his ancestral origin after his travels to American colonies and to Caribbean. He feels homeless even in India. Anyhow, the visit reveals new realities to him. It awakens him from his dreams and illusions. On another occasion, the narrator says that “writing strengthened me, it quelled anxiety. And now writing restored me again” ([Naipaul, 1987, p. 154](#)). The process of writing consistently helps him to explore and find himself. It is writing that took him away from England and brought him back to England, it brought him disillusionment and gave him a message of universal love. It provided him an understanding of himself. This knowledge of his own self or self-discovery settles the feeling of displacement as well as the consequent issues of identity which are reflected in his characters and themes.

The Enigma of Arrival is characterized by the evolution of writer’s identity through different stages. The novel provides revelatory information about Naipaul’s aspirations, his roots, personal life and his search for identity. He compares the uncertainty and vulnerability of his life with the security and protectiveness of others. The Wiltshire experience provides him a sort of peace which he never found anywhere else before. The solitude and wilderness of countryside landscape in England is compared with the dirt and swamp of West Indies. The concept of flux and change connects two different worlds of Naipaul where present and past meet. The historical and personal have been compellingly expressed. Naipaul attempts to synthesize various dimensions of his personality and life in writing. His failure to identify himself as a Westerner, an Indian or a West Indian leads him to find his identity in writing.

A Way in the World: Rediscovering Identity in History

A Way in the World follows Naipaul’s accomplishment in *The Enigma of Arrival* wherein he initiates a change in the novel form to create a discourse which is placed in the uncertain spaces between non-fiction, fiction and autobiography. This book is more clearly a hybrid creation than *The Enigma of Arrival*, blending the features of journalism, historical documentation, autobiography, essay, memoir and fiction. Naipaul acts as a historian, explorer, author, character, narrator and traveler in the narrative. Depending on recorded data, for example, archival documents and letters and synthesizing these verifiable historical facts with his art of creation and gift of imagination as a writer, Naipaul recreates the lives of historical and fictional personages in the book, giving just those pieces of their accounts that are sliced away from a bigger historical picture. The other sources which provided intertextual resources in the text include personal memory and authentic historical documents. *A Way in the World* shows how much the writer’s general understanding of history is affected by an ideology of Western historicism. Naipaul depends on archival documents from Western information centers, and he employs, within his narrative, a stylistic feature of modern textuality. He fills the gap found in historical text with his creative imagination and delineates his characters reflectively and retrospectively. Naipaul explains

through these fragmentary stories, his sense of time, memory and history as delicate connections which make the uncertainty of current social reality.

A Way in the World is about the quest for roots and origins in that Naipaul revisits Trinidad, his native island and as [Helen Hayward \(2002\)](#) says, “re-writes *The Loss of El Dorado*” (p. 19). Naipaul revisits a long past in South America and the Caribbean, the New World colony and reincarnates the days of original natives who possessed the land before the arrival of indentured laborers from China and Asia and the slaves from Africa. His regular visits to imaginary homelands of the past seems to be a sad dirge for loss and an innocent dream of going back to a fantastical past. Naipaul (1987) himself writes on the last page of *The Enigma of Arrival* that people always need history to know themselves (p. 318). *A Way in the World* compares historical-cum-fictional documentary with significant experiences in the life of the narrator connected with a contemplative exploration of meaning.

This novel also shows the problems of writing history on the grounds that the past is the perfect alien, more bizarre than the most far off and distant physical reality. In *A Way in the World*, the action changes in time as well as place from the earlier colonial conflicts, through the unrest of Napoleonic periods, Elizabethan age to the current times of decolonization, with London, Trinidad, South America, Venezuela, Uganda, Guiana and a nameless African colony giving the background scenery. With this background, the order of fragmented stories demonstrates the major characters in constant evolution.

In fact, this novel appears to synthesize and summarize most of the author's literary output in that the satire and irony have been abandoned. It might be supposed to be the point of perfection of a lifelong effort as it is a combination of interests and genres. Naipaul transformed his own life, his historical research, his attachment with people, his travel interests, his preoccupations, his attraction towards the experience of a particular type of people, and his views about the oppressed and oppressor into fiction in *A Way in the World*. Therefore, we find important periods of his life in England and the Caribbean, we see postcolonial Africa in Conradian vision, and we hear voices of explorers and adventurers from history like Sir Walter Raleigh and Francisco Miranda.

This book comprises of nine sectionalized contemplations wherein Naipaul reaches a profound comprehension of his hybrid identity and multicultural legacy. The book also observes the writer's skillful use of blending multiple literary genres to shed light on his dark areas and to communicate his exilic experience. Trying to look for a suitable form appropriate for his all sorts of experience, V.S. Naipaul goes beyond generic borders as the structural forms he employed went hand in hand ([Naipaul, 2003, p. 20-24](#)). [Naipaul \(2002\)](#) says that the models of fiction he learnt and practiced under colonial educational system are not viable for him as they concerned with other type of societies” (p. 484) wherein the chance of a broader knowledge, an understanding of past, a perception of identity exists ([Naipaul, 2003, p. 25](#)). Because of his visits to several different countries of the world, Naipaul thinks whether the acquired structure of fiction can present beyond the appearances of objects (Naipaul, 2003, p. 25). To convey the spirit of his Indian, English and Trinidadian experience, he has to look for his own path in the world of fiction. Accordingly, he has made another world wherein he struggles against the absence and incompleteness of history by rewriting the history and reconstructing the past in the present.

In his article, “Reading and Writing: A Personal Account”, [Naipaul \(2003\)](#) in an especially captivating passage remembers the forces that led him at that phase in his life into writing travelogues. He says that traditional fictional form has exhausted itself for him; the structure of autobiography is insufficient, and he is at loss what to write (p. 28). Obviously, a lot of writers have gone through various forms of this fictional crisis. V.S. Naipaul's description of his situation in what he evidently observes as a defining moment in his life is clearly genuine. At that time, when he was able to transform his experience into fiction, he got caught by the insularity of the world or society he was bound to or surrounded by the constraints of his own position in a strange society which he could not comprehend. Such are the memories of a man caught between cultures

battling in his early career with the assertion of an individual identity. By identity here means the identity of a writer and a man who got associated with individuals who are 'quite lost' in many of his novels.

A Way in the World is about lost individuals in the declining days of their lives flooded with recollections of fame, fortune and youth. All the characters portrayed in the book are of failed visionaries and revolutionaries. There is Venezuelan revolutionary of the nineteenth century, Francisco Miranda, who consumes a lot of his energy in European courts while propagating his progressive views and who culminates his career as a Spanish prisoner. And there is Sir Walter Raleigh, the person who wants to rule the American Indians in the famous El Dorado. There is a story of Blair, who ascends from the job of a clerk in Port of Spain in the Government House to the status of an economic advisor in East Africa to a progressive communist state where he is assassinated. And then there is Lebanese, who lives in London as a permanent exile and is romanticized in the circles of friends in New York and London. The book, therefore, turns out to be the ambitious tales of these fallen political heroes.

The narratives in the book are predominantly records of individuals who are either selected from historical documents very carefully or sketched from the recollections of the author that trace back to his early boyhood days in Trinidad, his time spent in London when he was trying to set himself up as a writer and his revisits to his birthplace to review it with an enhanced understanding of the world and himself.

A Way in the World opens with Naipaul's journey back to Trinidad, which he left four decades ago and meditates on his adolescent years in Trinidad and discovers that everything was, in a way, queer and not queer (Naipaul, 1994, p. 1). Revisiting homeland to Naipaul was, to play with memories and impressions, to view a world small and big, real and unreal, all at the same time (Naipaul, 1994, p.1). Naipaul remembers himself serving as a junior clerk in Registry Office in the Red House of Trinidad. This office is a storehouse of the history of island and the place from where all the links of the textual contents transmit. All the past documents of the country – birth and death certificates, business and slave-trade deeds, property transfer records – everything from the colonial era to the present (Naipaul, 1994, p.21). Naipaul picks a memory from the bygone days and knits a tale around it. The most touching and interesting in the whole book is, perhaps, the tale of Leonard Side, an undertaker and an arranger of flowers and decorator of cakes. In spite of the fact that it is just a description of a past event, the writer conveys it so artistically that the impression Leonard Side creates on the mind of the narrator is as strong as on the reader. In this part entitled "Prelude – An Inheritance" Naipaul sets the tone and theme for the examination of historical process which will analyze different layers of a perplexing and injured past.

The narrator is taken over by the sense of past, alongside the brutality of a rootless and changing present. Naipaul's purposeful demystification of people and past permits the reader to view how the so-called 'authorized versions' of historical texts are created, and how historical figures are fictionalized, and how fictional characters are historicized. A real-life event is blended with a forged tale to invent a new text, and a personal experience is reshaped to become the framework for a fictional projection. Naipaul plays with the cultural encounters and dramatizes the fictional reconstructions of facts to reconstruct and deconstruct the past of Trinidad. As Timothy Weiss (1996) writes that *A Way in the World* demonstrates Naipaul's use of memory and history to revisit one's viewpoint of society and self and the ability to construct one's self through writing (p. 121). Hence, Naipaul ventures a long voyage to comprehend one's duty regarding a world shared with other people from present, past and future, and with fellow human beings of various ethnic and cultural background, modern or ancient. In the book, Naipaul describes his developing understanding of himself as well as other people, just as his endeavor to find and re-make cultural and individual histories. *A Way in the World* particularly emphasizes that each person has an individualistic vision, a unique story, and their story is somehow interlinked with the story of the narrator and the author.

This concept is evolved further in the second chapter of the novel, "History: A Smell of Fish Glue". The narrator was told before his journey to London after a brief service in Trinidad in the office of the Registrar General that all the documents of colonial period were stored in the basement of the office (Naipaul, 1994, p.

41). The clear memory of the narrator about “the smell of fish glue” which was used to bind these documents reflects an improvement in his childhood impression that Trinidad was out of history because the heat and light have reduced the history of island to ashes (Naipaul, 1994, p.74). Recognizing the estrangement around and within himself, the narrator comes back to his native island as an emerging writer with an aim to rediscover the historical past of the nation and his own self. In spite of the fact that archives may “hunt up” the history of the island, the narrator notices that a “historical bird’s eye view” does not truly clarify “the mystery” of one’s legacy (Naipaul, 1994, p.11). As illustrated in the novel, Naipaul has sketched his characters – the half-demented Raleigh, the doomed Blair, the disillusioned Columbus, the dishonored Miranda and the omniscient narrator who is like the author himself – as remarkable people whose histories or mysteries, life or death establish various ways in the world.

An outstanding element in Naipaul’s literary works is that he revises in a later novel elements and materials utilized in his previous books. The materials Naipaul used in *The Loss of El Dorado* are rewritten in *A Way in the World* particularly the episodes on Miranda and Raleigh. Answering the question if he is aware of recomposing the features of previous novels, Naipaul replied in affirmative with the condition that procuring the material, getting appropriate perspective, writing from different angle and creating something new (Naipaul, 1998, p. 55). From the status and position of a famous writer and a mature man glancing back at his years as a striving writer and his more youthful self, Naipaul reworks his familiar themes in *A Way in the World*: the themes of narrowness of living as a colonial, the queerness of metropolitan life and the trouble in maintaining the spirit to become a writer. Apart from corrupt societies and chaotic life in the Third World postcolonial countries, *A Way in the World* demonstrates a sympathetic approach and a milder tone than the earlier novels of Naipaul like *A Bend in the River*. Moreover, *A Way in the World* shows Naipaul’s re-depiction of Trinidad once portrayed in *Miguel Street* by him with absurd comedy and bitter irony. Basically, the known and the unknown both have essentially contributed in Naipaul’s search for renewal and continuity, and in converting his works to one composite creation.

This intertextuality of Naipaul’s works blends the elements of distancing and re-enactment, demonstrating a transforming vision of one’s community and oneself. It is because of “a different way of writing” that each time, collective and individual histories are consistently interpreted to meet with the changing and growing understanding of the past (Naipaul, 2003, p. 15). Hence, *A Way in the World* illustrates V.S. Naipaul’s quest for a way in the world of fictional writing through researching, rediscovering, recreating and correcting history in order to incorporate and represent his own experience or the experience of people like him in culture and literary histories.

Conclusion

Thus, Naipaul tries to discover his identity in writing *The Enigma of Arrival* and *A Way in the World*; he demonstrates that in writing, identity reconstitution, cultural representation, place re-territORIZATION and revision of history are made imaginatively and readily available, accessible and possible. As Sandra Paquet (1997) says that both the novels sustain on interplay of autobiography, fiction and history, revealing fiction as either history, autobiography or artifice, all culturally and ideologically conditioned (p. 768). The act of writing provides the creative and imaginative opportunity and possibility to re-order, to reconceive, to re-root and to syncretize. It provides the intercultural space, the translational and transnational landscape and mindscape in which history, culture and identity can be re-defined in indefinite ways.

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