

**The Displacement and the Dimensions of Freedom in
V.S. Naipaul's *In A Free State***

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Abstract

Naipaul's best works of fiction, in a *Free State*, *Guerrillas* and *A Bend in the River*, were written in English during ten years when he lived in Wiltshire, interrupted by travels abroad on assignments as a journalist. While offering portraits and analysis of their main concerns are the nature of freedom, commitment and authenticity in relation to experience and giving purpose to life. Ideas are questioned by actualities. The focus is usually on individuals, their hopes, desires, fears; lives show the real as opposed to abstract theoretical problems of liberty and human nature.

Keywords: V.S. Naipaul, *In A Free State*, Alienation, displacement, freedom, place, identity, dignity

In his earlier novels, Naipaul has followed recognizable patterns of the tradition of the novel, staying close to the novel of sensibility. He has regulated the distance between the protagonist, narrator, author and reader to ensure that the dominant vision of each novel is that of the narrator, leaving the novels open-ended. Through there are dramatic and literary resolutions in the lives of the protagonist and the narrator, respectively, in each novel—the latter arriving at a centre of stillness, however temporary. Naipaul, by depicting the narrator as the controlling agent of the novel, suggests other stories with different narrators and different endings. However, even though it is the narrator's vision and pain which is prominent, it is the protagonist's existential reality that dominates the story, the narrator/author being present by implication or intrusively and the artist's vision being a critical assumption of the reader based on the dramatic/psychological structure of the novel.

In a *Free State* is a composite of first person reporting of events experienced by the narrator and made available to the reader as pages from his journal and three fictive accounts. The first two

are in the stream-of-consciousness mode. The third is a dramatic, third person account with emphasis on chronological detailing of journey by car as Bobby's growth in awareness as the travels with Linda through 'no man's land.' One sees the modern intellectual sensibility unable to be totally involved as experience is accompanied by simultaneous analysis of it. This exterior structure of the book, so evidently composed of disparate items, is loosely held together thematically by the latent relationship between absurdity and freedom, and structurally through the de-liberate use by the narrator of his journalistic non-fictional accounts as parentheses for the fiction.

The surface structure then consists of five episodes. Each episode is in itself a complete story with a narrator, a protagonist, an action, a resolution, a mood and a vision. Each story reflects a total situation in its own context but a partial one in that of the novel. As analogues for the narrator's experience, unhesitatingly depicted in the prologue and the epilogue, they build up a novel of sensibility with emphasis on mood and subjectivity. They reflect a latent single vision whose genesis is in the experience of existential futility of the narrator while defending the dignity of the Arab urchin against the Italian tourist who baits the hungry child with food as a form of amusement in the rest house at Luxor. His personal frustration illuminates a particular truth about his contingent world: neither the oppressor nor the oppressed have a concept of personal and human dignity.

The surface structure directs the attention of the reader to the narrator's subjective world, his dilemmas and his vision as a man and artist. It also presents the narrator's wide and varied experience of the world. Geographically, it covers the important world: Bombay/Washington, Trinidad/London, African Reality (actual and imagined, black and white) and Cairo and its environs. Within this important world of business and power politics, the narrator views a cross-section of contemporary humanity in the grip of contemporary culture in which power and money are the criterion of importance. The panorama ranges from the most deprived and dispossessed, the third world's third world—people like Santosh, Dayo's brother, Arab urchins, Egyptian soldiers returning defeated from Sinai, Greek refugees, the tramp—at one end, to the materially sound and secure people like Bobby and Linda, the Lebanese businessman, the American and European tourists and sons of affluent Egyptians studying abroad.

An ironic touch is added by the inclusion of the comfortably well-off Communist Chinese Circus at Luxor, distributing gifts, hand-shakes, money, medals and picture postcards of Chinese peonies—one empire replacing another. The rich and the poor can never meet though separated only by the distance of a deck on the steamer! Ironically, as the narration proceeds, the important aggressive world recedes and the subjective reality of the unimportant emerges as the signification fact of each story. Washington, London and the African State become less than meaningful when Santosh is faced with the powerful reality of his body and his mortality, Dayo's brother with the insubstantiality of his all-embracing love for Dayo, and Bobby, the colonial administrator, with the insecurity of the compound!

The narrator hence presents contemporary reality, the 'thing in itself' as a vast 'no man's land' in which those who grab or scavenge or indulge themselves possess the original freedom of Alexander or Crusoe who to themselves are the only living realities in the world. This world is

indifferent, if not hostile, to the subjective reality of the sensitive, reflective third world man who in his own orderly and imaginative fashion seeks to possess the world. Simultaneously, the narrator also present an emphatic image of the protagonist of each episode, literally and literarily in a ‘free state,’ detached from contingency as a result of a destructive encounter with reality.

In placing the ‘free’ world and the ‘free’ protagonist side by side, the depth of the latter’s disillusionment is presented. The freedom of the upper deck of the steamer and the tourist rest house at Luxor, viewed from a distance, is the one aspired to and is also partially achieved by Santosh, Dayo’s brother and Bobby. However, for these ‘island innocents,’ the distance coalesces security with success. Only as they approach it do realize the antithetical nature having of these two realities. For with success life for these people has come to a standstill. In order to arrive, they moved away from a ‘home’ but having arrived they do not ‘belong’ and so are stranded. But paradoxically, like a gift from the gods, their loss becomes the condition for their growth in self-awareness bringing with it the freedom of vision and perspective. Their sense of individuality, of subjective apartness from the world, may be painful but at least it combines the conditions of ‘home’ with those of freedom.

In Naipaul’s fiction, the greatest traps to self-expression are well-defined social systems; the greatest freedoms can be practiced only in situations which represent no man’s territory. The maximum aggression and the greatest growth in self-awareness occur when contingent reality, in losing its contours, loosens its grip on man.

In a *Free State* presents a different argument to the rest of Naipaul’s fiction. Dialectically this novel stands alone as an effective question mark to the rest of his fiction. So far his novels have developed in detail situations of entrapment: entrapped individuals seeking release from intense immediate pressure which forbids any idea of the future or of freedom. The narrator emphasizes the hardly measurable distance the protagonist has moved in this direction because of the narrowness of his vision—“between attic and basement,” “pleasure and its penalty” as Ralph Singh says. Yet he highlights the dignity of the effort as a moment of insight against a lengthy and vividly evoked landscape which is dead or disruptive of creativity. The houses that Biswas moves through are metaphors of entrapment. Contrastingly, hardly much space has been allotted to the house in Sikkim Street which meant release. A major metaphor of entrapment in *The Mimic Men* is the houses and boarding house rooms in which Ralph Singh spends a large part of his life. The hotel room in which he finds a sense of release at the end of the novel received cursory attention. Similarly, Mr. Stone’s house, for the larger part of the novel, conveys the impression of a prison. The narrator gives only a paragraph at the end describing it as the setting for a Mr. Stone who enters his house with a feeling of release and love for the black cat.

In *In a Free State*, we see the protagonist arriving at successive stages of being free from anxiety. Each free situation carries its own disillusionments. Each creates its own insecurities and necessitates further movement to the very limits of the literal and the literary in each context. “In a Free State” describes in detail Bobby’s sense of security and freedom of action. The incident in the bar at the New Shropshire with the Zulu elaborates the gestures of a man at ease in his environment. The setback he receives when the Zulu boy spits at him does not disturb him unduly:

'Africa was for Bobby the empty spaces, the safe adventures of long fatiguing drives on open roads, the other Africans, boys built like men. You want lift? You big boy, you no go school? ...when I born again I want your color. You no frighten. You want five shillings?'(109)

That evening he had broken all rules; the evening had shown how right his rules were. He felt no bitterness, no hurt.

Naipaul is considered to be a pessimist and is said to have a poor view of man. But this is a sweeping judgment of his fiction. His vision is focused on a particular third world reality—the homeless man in search of an identity which dignifies. That he fails is also a particular truth of his situation today. But the fact that Naipaul's most enduring and lovable characters are travelers and explorers, that he uses the tools of analysis to sift for man's possibilities in an impossible world, that none of his protagonists ever commits suicide, is sufficient evidence of Naipaul's faith in humanity. What everyone's private heaven or hell is, is not his concern for no one can know another's existential anguish. But the fact that they face it distinguishes the individual from a faceless society. His protagonists, like Bunyan's pilgrims, are to be admired on the journey.

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