

V. S. Naipaul: From Memory en route to Roots¹

CHANDRIMA KARMAKAR

Abstract

V.S. Naipaul has constantly been in search of his 'home'. He never felt at 'home' in Trinidad. The anxiety over his 'home' has been elaborated on in most of his literary works. His works revolve around the uncertainty and doubt of the outsider and the exile. In Naipaul's own words, 'When I speak about being an exile or a refuge, I'm not just using a metaphor, outside the metaphor lies a deeply self-absorbed existentialist state, not a political one'. His evolving years span his native Trinidad and his assumed British 'home'. His 'roots', however, are retained in India and the Hindu religion. In Trinidad, Naipaul is an exile from India; in England, he is an exile from Trinidad. He is also not at 'home' in India because it is a country he has always known only metaphorically (see Dascalu 2007:93). One of the factors that generated his interest in India was the thought of finding a 'home'. India was the 'home' of his ancestors; it could probably be a 'home' for him too. Naipaul's inclination towards his 'ancestral home' is a common characteristic found in many a diasporic Indian (writer). Naipaul's oeuvre cannot be understood in isolation from his Indian roots. His engagement with India results in a significant part of his oeuvre; often referred to as the Indian trilogy. His interest in India was not that of a mere sojourner. The interest in his 'ancestral roots' was more deep-seated in his vivid childhood memories. His society comprised people of indentured labour ancestry. Naipaul's indentured labour lineage makes him a unique representation among diasporic

¹This paper is written based on a chapter from my Ph.D. thesis titled: 'Home', Roots and Memory in V.S.Naipaul's oeuvre: An Interpretive Analysis.

Indian writers. He is probably one of those few who traversed between the 'old Indian diaspora' and the 'new Indian diaspora' with equal ease. He becomes a part of the 'old Indian diaspora' by virtue of his birth. He spends his initial childhood days in the Capildeo household. He was surrounded by people who were indentured labour migrants and their children. His experience of being a part of the plantation society helps him to understand the darker sides of being colonised. These later find their way into his writings, which are examined in this paper.

Keywords: V.S. Naipaul, Indian Diaspora, Indentured Labour, 'Home', Memory.

Introduction

I certainly do not want to go back to Trinidad or any other island in the West Indies if I can help it. I very much want to go to India. However, there are many difficulties. I cannot be employed on the Indian side because I am British, and on the British side, I cannot be employed because I am not English. I think it is almost impossible for me to do anything worthwhile in this country, for reasons you doubtless know....

– Naipaul (Letter, 14 May 1954)

Such earnestness to visit 'India' has seldom been expressed by diasporic Indian writers. This makes V. S. Naipaul² a unique representative among the diasporic Indian writers. He was not at ease with himself. Like most of the other diasporic Indian writers, he too had problems deciphering 'home'. However, unlike others, he was more articulate in his denial and being denied. Fawzia Mustafa in *V. S. Naipaul* elaborates,

²Throughout this paper, I shall refer to V.S. Naipaul using his last name, Naipaul. Any reference to other members of the Naipaul family will be done using their full name.

“Naipaul was more comfortable with labels such as ‘rootless’, an ‘exile’, or ‘truly a man without a country or a cause’” (Mustafa 1995:8).

Naipaul had been a man constantly in search of his ‘home’. He never felt at ‘home’ in Trinidad. His works revolve around the uncertainty and doubt of the outsider and the exile. In Naipaul’s words, “When I speak about being an exile or a refugee, I am not just using a metaphor, outside the metaphor lies a deeply self-absorbed existentialist state, not a political one” (ibid:9).

His evolving years span his native Trinidad and his assumed British ‘home’. His roots, however, are retained in India and the Hindu religion. In Trinidad, Naipaul was an *exile* from India; in England, he was an *exile* from Trinidad. He was also not at ‘home’ in India because it is a country he had always known ‘only metaphorically’ (Dascalu 2007:93). One of the factors that generated his interest in India was the thought of finding a ‘home’. India was the ‘home’ of his ancestors; it could probably be a ‘home’ for him too. Naipaul's inclination toward his ‘ancestral home’ is common in most diasporic Indians (writers). In most cases, this curiosity and inclination reflect in the writer's literary output. In this context, Cudjoe states -

Whether the writer likes it or not, his language is chosen from certain historical possibilities, even though he may claim the *style* is his own. Thus the history of a mode of writing cannot be reduced to an independent, history-less activity from which the writer is free to choose or not to choose. He is implicated irrevocably and cannot arbitrarily negate or deny that bond, And in this sense, Naipaul's *écriture*, though free and important, is an integral part of its general history and literary tradition (Cudjoe 1988:9–10).

The nostalgia associated with 'home' and the idea of an 'imaginary home' gives rise to a fragmented society, yearning for its lost roots. The diasporic Indians' persistent attempt to hold on to their past gives rise to a new generation with borrowed sensibilities. The problem arises when the new generation tries to negotiate its past with the present. The irony is that most of them remain 'homeless' in the country they grow up in and in India as well. This happens in the case of Naipaul too. The make-believe world in which he grew up was significantly different from 'existential India'³ His inability to find a 'home' for himself leads him to trace his roots. Like many other diasporic Indians, Naipaul too tries to resolve the conflict of 'home'.

Naipaul's oeuvre cannot be understood in isolation from his Indian roots. His engagement with India results in a significant part of his oeuvre, often referred to as the Indian trilogy. His interest in 'India' was not that of a mere sojourner. The interest in his 'ancestral roots' was more deep-seated in his childhood memories. The objective of this paper is to facilitate an understanding of Naipaul's broader themes of memory, 'home', and roots that shape his literary oeuvre. It is the foundation on which Naipaul laid his works. The impetus to combine these three aspects came only when he joined the BBC. 'Home', roots and memories are three integral components in the lives of diasporic Indians. As we wade through Naipaul's vast oeuvre, we find that Naipaul pulls out characters from his memory. His memory serves as the umbilical cord between his roots and his 'home'.

³ Political India has undergone a change in its boundary during the last one hundred years. For people who left 'India' before Partition in 1947, especially the indentured labour migrants and their descendants, the reference point is 'the subcontinental India'; whereas for immigrants post Partition, it is the political state of India as it exists now (Jayaram 2011:3).

Naipaul was born a few years after the abolition of the indentured labour system in 1917. He was born on 17 August 1932 in colonial Trinidad. He grew up in a society inhabited by a population that had been uprooted and was 'homeless'. Naipaul's society comprised people of indentured labour ancestry. In his own words, "My background is at once exceedingly simple and exceedingly confused" (Naipaul 2001:3). It was a society of rural poverty (French 2008:xi). He describes himself and the diasporic Indians as, "we were an immigrant's Asian community on a small plantation island in the New World" (Mahanta 2004:6). It is hardly gainsaid that Naipaul had deep roots in indentured labour migration; he spent his childhood in Trinidad's plantation colony. "There were about 400,000 Indians who had come and settled in the Caribbean colonies" (Kadekar et al. 2009:113).

Discussing Naipaul's works, Michael V. Angrosino, in "V.S. Naipaul and the Colonial Image" (1975) states that the theme of Naipaul's non-fiction, historical and journalistic analyses, and his novels and stories are the concept of 'the colonial'. He elaborates that, for Naipaul, being 'colonial' did not connote 'just any oppressed' or exploited member of what is frequently called the "Third World". For Naipaul, being a colonial implied the psychological loss of identity in the context of a spatial displacement (ibid. 2).

The society of Trinidad was nothing less than a 'social laboratory' (Jayaram, 1998) despite offering its inhabitants a mundane quotidian life. Discovered by Christopher Columbus in 1492, Trinidad was first colonized by the Spaniards. The Spaniards virtually exterminated the indigenous inhabitants, the Amerindians; they later brought Negro [*sic*] slaves to the island from Africa. After being a Spanish colony from 31 July 1498, Trinidad became a British colony on 18 February 1797. It achieved its independence as late as 31 August 1962 (ibid:1–

10). Trinidad has, therefore, been a colony for more than four centuries.

Naipaul's indentured labour lineage made him a unique representation among diasporic Indian writers. He was probably one of those few who traversed between the 'old Indian diaspora' and the 'new Indian diaspora'⁴ with equal ease. He became part of the 'old Indian diaspora' by virtue of his birth. He spent his initial childhood days in the Capildeo household. He was surrounded by people who were indentured labour migrants with children. His experience of being a part of the plantation society helped him understand the darker sides of being colonized. These later found their way into his writings. Like most of the 'new Indian diaspora' members, Naipaul too decided to leave Trinidad for better opportunities. The impulse to flee from circumscription and stagnation was inherited from his father, Seepersad Naipaul. Naipaul took a voluntary decision to be twice displaced. His decision made him a part of many Indians who became members of the diaspora to pursue prosperity. Naipaul's 'biographic conditions' enabled him to voice the angst of (a) diasporic who were indentured labourers, (b) diasporic out of choice, and (c) diasporas who were twice displaced.

The paper will briefly broach Naipaul's ancestral history to later elaborate upon his cartography of memories. His maternal grandfather Capildeo Maharaj arrived in Trinidad as an indentured labourer around Christmas in 1894. Dolly Zulakha

⁴ Arthur Helweg makes a distinction among the diasporic Indian community. He coined the term 'old Indian diaspora' for members of the diaspora who are indentured labour migrants or their succeeding generations. The 'new Indian diaspora' is used for Indian immigrants who left India post Partition in search of a lucrative career and a better life (see Jayaram 2011).

Hassan states, Capildeo Maharaj eventually made the journey back to India. However, he had left behind an indelible mark of India on his family. She further elaborates that the legacy of Indian village culture and tradition brought from India and implanted on the island by people like Naipaul's grandfather established a 'miniature India' (Hassan 1989:295).

In *An Area of Darkness* (1964/2002), Naipaul states that his grandfather had abandoned India. Despite the abandonment, he carried his village along with him. Never did any place or incident supersede the impact that his village had on him (2002:25). Naipaul grew up in a Brahmin household. He was surrounded by many people and household items showcasing his Indian roots. Thus he remained an 'Indian' by upbringing despite being a West Indian by birth.

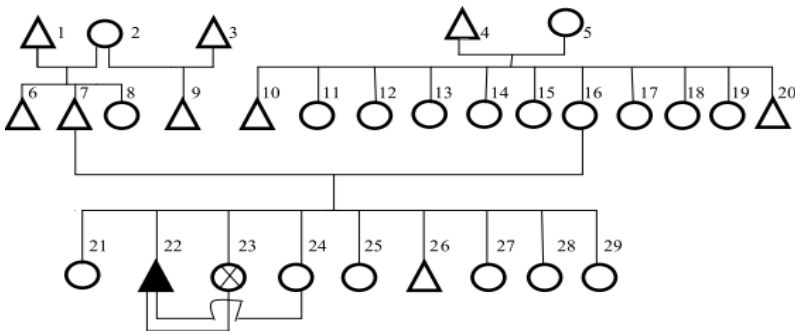
Although Naipaul never lived in India, the cultural baggage of being an 'Indian' never stopped casting its shadow on him. 'India' had its omnipresence in Naipaul's life. Another significant factor that accentuated the omnipresent 'India' was his father, Seepersad Naipaul. Seepersad Naipaul too hails from an indentured lineage. His father was brought to Trinidad by his grandmother, who arrived in Trinidad in the 1870s as an indentured labourer. Seepersad had to cope with mental disturbances and find a way out of his village. He was ambitious and intelligent (traits that were passed on to his son) and wanted to escape from the likely future of an agricultural labourer. He taught himself to read and write English. Thereafter, he conceived the idea of becoming a journalist, a profession that was conventional for Whites and Blacks (Negroes) [*sic*] (ibid:18).

Unlike Naipaul, Seepersad could not escape Trinidad's geographical confinements, he did escape from his precarious living conditions by self-education and strong 'homing

desires'.⁵ As mentioned earlier, most of his characteristics, especially the ardent desire to flee from stagnation and carve a niche for himself, were passed on to Naipaul. Naipaul's upbringing amidst his maternal family members deeply affected his diasporic self and later his desire to visit his ancestral roots.

In order to understand Naipaul's diasporic position, a reference to his genealogy will help in understanding the cartography of his roots.

Figure 4.1: Naipaul's Genealogy



No.	Name	Relationship to Naipaul	Remarks
1	Naipaul Maharaj	Paternal grandfather	Brought to Trinidad in 1870; mother, fleeing disgrace or abandonment in the area around Ayodhya
2	Name not known	Paternal grandmother	Not much known; had family in Chandernagore; had a sister and her husband, Sookdeo Misir, who lived on El Dorado Road in Tunapuna
3	Name not known	Paternal step-grandfather	Not much known
4	Capildeo Maharaj	Maternal grandfather	Originally named Kapil, a Brahmin, from a family of hereditary pundits in a village near Gorakhpur; came to

⁵ Avtar Brah (1996, p. 03) introduces the term 'homing desire' to give more meaning and clarity on the use of 'home'.

			Trinidad on the Christmas day in 1894
5	Soogee	Maternal grandmother	Daughter of an Indian <i>Sirdar</i> (a plantation labour driver or overseer); Bengali Brahmin, Govinda
6	Rampersad	Eldest paternal uncle	Fictionalised as 'Rapooche'
7	Seepersad Naipaul	Father	Discussed in detail in the chapter
8	Prabhakaran	Paternal aunt	Not much known
9	Simbhoonath (Capo S)	Eldest maternal uncle	An attorney and politician; father of Devendranath, Sita, and Surendranath
10	Hariprasad	Paternal step-uncle	Not much known
11	Rajdayee	Maternal aunt 1	Mother of Jainarayan and Keso
12	Ramdoolarie	Maternal aunt 2	Divorced wife of Dinanath (the source of Seepersad Naipaul's 'Gurudeva' in <i>The Adventures of Gurudeva</i> (1976))
13	Dhan	Maternal aunt 3	Mother of Owad, Sattin, and Germany
14	Koontz	Maternal aunt 4	Mother of Indarjit (Boysie)
15	Ahilla	Maternal aunt 5	Mother of Phoolo, Brahmanand, and Deokunwar
16	Droapatie Capildeo	Mother	The seventh of eleven children in the family
17	Kalawatee	Maternal aunt 6	Mother of Shakhar, Baidwattee, Rabindranath, and Dayo
18	Tara	Maternal aunt 7	Not much known
19	Binmatie	Maternal aunt 8	Not much known
20	Rudranath (Capo R)	Maternal uncle	Not much known
21	Kamla	Elder sister	Travels to India to study in Benares Hindu University
22	Vidyadar Soorajprasad	Ego	Protagonist of the thesis
23	Patricia Hale	Wife	Discussed in the chapter
24	Nadira	Second wife	Pakistani by origin
25	Sati	Younger sister 1	Dies early in 1984
26	Mira	Younger sister	Not much known

		2	
27	Savi	Younger sister 3	Not much known
28	Shiva	Younger brother	Talented author of <i>The Fireflies</i> (1971) and <i>The Chip Chip Gatherers</i> (1976/1973)
29	Nalini	Younger sister 4	Not much known

Table 1.1: Genealogical Table of Naipaul's Kin Circle

Note: Prepared by Chandrima Karmakar based on scattered information in Naipaul (1999) and French (2008).

As a child, Naipaul was quite close to his father. The fondness between child Naipaul and father Seepersad is beautifully fictionalized in *A House for Mr. Biswas* published in 1961. This fondness increased with time as the father-son duo cultivated a shared interest in Literature. Years later, this fondness shared by them has again been fictionalized in Hanif Kureishi's, *The Last Word* (2014). Harry (believed to be fictionalized Patrick French) questions Mamoon (believed to be fictionalized Naipaul), "Did you love your father?" To which Mamoon replies, "Too much. I was a son rather than a man" (Kureishi 2014:35).

Both Seepersad and Naipaul's writings invoke 'India'. The setting was not India, but the characters and the lives portrayed reflected the Indian civilization. Seepersad's writings narrated stories of the 'everyday life' that he saw around him. His achievement as a writer was the use of the English language to spin out his own world narratives. He narrates in 'Standard English', but his character Gurudeva in *Gurudeva and Other Indian Tales* speaks in the local Trinidadian dialect. He narrates the tales of the Indian community in Trinidad in the 1930s and 1940s. "These tales were divorced from their origins, but they reflected coping with a confusing, changing world" (ibid:44) and he celebrated the 'Indian' life in all its

hues. In his own words, Naipaul describes his father's book as a celebration of the 'Indian' life.

Besides his inception into the life-world of diasporic Indians, Seepersad's stories also introduced Naipaul to the world of colonialism. Years later, while delivering a speech at Tulsa, Naipaul says, "The West Indians have been a colonial people twice over. They migrated from metropolitan India into another colonialism" (*The Sunday Statesman*, 3 November 1963 as cited in Hassan 1989:189). He was referring to the people who had left India as indentured labourers and settled in Trinidad. Therefore, the diasporic Indians in Trinidad bore the angst of being diasporic as well as 'colonial'.

Unlike Seepersad, Naipaul later in his life visited India in search of a 'home'. Though his visit was not altogether futile, he could not anchor himself at 'home' in India. This was, largely, because his 'imagined India' bore no resemblance to 'existential India'. Before elaborating further on this, it is important to note the factor(s) that formed his 'imagined India'. One of the significant facilitators was the memory of his early childhood and his father's stories. It, therefore, becomes necessary to navigate through Naipaul's cartography of memories.

India: Memories and Imagination

"Look, boys, it ever strikes you that the world not real at all? It ever strikes you that we have the only mind in the world, and you are just thinking up everything else?"
Naipaul (2001/1959:37).

Naipaul's life and his creative pursuits revolve around memories. Most of Naipaul's fiction is created out of his memory. They are portrayals of childhood memories. Memories become a common thread between Seepersad and

his stories, on the one hand, and Naipaul, his 'imagined India' and his literary oeuvre, on the other.

Naipaul's writings keep moving back and forth between his memories and his lived realities. His memories, too, add meaning to his 'biographic conditions'. Memories and the colonial setup in which Naipaul grew up as a diasporic set the stage for his future as a writer.

Naipaul's writings begin in a Trinidadian setup. They gradually move to wider horizons of the Caribbean basin and South America. He returns to India, moves to Africa, and keeps writing about all his experiences. He gradually matures through fiction to the putatively greater realities of non-fictional prose and travelogues (Mustafa 1995:7). Memories of his childhood, his father's works, and his mother's family, where he spent his childhood years, became a rich quarry from which he kept extracting stories for his creative pursuits.

The larger share of Naipaul's novels speaks of the angst of being diasporic. Born in Trinidad, Naipaul (like many other diasporic Indians) could not understand the connotation of being diasporic in his childhood; he started comprehending it much later:

They have become people without a past. Most of us can look back only to our grandfathers, after all. Beyond that is a blank. Very few of us, you know, can trace our ancestors...What has happened has happened. I think it would be foolish to see it as good or bad. What is important about it is that it has not been understood, and when things are not understood, people can flounder and become irrational. I little understood this myself, I think, this process of change. Like everyone else, I assumed that the old values and the old values with which one grew up would somehow just go on, but they don't (Naipaul 1982:4-5).

The comprehension was initially facilitated by memory and, much later, by his experience in England. Years later, in *An Area of Darkness* (1964/2002), he narrates that he had memories of women in his household dressing differently. He also recalls that their food habits were different from that of his friends. Another significant mention is that of a *Katha* (a Hindu ritual in which a divine story is narrated by a *pundit* [priest]) that his grandmother insisted on being held under a particular tree. He recalls that others on the island were quite surprised by what they were doing (Naipaul 2002:25-26). Such narrations imply that memories like these helped Naipaul understand the connotation of being diasporic. He had never been able to anchor himself physically or mentally in any place. It was much later in his life that he finally settled down in England. Whether he considered England to be his 'home' could be best answered by him.

Naipaul had always denied Trinidad, yet one cannot ignore that he was part of Trinidad's diasporic Indian community. His works are one of the best portrayals of plantation life there. So, despite his denial of Trinidad, what makes him part of that society? How does one describe Naipaul's internalization of the Indo-Trinidadian diasporic community, despite his consistent (and vehement) denial? Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann in, *The Social Construction of Reality*, say:

The individual, however, is not a member of society. He is born with a predisposition toward sociality, and he becomes a member of society. In every individual's life, therefore, there *is* a temporal sequence, in the course of which he is inducted into participation in the societal dialectic. (Berger and Luckmann 1967:129).

Naipaul's memories serve as the 'predisposition' towards the diasporic Indian society in Trinidad and 'India'.

Like his father, Naipaul too had to resort to his own experiences for his creative output. In Naipaul's case, the dependence was more on memory.⁶ The journey from memories to reality took the shape of novels. In turn, these novels give us a glimpse of Naipaul's life and the 'life-world' of diasporic Indians. They also give us a glimpse of a very ancient Indian civilization, one that was carried by several indentured labourers to the islands; a legacy that was passed on to the succeeding generations; traces of an ancient civilization that gradually got creolized but existed as an 'imaginary' entity; a memory that was a substitute for the physical reality that was left behind in time. It shall not be an exaggeration to say that, as one traces Naipaul's 'life-world', one understands the diasporic 'life-world'. The significance of memory in narrating the history of times gone by is implicit in Naipaul's writings.

Memory has such a significant impact on Naipaul's life that the 'imagined India' lures Naipaul to pay a visit to his ancestral roots, 'India'. His time spent in India speaks volumes of the sense of displacement felt by diasporic Indians. It took many years for Naipaul to come to terms with 'existential India'. He never knew 'existential India' before he visited India for the first time in 1960. All through his childhood and youth, he was only familiar with 'imagined India'. Any affinity or contempt felt towards 'India' was solely based on his memory or imagination. It had nothing to do with *existential* India. The constant conflict between 'imagined India' and 'existential India' shapes Naipaul's trilogy on India, namely, *An Area of*

⁶ Memories have sociological significance. Letters and diaries are usually a storehouse of memory. Another important sociological tool, namely, oral history, taps memory. It is, therefore, not surprising that Naipaul's works gain sociological-significance of their own. The memories evoked in these novels give a glimpse of a wider phenomenon, 'The Indian Diaspora'.

Darkness (1964), *India: A Wounded Civilisation* (1977), and, *India: A Million Mutinies Now* (1990).

Conclusion

As I wind up, I would like to refer to Charles Horton Cooley's concept of 'the looking glass self'. Cooley says that an individual's consciousness of himself reflects the ideas about himself that he attributes to other minds; thus there can be no isolated selves' (Coser 1971:306). It is composed of three principles:

1. the imagination of our appearance to the other person
2. the imagination of his judgement of that appearance
3. some sort of self-feeling, such as pride or mortification (ibid.).

Adhering to the above principles, I would like to locate diasporic Indians like Naipaul in Trinidad's colonized set-up. By virtue of their appearance and their 'life-world', they knew that they differed from the others inhabiting the same geographical space. One was conscious of his social stature not just in the eyes of the Whites but also the Blacks. Memories cherished by members of the diaspora give rise to nostalgia among them. If one did not have memories about the 'home' left behind and the origin of one's roots, the angst of being in a diaspora would never be felt. Therefore this emphasizes the nuances of memories in Naipaul's life. Naipaul was led to his writings by his memory, and his writings lead us to the 'life-world' of diasporic Indians.

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