

V.S. Naipaul: An Expatriate Writer

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V.S. Naipaul is, undoubtedly, one of the most significant novelists of the present century. Rarely does a writer in his forties merit and receive the kind of critical attention and praise that has come to V.S. Naipaul. V.S. Naipaul as an expatriate writer enjoys a unique position. As a prelude to the reading of Naipaul's work, a broad outline of the concept of expatriate literature is a necessity. Expatriate literature is literature written by persons living as aliens in a foreign country. Every age nurtures literature which its ethos favours and inspires. If religious fervour marked literature in the earlier ages, freshness of a rebirth characterized the literature of Renaissance, restraint and order was the hallmark of the eighteenth century, liberation of the imagination was a feature of the Romantic Revival. War, modernism and new themes from twentieth century characterized literature of the twentieth century. A growing tendency in the Post-World War II period is the emergence of expatriate literature. Advance of technology and novel modes of transport have created globalisation and displacement. Migration and transport are common features of the twentieth century; literature written by the expatriates depicting the predicament of such people is a distinguishing feature of the twentieth century life. British literature too has a large contribution from expatriates.

Terry Eagleton in his book *Exiles and Emigre's* observes that “the heights of English literature have been dominated by foreigners and emigres: Conrad, James, Eliot, Pound, Yeats, Joyce, Eagleton’s theory is that when a society’s literature is dominated by expatriates, there is something compulsive within that society which necessitates it. He also talks of expatriates within the same country – cultural expatriates and speaking from a wider, philosophic angle, he observes that all of us are expatriates of a sort. However, there are also expatriates from the erstwhile colonies and the subject, therefore has a post-colonial perspectives too. People from the Third world countries migrated to the erstwhile metropolitan centre in search of multiple objectives. Exodus from the underdeveloped countries to the developed countries is a commonly observed phenomenon and this is for widening their horizons and gaining new opportunities.

It would be worthwhile to define the word ‘expatriate’ at the outset itself. As the dictionary meaning goes, an expatriate is a person living outside one’s country; he is an alien there, having emigrated from the land of his birth. For all purposes, he is an outsider and lives in a state of ‘exile’, self-imposed or circumstantial. The word ‘patria’, which is of Latin origin, means a country and it would follow therefore, that an expatriate is one, who is expelled from ‘patria’ or it may be a voluntary effort determined by circumstances.

An expatriate emigrates to an alien country from his ‘patria’ for multiple reasons – lure of money or other opportunities for education and employment, religious persecution, political asylum, cultural perspectives or motives or it may be a combination of all these. Meddenga, a Sri Lankan poet sings of his journey to U.S.A. and his voice, perhaps, finds a strong echo in the journeys of numerous individuals: Full of hope

I crossed the seven seas looking for
The pot of gold.¹

This is the most common reason for several people from the Third World countries migrating to the U.S.A. to day. Ages ago, it was the similar lure for gold which set off a chain of sailors and explorers from the West, like Columbus and Sir Walter Raleigh in search of India and the West Indies. In the twentieth century, there is a reversal of these journeys and it is the advanced West, which fascinates the underdeveloped and developing countries. The expatriates are the new Columbuses, sailing out to advanced countries to recreate a New world.

An expatriate may live abroad without acquiring citizenship there, like a resident alien, as Aldous Huxley did in the U.S.A. An expatriate may still experience the social and cultural vacuum of an exile in spite of acquiring citizenship in an alien country. V.S. Naipaul, who has lived in England for 46 years, still belongs to this category. In spite of his prolonged stay and his marriage with an English lady, he is an “expatriate” and a feeling of ruthlessness persists in him. In several books of his, he has expressed this sentiment. Describing his stay in England, he observes, “I do not sign petitions. I do not cease to feel that this lack of interest is all wrong.”² He admits that he lives there with a ‘Buddhist detachment’ unable to utilize his immediate environment for a creative purpose. London remains his base, the land of his physical stay but it is his journeys to various countries and to Trinidad and Tobago, the land of his birth, which give him stuff for his creative work. The journeys may be physical or imaginative and mental. An expatriate writer like him has dual existence; living as he does, simultaneously in two worlds; The one to which he cannot and does not wish to return and the other, the land of his actual stay, which he cannot or dare not leave. The hold of the country of his stay exerts a strong pull and glues him to it and the lure of his home

remains a distant dream. Expatriate literature is born out of the tension exerting between these two forces. Expatriate sensibility is generated out of such a dialogic juxtaposition.

Such writing is very common in post-colonial societies and people from them. The dream and reality, nostalgia and repulsion juxtaposed dialogically create expatriate literature. Egleton voices this view when he says, “In each case, great art is produced, from the subtle and involuted tension between the remembered and the real, the potential and the actual, interaction and depression, exile and involvement.”³ This dominant characteristic is also expressed by Ashcroft Bill in *The Empire Writes Back*; “The dialectic of place and displacement is always a feature of post-colonial societies.”⁴ Such a dialogic condition in the mind may also lead to a “crisis of self-image”, of which the author may write again and again. V.S. Naipaul’s repeated resort to autobiographical narrations is a feature emerging out of such a situation.

Naipaul, living as an expatriate in London, has contributed voluminously and qualitatively to the mainstream of British fiction. He is one of the few writers to have received a host of awards. When asked in an interview, how Naipaul felt about the ‘official response’ he received in England through a chain of awards — he being “the most prize-laden novelist of recent times”, Naipaul replied, “I am very touched by it. As I was saying earlier, without London, without the generosity of the people in London, of critics and expatriates, one would have been trying to write in a wilderness”.⁵ London is the base of his creative writing, the land of his creative effort. It is the land of his physical stay and a commercial centre with opportunities for publishing, the land which made the vocation of writing possible for him. For the content of his books, he may rely not only on England but even on other places.

Expatriate literature is characterized by descriptions of incessant travel, displacement and homelessness. At the heart of an expatriate is a growing restlessness which makes him launch on temporary journeys. 'Flights' and 'escapes' are common features in an expatriate's life. The ship and the aeroplane constantly recur in expatriate literature. The expatriate finds in these modes a metaphor for a feeling of temporariness, footlessness, nowhere-ness, a state of constant mobility and expectancy. The idea of an escape or 'flight' first came to Naipaul when he was a child and as an extraordinary child, he wanted to escape from the creatively barren environment of Trinidad. Journeys from Trinidad to London and from London to various countries for temporary visits constitute Naipaul's life. He travels to the West Indies, India, Africa, Islamic countries and America and writes his travelogues. This has been a common experience of several other writers from the Caribbean Islands who also emigrated to London.

Naipaul vividly depicts such a predicament of an expatriate in his *The Tramp of Piracous*, in which expelled Egyptians are sailing back to Greece from Africa. The expatriates' celebration of euphoria is narrated in the interaction among the inmates – Americans, Australians, Egyptians, Greeks and Lebanese but it is suddenly subdued and dispersed when the port of call arrives. They experience a sense of camaraderie and unity. All national boundaries are transcended in the prevailing euphoria, however temporary, it may be. There is an overcoming of national perspectives. A new consciousness emerges in an expatriate overriding all regional and national boundaries. It is a true widening of horizons. As the Nobel Laureate Derek Walcott observed, "To have loved one horizon is insularity; it blindfolds vision, it narrows experience."⁶ A global vision and awareness emerges in expatriate literature. Man becomes a citizen of the world, he no more belongs to any single country. A global vision is,

therefore, a release and true freedom. Such an experience is frequently celebrated in expatriate literature.

To be away from one's homeland is also to be away from some of the oppressive rigidities, clumsy and obsolete traditions and rituals and above all the killing stagnation, and creative sterility, prevailing in the Third world countries. Perhaps such a feature would dominate in expatriatism if the conditions in homeland are depressing. Naipaul also portrays an authentic picture of such an experience in *In a Free State*. An Indian domestic goes to the U.S.A. with his employer. Although he initially misses the openness in Bombay, he enjoys his freedom in the U.S.A. To him it is a discovery; it is a release from all the restrictions of a domestic's life in India. He interacts with the new world and enjoys it. However, disillusionment awaits him there too for the new restrictions by the U.S.A. are equally suffocating. He is both free and not free. The kind and degree of euphoria experienced depends upon the individual's background and the country to which the individual has emigrated.

Such an experience lasts for a short time and then the reality starts asserting itself. The cross-cultural existence, the cultural shock and the cultural encounter – it may be cross-religious, cross -lingual, cross -racial or cross-ethnic, often results in an identity crisis. There may be stages of identity crisis. There may be stages of cultural alienation and confrontation only to be followed later by acculturation and cultural actualization and sometimes in genuine cultural assimilation. Expatriate literature is flooded with the details of such assimilation and confrontation.

Expatriate writers suffer from a sense of loneliness and nostalgia which comes very often as a revealing factor. The expatriate's dilemma of being unable to return home and yet not find a new home in the adopted land is acutely voiced. The expatriate realises his homeland in his imagination and this bond strengthens his contact with the homeland like a

spider spinning yarn and a web, the expatriate writer goes back to it again and again and creates a web of creative effusion. This is the dominant mood and note in Naipaul's works too and his entire contribution is spiraling round and round this central theme.

Expatriate literature is a growing and expanding literature; as it caters to some basic instincts and requirements of writers living in foreign countries. Expatriate literature is the result of the call of the home when it has been lost; it is this sense of the loss which becomes a stimulant for creative writing. It is the expatriate sensibility of Naipaul that enabled him to see through the creeds, cultures, and countries – the postcolonial societies – and strips them of their pretences and defense mechanisms by means of irony and prophecy.

Truly speaking, Naipaul, as an expatriate writer, has emerged as the most eminent writer in English and has at the same time made significant contribution to postcolonial literature by constantly interrogating postcolonial and post-imperial issues and realities that have shaped contemporary societies and politics.

References

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