THE CONTEXT OF V.S.NAIPAUL'S COLONIAL AND POSTCOLONIAL NOVELS

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Abstract: Naipaul's literary career encompasses both specific Trinidadian novels like The Mystic Masseur and A House for Mr. Biswas and diasporic and migrant fiction, which includes The Mimic Men, Half a Life and Magic Seeds. In between the anguish of dislocation that characterizes The Mimic Men and the global journey in search of identity undertaken by Willie Chandran in Half a Life and its sequel, comes the narrative of The Enigma of Arrival, a book dedicated to the author's effort at belonging to the community of rural Wiltshire in his adoptive country, Great Britain. The failure to belong testifies to Naipaul's conceptualization of the (post)colonial subject as situated outside strict national locations. My paper aims to offer a historical perspective on V.S. Naipaul's fiction, showing that the construction of subjectivity and identity in his novels is associated with early postcolonial independence, with the rise of anti-colonial nationalism and the task facing postcolonial nations of healing old bruises and re-building identity from a new position. Naipaul's fiction, in spite of the author's repeated professions that "I am my own person", is haunted by the desire to belong, a product of the early phase of nationalism. Nevertheless, his novels engage critically with the nationalist project, revealing the contradictions and conflicts that plague postcolonial nationalisms. In Naipaul's last novels the focus shifts from an understanding of subjectivity in terms of roots (or rather the lack thereof) to one in terms of routes. This change of outlook can be pinned down to a radical transformation in world economy, politics and culture: globalization. On the other hand, the author's experienced marginality as a member of the Indian community in Trinidad may explain his long stubborn refusal to identify himself as a Trinidadian. While the historical context of decolonization and early nation building infused Naipaul's prose with a desire to belong, his geographical marginality engendered a repudiation of and reluctance to belonging. This contradiction translated in fictional works informed by a fierce critique of postcolonial national politics and at the same time haunted by the longing to belong.

Keywords: text and context, (post)colonial identity, mimicry, existentialism

The aim of the paper is to look at the construction of (post)colonial subjectivity as an effect of the historical-geographical positioning of V.S.Naipaul and to analyze the relationship between text and context from a poststructuralist point of view which emphasizes the importance of context in shaping the text. In the fiction of V.S.Naipaul the construction of subjectivity and identity is associated with early postcolonial independence, with the rise of anticolonial nationalism and the task facing postcolonial nations of healing old bruises and re-building identity from a new position. The belief that one should forge a relationship with the space one inhabits stems from the ideology of nation-building and is part of the Herderian notion of a national spirit shaped by specific geographic locations. Naipaul's fiction, in spite of the author's repeated professions that "I am my own person", is haunted by the desire to belong-which is the product of this early phase of nation building through nationalist

ideology. Nevertheless, his novels engage critically with the nationalist project, revealing the contradictions and conflicts that plague postcolonial nationalisms. In Naipaul's last novels the focus shifts from an understanding of subjectivity in terms of *roots* (or rather the lack thereof) to one in terms of *routes*. This change of outlook can be pinned down to a radical transformation in world economy, politics and culture: globalization. On the other hand, the author's experienced marginality as a member of the Indian community in Trinidad may partly explain his long stubborn refusal to identify himself as a Trinidadian. While the historical context of decolonization and early nation building infused Naipaul's prose with a desire to belong, his geographical marginality engendered a repudiation of and reluctance to belonging. This contradiction translated in fictional works informed by a fierce critique of postcolonial national politics and at the same time haunted by the longing to belong.

After the publication of *Half a Life*, whose protagonist is an Indian from India, Naipaul was asked by an Indian interviewer whether the creation of Willie Chandran meant that the author started feeling more of an Indian. To this question Naipaul offered the following reply, which is also a perfect statement of his position:

What do you mean more Indian ...? I don't like such terms. I said when receiving the Nobel Prize that I was born in Trinidad, I have lived most of my life in England and India is the land of my ancestors. That says it all. I am not English, not Indian, not Trinidadian. I am my own person. (qtd. in Trivedi www.findarticles.com)

Against this response we can set Naipaul's statement in an interview with Derek Walcott: "I do not think one can ever abandon one's allegiance to one's community, or at any rate to the idea of one's community." (6) Although these affirmations appear contradictory at first sight, the dialectic between the acknowledgement of allegiance and the refusal of identification can prove extremely useful for an understanding of Naipaul's fiction and non-fiction alike. A sense of allegiance to community is not the same thing as identification. Out of loyalty to one's community, one can choose to reveal harsh truths about it and analyze it critically.

Naipaul's literary career encompasses both specific Trinidadian novels like *The Mystic Masseur* and *A House for Mr. Biswas* and diasporic and migrant fiction, which includes *The Mimic Men*, *Half a Life* and *Magic Seeds*. In between the anguish of dislocation that characterizes *The Mimic Men* and the global journey in search of identity undertaken by Willie Chandran in *Half a Life* and its sequel, comes the narrative of *The Enigma of Arrival*, a book dedicated to the author's effort at belonging to the community of rural Wiltshire in his adoptive country, Great Britain. Yet this novel, too, in spite of the deep yearning for roots that is evident in the descriptions of natural background and simple rural life, stages the impossibility of the uprooted Naipaul to find home anywhere in the world. In the end, England remains an enigma, a country of his imagination: the novel is made up mostly of the narrator's life-impressions and his struggles with creation- there are few real experiences recounted in the book.

The structural conflict in Naipaul's fiction is that between the desire to belong (which Naipaul construes as idealism) and the rational acknowledgement that such a desire is impossible to gratify, given the historical context in which he was born and raised. The impossibility to belong to Trinidad (his native country) is posited on a specific colonial history that led to the creation in Trinidad (as in many other colonies) of unnatural, Western-made, half-made societies, with no organic link between the individual and his environment. In such communities, originally based on mercantilism and plunder, the individual is unable to construct a meaningful identity, because he lacks the institutional framework that orientates individual life-projects. In *A House for Mr. Biswas*, the importance of what we may call positive freedom stands out for the journalist that can never afford to buy a decent house as he

does not possess enough of this kind of freedom and independence. Positive freedom[1], as defined by Isaiah Berlin in *Two Concepts of Liberty* (131-4) consists in self-realization, and individual self-fulfillment is often embedded in a network of social groups and communities capable of offering their members a positive choice among valuable life-projects. It is positive freedom that is hard to achieve in artificial and half-made societies like the one in Trinidad, which lack proper social/political institutions and traditions that can provide a modicum of social cohesion. Without these institutions which offer intelligible frameworks for life-projects, society remains highly volatile, segregated and unorganized and individuals are deprived of the very basis for the construction of subjectivity.

Naipaul's deep sense of rootlessness and his rejection of Trinidad as the archetype of the improvised postcolonial nation can be also traced back to the marginality of the Indians in Trinidadian society-a particularity of the colonial history of the Caribbean. Bridget Brereton offers a detailed perspective on the historical context that had precipitated the "import" of Indian labour force through the indentureship system in the decades following the liberation of black slaves in 1838. The arrival of the Indians coincided with one of the most important moments in the history of the Caribbean: new ethnic groups appeared that made Trinidad a heterogeneous, cosmopolitan society (i) and great economic shifts were underway. Although Trinidad was mostly a white dominated society (by Spanish, French and British elites) these economic shifts led to new class patterns and "gradually a non-white middle class was emerging, augmented from below" (i). The Indians, although initially brought in a new form of slavery to replace the freed blacks as labour force on the cocoa and sugar cane estates, managed to rise socially faster than the blacks, due to their traditional culture that emphasized education and knowledge-and formed a large part of the non-white middle class. Their position was naturally envied by the blacks and the Creoles, who looked on Indians with suspicion. There were also other reasons for the Indians' marginality within Trinidadian society:

> the Indians remained marginal to Creole society. For many decades after their initial arrival, they were viewed as a group of migrant labourers, birds of passage, who would not remain to form a permanent part of the population. Even when, after the1870s, it became clear that substantial numbers had chosen to settle permanently, the Indians remained largely outside the Creole society. They showed no desire to play a wider part in the island society, and mostly abstained from Creole activities, apparently satisfied with the traditional values of their own culture. […] Indians were difficult to locate in the Creole colour hierarchy, being neither black nor white. (2)

As it appears from Brereton's study, the category of Indian in Trinidad corresponded loosely with Kristeva's definition of the abject, that which does not fit easily into any category due to its ambiguity. Kristeva points out that it is a common feature of human cultures to try to oust the abject-and so it is no wonder that Indians were regarded with suspicion and marginalized. The Indians, of course, reciprocated the attitude of the black and Creole population. In *The Middle Passage*, Naipaul dwells on the racial tensions between the Indians and the blacks, claiming that they took center stage in the segregated society of Trinidad: "When people speak of the race problem in Trinidad they do not mean the Negro-white problem. They mean the Negro-Indian rivalry." (78) The antagonisms between blacks and Indians are a specific product of white colonization, driven by the principle "divide et impera":

[1] In a lecture recently given at the French Institute in Bucharest, Julia Kristeva focused on the two models of freedom that Berlin defined as negative and positive, noting that negative freedom is Kantian and European, while positive freedom, the freedom to choose from many alternatives and to exercise subjective creativity was first defined in the independent American states.

The Negro has a deep contempt […] for all that is not white; his values are the values of white imperialism at its most bigoted. The Indian despises the Negro for not being an Indian; he has, in addition, taken over all the white prejudices against the Negro.... Indians and Negroes appeal to the unacknowledged white audience to see how much they despise one another. They despise one another by reference to the whites (80)

The segregation of Trinidadian society is analyzed extensively in *The Middle Passage* and dramatized in *The Mimic Men*, where Naipaul's description of racial and ethnic fragmentation on Isabella corresponds to the sociopolitical climate on Trinidad and the neighbouring islands. By exposing the racism and the stereotypes prevalent in the school system (a system set up by the white colonizers), Naipaul is able to put his finger on the terrible illness engendered by colonialism: self-division. His bleak outlook and political pessimism evident in the novel may be put down to the author's disillusionment with pre-independence politics in the Caribbean. Naipaul's political hopes, as he confessed in *The Middle Passage*, were for a coalition government between blacks and Indians which would undertake nation building on the basis of shared communal values. According to Peter Simms (24), this type of government appeared for a while in the coalition between the East Indian Cheddi Jagan and the black Forbes Burnham in British Guyana in 1953. The Burnham-Jagan government offered Naipaul the historical antecedent for his exploration in *The Mimic Men* of an experiment in early independence politics conducted by the Indian-black coalition of Singh and Browne. The historical coalition government of Jagan and Burnham ended disastrously after only a few months, and British troops were called upon to crush the resulting estate strikes. Naipaul, initially thrilled by the possibilities of such a government, suffered a great disillusionment, and his opinion of Burnham was radically transformed in 1961, when Burnham, a great rhetorician, changed his message to one that intensified existing racial tensions in an attempt to defeat Jagan, now turned his adversary.

Naipaul's negative view of cultural hybridity (*The Mystic Masseur*, *A House for Mr.Biswas*) is also a product of his historical background. Kavita Nandan claims that Naipaul cannot "celebrate the developing creole culture of the Caribbean like African-Caribbean writers such as Lamming and Edward Kamau Brathwaite" because "the indentured East Indian community of the West Indies was largely a homogenous group isolated from other cultures", a consequence of their refusal to "inter-marry with Afro-Caribbeans."(www.findarticles.com). Building on Naipaul's metaphor of arrival as the perpetual condition of the migrant, dislocated self (*The Enigma of Arrival*), Victor Ramraj makes the same point:"while the Afro-Caribbeans are, to use Edward Kamau Brathwaite's term *arrivants,* however dislocated and ambivalent, the Indo-Caribbean assimilationists are perpetual arrivers, who find themselves at the harbour contemplating the enigma of their arrival" (*Still Arriving* 84).

In his 1990 Wriston Lecture, "Our Universal Civilization", Naipaul describes the East Indian community on Trinidad Island in the following terms:

We were a people of ritual and sacred texts. […] But it couldn't be said that we were a literary people. Our literature, our texts, didn't commit us to an exploration of our world; rather, they were cultural markers, giving us a sense of the wholeness of our world and the alienness of what lay outside. I don't believe that, in his family, anyone before my father would have thought of original literary composition. That idea came to my father in Trinidad with the English language; somehow, in spite of the colonial discouragements of the place, an idea of the high civilization connected with the language came to my father; and he was given some knowledge of literary forms. (www.manhattan-institute.org)

Naipaul acknowledges his affiliation with Indian culture and history and his debt to the English language, which introduced him to an idea of high civilization and writing as a

personal and deeply original act. Although he has been intensely criticized by leftist critics for his admiration of canonical English literature, it is a courageous gesture on the part of a person who suffered (and exposed in his novels) the ills of colonial exploitation to acknowledge both the drawbacks and the benefits of colonization. It is also part of his "objective writer" persona. His notorious travelogue about India *An Area of Darkness* employs this objective persona in order to give a comprehensive account of Indian civilization and identity. It is my contention that this travelogue, far from being just a plain objective account of Indian realities, serves as both a gesture of inscription and erasure. By his description of petty incidents, characters and slices of Indian life, Naipaul attempts to inscribe certain Indian cultural features into his writer persona, while erasing his sense of identification with his India. Originally in search of his roots (he is undertaking the journey with the express purpose of finding the village in Utar Pradesh from which his ancestors had emigrated to Trinidad[2]), he ends the narrative of his journey with a meditation on illusion and negation, pitting his experience in India against his homelessness: " It was only now, as my experience in India defined itself against my own homelessness, that I saw how close in the past year I had been to the Indian negation, how much it had become the basis of thought and feeling." (339) This capacity of negating something by an identification with the source of negation is perhaps a standard feature of Naipaulian irony. Paradoxically, he grounds his homelessness (and thus rejects his identification with India as home) on the idea of negation as an Indian cultural specificity. Moreover, by the end of the book it has become perfectly clear to the reader that the ideas of illusion, negation and ruin[3] are one of the few worthwhile characteristics of Indian realities, since most of the book is dedicated to Naipaul's minute criticism of the social and historical ills affecting Indian society.

While accusing Naipaul's travelogues of adding to the familiar grid of Western perceptions images of India as a place of "heat and dust", Dipesh Chakrabarty acknowledges that there is more to Naipaul's critique than a simple pandering to Western tastes:

What it speaks is the language of modernity, of civic consciousness and public health, of even certain ideas of beauty related to the management of public space and interests, an order of aesthetics from which the ideals of public health and hygiene cannot be separated. It is the language of modern governments, both colonial and post-colonial, and for that reason it is the language not only of imperialist officials but of modernist nationalists as well. (*Of Garbage* 541)

Chakrabarty's observation proves especially useful when trying to elucidate Naipaul's controversial position on the issue of nationalism. While some critics claim that his fiction and non-fiction reflects "an unenthusiastic view of postcolonial nationalism and nation-building" (Greenberg 214), Dipesh Chakrabarty associates Naipaul's discourse with a specific modernist nationalist ideology and aligns him with Gandhi[4] in "deploring the absence of a citizen-culture on the part of the people" (541) A fair appraisal of Naipaul's position regarding nationalist issues has to take into account the historical sociopolitical conditions that changed him from an early supporter of independence politics to a disillusioned critic of nation-building in the former colonies.

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[2] The journey described in *An Area of Darkness* was undertaken by Naipaul in 1962, one year after his disillusionment with post-independence politics in the Caribbean.

[3] In *The Enigma of Arrival*, Naipaul claims again that his bleak and pessimistic vision is a heritage from his Indian ancestors:" To see the possibility, the certainty, of ruin, even at the moment of creation: it was my temperament. Those nerves had been given me as a child in Trinidad partly by our family circumstances: the half-ruined or broken-down houses we lived in, our many moves, our general uncertainty. Possibly, too, this mode of feeling went deeper and was an ancestral inheritance, something that came with the history that made me: not only India, with its ideas of a world outside men's control, but also the colonial plantations or estates of Trinidad, to which my impoverished Indian ancestors had been transported in the last century." (52)

[4] Besides Gandhi, Chakrabarty pairs Naipaul with Nirad Chaudhuri, a self-declared Anglophile who offended many Indians because of his open admiration for the British Raj. Dissatisfied with Indian politics and what he saw as the failure of the nationalist project of Gandhi and Nehru, Chaudhuri moved to Britain in the 1970s and lived in Oxford until his death at the age of 101.

Naipaul is as firmly censorious of mimicry as he is of cultural hybridity. While he regards the preservation of the British administrative system, the railways and the buildings as a kind of positive mimicry that enables the functioning of the Indian traditional society and brings about modernization, he is critical of the way in which these systems are borrowed without being adapted to local realities. Indiscriminate mimicry of the West is simultaneously coupled with the Indian superstitious and anti-rationalist mentality- which gives rise to a particular kind of schizophrenia.

Although postcolonial/postmodernist theorists such as Bhabha and Ashcroft focus on the subversive side of mimicry and its role in the parodying of colonial hegemonic discourse, Naipaul, whose literary credo is more along the lines of modernism and existentialism, views mimicry as a kind of bad mimesis, devoid of originality and heavily indebted to Western tradition. He chooses to concentrate on the absurdities that mimicry engenders in postcolonial societies. In Naipaul's view, far from being a strategy of empowerment, mimicry shows the extent to which the postcolonial subject is still enslaved to the former colonists. Rob Nixon notes that Naipaul indicts mimicry in "partly Westernized societies of the Third World [that] have learned the security of living off the creativeness of others. By languishing in the idleness of that dependency, they dehumanize themselves".(131) Mimicry reveals that the departure of the English, instead of prompting Indians to the (re)construction of a national independent Indian culture, was perceived as an opportunity to seize what had been so long refused to them: the opportunity to step into the colonizer's shoes. Independence is thus associated not with the desire for an autonomous culture, but with a subservient mimicry of their former masters. This is the point when colonization achieves its final purpose: when the mind itself is colonized to the extent of internalizing the binary oppositions instituted by the colonizers-it is no longer the British but the Indians themselves which recognize Western culture as superior and desirable. To speak of de-colonization in this context is possible only in an ironical mode, which is what Naipaul does.

Naipaul's negative appraisal of mimicry and hybridity stems from his concern with elucidating the colonial past of oppression and exploitation as well as from his engagement with existentialist philosophy. The precursors of existentialism (Kierkegaard, Nietzsche) together with later thinkers that accepted the label of existentialist (Sartre, Camus, de Beauvoir, Merleau-Ponty) emphasize the singularity of the human predicament, in which freedom plays an essential role. The necessary (and responsible) exercise of freedom is the only path towards an authentic existence. Naipaul's use of terms like "borrowed", "half-made" betrays his existentialist perspective, in which the dignity of human beings resides in the ability to lead an authentic existence as creators and producers. The tendency of the colonial/postcolonial context to give birth to 'mimic men' is construed by Naipaul as the lack of a great past/tradition, which leaves the postcolonial subject devoid of valuable "resources, ideals, or models of high achievement" (Greenberg 224). Naipaul's obsession with the past as the repository of a great tradition is what drove him out of Trinidad (a society of borrowed ideals and half-made men) into Europe and London:

You will understand, then, how important it was to me to know when I was young that I could make this journey from the margin to the center, from Trinidad to London. The ambition to be a writer assumed that this was possible. So, in fact, I was taking it for granted, in spite of my ancestry and Trinidad background, that with another, equally important part of myself, I was part of a larger civilization. I suppose the same could be said of my father, though he was closer to the ritual ways of our Hindu and Indian past. (*Our Universal Civilization* www.nybooks.com)

An authentic identity is part of an authentic culture, which cannot exist in the absence of a great past/ tradition. As the colonial past is invariably one of servitude, brutality and

indifference, it is no wonder that the colonial/postcolonial quest for identity is fraught with obstacles and self-knowledge is painful to arrive at. Because of this obsessive concern with the recovery of the past-a past that acts as a burden, placing restrictions on the construction of subjectivity-Naipaul's prose looks bleak and pessimistic. Fawzia Mustafa notes that instead of resistance and contestation, his fiction offers its readers only "an existentialist epiphany of marginality" (106). Paradoxically, the same contention was echoed by the Nobel Prize Committee, who awarded him the Nobel for "works that compel us to see the presence of suppressed histories." (*Nobel Prize in Literature 2001* nobelprize.org) Naipaul has been often contested by his critics (who notoriously included Edward Said), yet this contestation took place in a context which was inimical to the reception of his prose, in the high decades of postcolonial theory, when political engagement seemed to call for a more actively-challenging attitude on the part of writers from the former colonies. Thus he was judged and interpreted from a perspective that did not do any justice to his fiction.

Naipaul's valuable contribution to postcolonial as well as world literature lies exactly in his unearthing of suppressed histories, histories of people oppressed or erased by centuries of colonization. His intellectual sincerity prevents him from giving the suppressed a voice-and thus his fiction embarks on a journey of discovery and self-discovery that problematizes the past and its carefully hidden secrets. The impulse behind his fiction is the horror (the Conradian horror) one feels towards the discovery of terrible atrocities lying underneath the layers of colonial history (Naipaul's drive is to remove the upper crust in order to reveal what lies beneath). In his Nobel Lecture, Naipaul recounts his visit to the British Museum to read the documents left by the Spanish in Venezuela, documents that testified to the genocide of the Chaguanes Indians (the native inhabitants of Trinidad) at the hand of the Spaniards, following the support they had given the English. The discovery that he had been living on the land of the cruelly murdered Indians came as a shock to Naipaul:

The world is always in movement. People have everywhere at some time been dispossessed. I suppose I was shocked by this discovery in 1967 about my birthplace because I had never had any idea about it. But that was the way most of us lived in the agricultural colony, blindly. There was no plot by the authorities to keep us in our darkness. I think it was more simply that the knowledge wasn't there. The kind of knowledge about the Chaguanes would not have been considered important, and it would not have been easy to recover. (*Two Worlds* nobelprize.org)

In conclusion, any reading of his novels informed by the awareness of his literary purpose will yield better results than the approach favored by many of his critics, who focus on his foreclosure of invention and contestation. Writing on the cusp of decolonization, Naipaul is understandably preoccupied with the issue of how the past is able to shape (and impose constraints) on the future, and his importance as a postcolonial writer resides in an extensive analysis of colonial/postcolonial ills and an attending 'vivisection' of the diseased postcolonial subject, rarely capable of freedom and the attainment of an authentic existence.

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