

V.S. Naipaul's "One Out of Many": In the Middle of Nowhere

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Abstract

Identity crisis, displacement and isolation are among the popular themes of post-colonial studies that are worked on by many writers. As a writer in a self-imposed exile, V. S. Naipaul reflected his own experiences in most of his novels. From his childhood, Naipaul had a sense of dislocation and as Kelly (1989) points out Naipaul explains the sense of dislocation in his early memories: "...between my birth and the age of seven we lived in about seven or eight different houses. I think it is because one has lived this disordered life that I haven't been able to settle down, even as an adult" (as cited in Kelly, 1989, p. 2). "One out of many" is one of Naipaul's stories in which he deals with issues such as isolation and displacement. Thus, the aim of this paper is to analyse displacement and isolation experienced by a third world character, named Santosh, in the first world in V.S. Naipaul's "One out of Many."

Keywords: V.S. Naipaul, "One out of Many", identity crisis, displacement, isolation

1. Introduction

Post-colonial studies is a field of academic study that focuses on the experiences of individuals and communities in the aftermath of colonization. This includes an examination of the ongoing impacts of colonization and the processes of decolonization, as well as an exploration of the ways in which colonization has shaped political, social, cultural, and economic systems around the world. The aim of post-colonial studies is to provide a better understanding of the experiences of individuals and communities after colonization. In addition to this, there is also an analysis of the ways in which colonization has affected the lives of people in both the colonized and colonizing countries, as well as an exploration of the ongoing effects of colonization on contemporary societies. Moreover, post-colonial studies seeks to challenge and subvert dominant narratives about colonization and its effects, and to provide a more nuanced and complex understanding of the impacts of this process.

Isolation, displacement, and identity crises are crucial themes in post-colonial studies, as they reveal the experiences of individuals and communities. These themes are often intertwined and can have profound effects on the lives of those affected by colonization. In

post-colonial literature, writers often explore the ways in which isolation, displacement, and identity crises are experienced and how they shape the lives of individuals and communities. By examining these themes, post-colonial studies can provide valuable insights into the impacts of colonization and the ongoing process of decolonization.

V.S. Naipaul is one of those writers who deals with these themes in his works. In “One out of Many,” V.S. Naipaul explores the themes of isolation, displacement, and identity crisis through the experiences of Santosh, a third-world character in the first world. The story examines the ways in which Santosh struggles to adapt to his new surroundings and grapples with feelings of isolation and a crisis of identity. By exploring these themes, the story sheds light on the experiences of individuals from the developing world who encounter the culture and society of the developed world. This paper aims to analyse the depiction of displacement and isolation in “One out of Many.”

2. Santosh: in the middle of nowhere

In 1971, Naipaul wrote his novel *In a Free State* as a collection of stories. Although these stories are not structurally connected and could not be regarded as sections of a single, unified novel, they are thematically relevant to the title novella (Kelly, 1989, p. 104). In the novel, “One Out of Many” is the first story coming after the prologue. It is a story where the problems of displacement and identity crisis can be observed through its protagonist, Santosh, who is a domestic living in Bombay in the opening, but then he goes to the US with his employer, whom Santosh calls ‘Sahib.’ Since Santosh announces at the very beginning of the story that he is now an American citizen and he lives in Washington, the readers might mistakenly think that Santosh has done quite well in America (Naipaul, 1971, p. 21). “I am now an American citizen and I live in Washington, capital of the world. Many people, both here and in India, will feel that I have done well. But” (Naipaul, 1971, p. 21). However, Santosh’s emphasis on the conjunction ‘but’ reveals that the reality is exactly the opposite. “But” opens the story.

In the story, Naipaul portrays a character who is the representative of a developing world. In fact, this character is othered even in his own country because of the class which he belongs to. As Santosh is at the bottom of the caste system as a pariah it is quite clear that he can never climb to the upper level. He is destined to live among people like himself. This hopeless and destitute mass shares the same fate: class immobility. So, Santosh has never known he is leading a miserable life. Despite being homeless, he never minds this because he “was so happy in Bombay”, he “was respected” because he “worked for an important man” (Naipaul, 1971, p. 21). When he goes to the US with his ‘Sahib’, he is shocked on witnessing the severe differences between these two cultures. In his book *The Five Stages of Culture Shock: Critical Incidents Around the World*, Paul Pederson (1995) explains that culture shock is the result of re-

evaluating both the host and home culture. When a person experiences a new culture, there can be sudden and unpleasant feelings as this person compares it with his/her home culture. (p. 2) Thus, negative consequences are inevitable. Pederson mentions Oberg's six negative aspects of culture shock:

- (1) Strain resulting from the effort of psychological adaptation,
- (2) a sense of loss or deprivation referring to the removal of former friends, status, role, and/or possessions,
- (3) rejection by or rejection of the new culture,
- (4) confusion in the role definition, role expectation, feelings, and self-identity,
- (5) unexpected anxiety, disgust, or indignation regarding cultural differences between the old and new ways, and
- (6) feelings of helplessness as a result of not coping well in the new environment. (qtd in Pederson 2)

Experiencing culture shock, Santosh becomes lost in this vast land which is unlike his own country. Before landing in Washington, it is the flight which first makes Santosh feel inferior. The flight is like a passage: a passage from India to the US. He notices that the passengers are in neat, elegant clothes. "They were all dressed as though they were going to a wedding" (Naipaul, 1971, p. 24). However, he soon notices that the ones who are strange are not the passengers but he himself. Here it can be said that the plane is a symbol of the upper-middle class. He is now on the plane with Indians and foreigners, and they are all superior to him. The plane now is in the sky over Bombay and his ordinary life is left on the ground. There are many passengers on the plane but none of them is like Santosh. He is dressed in his "ordinary Bombay clothes and he feels heads turning whenever he stands" (Naipaul, 1971, p. 24). His journey on the plane has already highlighted the difference between Santosh and the other upper-middle class passengers.

The feeling of being a misfit continues after Santosh is first introduced to the city of Washington. At first, he has difficulties with the concept of time. He compares Bombay time to that of Washington. The big buildings, wide roads and motor cars that he has seen astound him. As Naipaul explains in his conversation with Ian Hamilton (1997), this story contains "the immigrant's view of the capital of the world, the view of a man from another, enclosed culture. Rather like my own of London, twenty years ago" (p. 19). For Santosh, the most striking thing is the appearance of Afro-American people, whom he calls 'hubshi', as he sees them walking in the streets freely. Santosh feels both scared and estranged. The reason behind this feeling of estrangement and fear is his inbred knowledge and his specific socio-cultural experience. In other words, it is his own culture that makes him feel that way. "But I have never dreamt that this wild race existed in such numbers in Washington and were permitted to roam the streets so freely" (Naipaul, 1971, p. 26). As pointed out by the authors of *The Empire Writes Back*, Naipaul uses the Hindi word 'hubshi' to create a deeper impact, and in so doing to express the gap between the two cultures in which Santosh is stuck.

The use of the Hindi word 'hubshi' rather than 'Negro' . . . prepares the reader for a gradual discovery of the peculiar significance of the word, indicating as it does the singular aversion, the ritual uncleanness, the religious horror which the Indian protagonist attaches to the touch of the Negro maid, who eventually seduces him. In Naipaul's case, the word is used to indicate the protagonist's culture rather than the writer's, and in this sense is a self-consciously detached use of language difference. With the word hubshi we do not have a different signified for the signifier 'Negro', as we might in a translation; we have a different sign altogether. It is a metonym of the Indiancultural experience, which lies beyond the word, but of which it is a part. (Ashcroft et al, 2002, pp. 64-65)

To Santosh, the black race is inferior; however, the irony is that he himself is seen as a member of another inferior race.

Santosh wants to live in Washington just like the way he did in Bombay. His desire to keep himself in the cupboard and not change his appearance are examples of this. Since he is an ignorant immigrant who knows nothing about the outer world, he resists adaptation and integration, and he is rejected by the host society. "Can't you read? We don't serve hippies or bare feet here" (Naipaul, 1971, p. 29). Feeling of estrangement leads to a solitary life and Santosh refuses to communicate with others. His only forms of entertainment are his trips to the supermarket and watching television. He closes all doors to the outside world and isolates himself. Thus, it is possible to say that Santosh has reached at the 'rejection' stage of the process of culture shock.

However, this isolation process gives way to recognition and realization after he has an affair with the "hubshi" maid in the apartment. After the affair with the black maid, Santosh starts to study his face in the mirror and he finds himself attractive just in the same way the black maid feels towards him. He finds himself handsome and he admits that he has never thought of himself in this way. That is a kind of identity discovery for him. Here it is possible to mention Lacan's 'mirror stage', where the unified self is discovered. Lacan says:

The mirror stage is a drama whose inner dynamic moves rapidly from insufficiency to anticipation – and which, for the subject caught in the snares of spatial identification, fashions the series of fantasies that runs from an image of a fragmented body to what we may call the orthopedic vision of its totality – and to the armour, donned at last, of an alienating identity, whose rigid structure will shape all the subject's future mental development. (as cited in Sarup, 1992, p. 64)

While he is gazing at his face in the mirror, he suddenly realizes that he is an individual and he has his own free will. From that moment on he takes more care over his appearance. He feels freer while making decisions. Although his 'Sahib' wants to go back to Bombay, Santosh wants to stay in Washington. He says:

When I adjusted to my imprisonment I had wanted only to get away from Washington and to return to Bombay. But then I had become confused. I had looked in the mirror and seen myself, and I knew it wasn't possible for me to return to Bombay to the sort of job I had had and the life I had lived. I couldn't easily become part of someone's presence again. Those evening chats on the pavement, those morning walks: happy times, but they were like the happy times of childhood: I didn't want them to return. (Naipaul, 1971, p. 41)

He can clearly recall the way that he lived in Bombay and does not want to go back there again. This is the reason for his feeling more confident after he discovers his identity in the mirror. In a decisive move, he leaves his job and starts to work for Priya, who is from India and has a restaurant in Washington. Santosh sees himself and Priya as equals in the beginning. They share the same culture and language. There is no caste difference between himself and Priya in Washington. Although Priya is his boss, Santosh does not call her 'Sahib' and in the beginning they are just like friends. Santosh enjoys his newly gained individuality and identity. He feels happier and freer. However, when he discovers later that his presence in Washington is illegal, and if he is caught by the authorities, he will be deported, he becomes desperate again. The isolation process starts again, and he starts calling Priya 'Sahib'. This indicates that when characters like Santosh feel isolated, they need someone to protect them, and this protector should be more powerful than them. Priya and Santosh are similar in that they are both Indian immigrants and they are not concerned with the caste system because they live in Washington. However, Priya is a restaurant owner and an employer, so she is the one who has money, or in other words, power. Santosh is desperate because he cannot go back to Bombay, a place where he does not belong anymore. He cannot stay in Washington either because he is an illegal immigrant. Priya suggests Santosh to marry a black woman in order to legalize his presence in the US. However, in the end, this arranged marriage cuts off all his contacts with the alien culture. He becomes a cultural misfit, a social outcast.

I am a single man who decided to act and see for himself, and it is as though I have had several lives. I do not wish to add to these. Some afternoons I walk to the circle with the fountain. I see the dancers but they are separated from me as by glass. Once, when there were rumours of new burnings, someone scrawled in white paint on the pavement outside my house: Soul Brother. I understand the words; but I feel, brother to what or to whom? I was once part of the flow, never thinking of myself as a presence. Then I looked in the mirror and decided to be free. All that my freedom has brought me is the knowledge that I have a face and have a body, that I must feed this body and clothe this body for a certain number of years. Then it will be over. (Naipaul, 1971, pp. 57-58)

Santosh gains his self-awareness first and this makes him feel freer. However, this freedom does not make him happy. He feels more isolated and dislocated. To Santosh, his marriage to the 'hubshi' woman is an extreme self-degradation from which he is unable to

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recover. In the developed world, as a character from a developing world he just feels financially and socially free but from then on, he decides to meet his basic needs such as feeding and clothing. Santosh can no longer see either his hometown or America in the same way again and neither of those nor he can ever be complete. His new experience and knowledge have corrupted his innocence. After he discovers his individual identity in the mirror, his 'rejection' stage gives way to a kind of change. However, because he decides to isolate himself from society in the end, it is obvious that he goes through the 'rejection' stage again and this means that Santosh would never adapt to the developed Western culture. There is no hope for him in the end and he continues his life as a cultural misfit. For Homi Bhabha (1994), the reason behind creating such characters is Naipaul's own "fated condition of Caribbean".

3. Conclusion

Santosh's journey to the US and his experiences there highlight the stark differences between the developing and developed worlds. While living in Bombay, Santosh was able to find a sense of purpose and belonging despite his homelessness. However, once he arrives in the US, he is faced with a completely different culture and society that he is not prepared for. The contrast between the two worlds is emphasized through Santosh's feelings of isolation and his struggle to find his place in this new environment.

Furthermore, Santosh's experiences in the US exacerbate his feelings of displacement and identity crisis. As he navigates the unfamiliar landscape and culture of Washington, he is constantly confronted with his own inferiority and outsider status. The contrast between his own background and that of the people around him is stark, and this only serves to further reinforce his sense of isolation and lack of belonging.

In "One out of Many" Naipaul highlights the ongoing struggles and challenges faced by individuals from the developing world when they encounter the developed world. Santosh's experience in the developed world makes him more hopeless and desperate. In the beginning, Santosh was a happy homeless trying to survive in Bombay. Yet, his life in the US turns his literal homelessness into an incurable spiritual one.

Disclosures

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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