

## Original Article

# The Unsettled Self: A Critical Study of Displacement and Alienation in V. S. Naipaul's Novels

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**Abstract**

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*This paper examines displacement and alienation in selected novels by V. S. Naipaul, arguing that Naipaul's fiction repeatedly stages the "unsettled self" as a product of colonial disjuncture, cultural mimicry, and migratory experience. Close readings of *A House for Mr Biswas* (1961), *The Mimic Men* (1967), *In a Free State* (1971), *A Bend in the River* (1979), and *The Enigma of Arrival* (1987) show how Naipaul represents subjectivity as fragmented, mobile, and often painfully self-aware. The paper situates these readings within postcolonial theoretical frameworks—especially ideas of exile, hybridity, and mimicry—drawing on Edward Said's reflections on exile and Homi Bhabha's account of cultural hybridity. It concludes that Naipaul's most sustained achievement is to make the psychic cost of displacement narratable without sentimentalizing it: his characters are neither mere victims nor triumphant cosmopolitans but figures who negotiate the permanent incompleteness of belonging.*

**Keywords :** V. S. Naipaul, displacement, alienation, exile, mimicry, hybridity, postcolonial identity, unsettled self.

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## Introduction

V. S. Naipaul (1932–2018), one of the most significant voices in postcolonial literature, is renowned for his sharp explorations of identity, exile, and belonging. Born in Trinidad to Indian indentured-descendant parents and later settling in England, Naipaul's personal history itself reflects the tensions of migration, hybridity, and cultural displacement that dominate his novels. His works span geographies—Caribbean, Africa, India, Europe—yet consistently return to the theme of the unsettled self: a consciousness fragmented by colonial history, alienated from both ancestral roots and adopted homelands, and caught between competing cultural identities (Naipaul, 1961/2001; 1967/2002; 1979/2002). Postcolonial studies often emphasize the material and political dimensions of decolonization, but Naipaul's contribution lies in dramatizing its psychological costs. His novels do not simply depict displaced subjects; they probe the inner fractures, the existential loneliness, and the ambivalence that displacement produces. Critics have described Naipaul as both a chronicler of exile and a controversial observer of postcolonial societies (Said, 2000). While some accuse him of pessimism or detachment, his works undeniably highlight how colonial history and migration unsettle identity at the most intimate levels. This paper aims to undertake a critical study of displacement and alienation in Naipaul's major novels—*A House for Mr Biswas* (1961), *The Mimic Men* (1967), *In a Free State* (1971), *A Bend in the River* (1979), and *The Enigma of Arrival* (1987). By situating these texts within theoretical frameworks of exile and hybridity (Bhabha, 1994; Said, 2000), the study argues that Naipaul's fiction captures the unsettled self as a permanent condition of postcolonial subjectivity. His protagonists, whether searching for a home, imitating colonial models, or reflecting on migration, embody the paradox of modern displacement: the impossibility of full belonging and the inevitability of alienation.



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## Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

### Literature Review

Scholarly engagement with V. S. Naipaul's fiction has often revolved around the themes of displacement, exile, and alienation. Early critics emphasized his realism and sharp portrayals of postcolonial societies, particularly his attention to the struggles of Indo-Caribbean communities in *A House for Mr Biswas* (1961) (King, 1993). This novel, widely considered his masterpiece, has been studied as a social and psychological exploration of the colonial subject's search for identity and stability (Mustafa, 1995). With *The Mimic Men* (1967), critics turned to Naipaul's representation of alienated elites, identifying Ralph Singh's fragmented self as emblematic of colonial mimicry. Bhabha's (1994) notion of mimicry as "almost the same, but not quite" has been applied to Naipaul's characters, who remain suspended between colonial authority and postcolonial aspirations (Singh, 2006). Similarly, *In a Free State* (1971) and *A Bend in the River* (1979) prompted critical debates on Naipaul's politics—some view his depictions of Africa and the Caribbean as pessimistic and Eurocentric (Parry, 1987), while others argue that his critique exposes the deep psychic wounds of postcolonial modernity (Gorra, 1997). Later works, especially *The Enigma of Arrival* (1987), have drawn attention to Naipaul's evolving style and autobiographical reflection. Scholars note how this novel moves from overt political critique to a meditative exploration of exile and belonging in England (Nixon, 1992). As Rob Nixon (1992) suggests, Naipaul's late fiction reveals displacement as an existential rather than purely geographical condition. Thus, across his oeuvre, Naipaul's representation of the unsettled self has become central to understanding the psychological impact of colonialism, migration, and cultural hybridity.

### Theoretical Framework

This paper draws on two major theoretical paradigms: **exile and displacement** (Said) and **mimicry and hybridity** (Bhabha). Edward Said (2000) argues that exile produces a fractured identity, marked by both estrangement and a sharpened perception of the world. For Said, the exiled subject experiences "contrapuntal" consciousness—living in between cultures, never fully at home in either. This perspective illuminates Naipaul's characters who, whether in Trinidad, London, or Africa, embody a sense of being outsiders everywhere. Their unsettled selves resonate with Said's idea of exile as both a wound and a resource. Homi Bhabha's (1994) concept of hybridity and mimicry provides another critical lens. Bhabha highlights how colonial subjects adopt the cultural forms of the colonizer, but in an incomplete, ambivalent way—mimicry becomes both resemblance and mockery. In Naipaul's novels, especially *The Mimic Men*, protagonists internalize colonial education and political models but remain estranged from both colonial and indigenous traditions. Their identities are "in-between," shaped by hybridity yet haunted by alienation. Together, Said's and Bhabha's frameworks allow us to analyze Naipaul's fiction as an articulation of the unsettled self: displacement is not merely spatial but psychological, and alienation emerges not only from exile but also from the failure of postcolonial nationhood to provide stable identities.

### Method and Text Selection

#### Method

This study adopts a **qualitative and interpretive approach**, relying primarily on close reading as the central method of analysis. Close reading allows for a detailed engagement with Naipaul's narrative strategies, characterization, symbolism, and thematic preoccupations, particularly in relation to displacement and alienation. The analysis is further situated within **postcolonial literary theory**, drawing on Edward Said's (2000) writings on exile and Homi Bhabha's (1994) concepts of hybridity and mimicry. The method is **comparative** in nature: Naipaul's novels are read across different phases of his career, highlighting continuities and shifts in his representation of the unsettled self. In addition, the study engages with relevant **secondary criticism** (e.g., King, 1993; Nixon, 1992; Mustafa, 1995) to contextualize Naipaul's work within wider debates in postcolonial literature. This interpretive framework does not aim to measure displacement in quantifiable terms but instead to illuminate how Naipaul narrativizes alienation—through voice, form, and imagery—and how his characters embody the fractured identities of postcolonial modernity.

**Text Selection** The selection of texts is based on their **representativeness and thematic richness** in relation to displacement and alienation. Five novels spanning nearly three decades of Naipaul's career were chosen:

#### **A House for Mr Biswas (1961)** –

Naipaul's early masterpiece, dramatizing the search for a home as a symbol of identity and belonging in the colonial Caribbean.

#### **The Mimic Men (1967)** –

A study of mimicry and alienation through Ralph Singh, a failed politician in exile.

#### **In a Free State (1971)** –

A Booker Prize-winning novel that explores mobility, exile, and moral disorientation against the backdrop of postcolonial instability.

## **A Bend in the River (1979) –**

A portrayal of an outsider navigating the turbulence of postcolonial Africa, exposing the tenuousness of cultural and personal anchoring.

## **The Enigma of Arrival (1987) –**

A semi-autobiographical work that reflects on migration, arrival, and the persistence of exile, shifting Naipaul's exploration from political to existential dimensions.

Together, these texts reflect a **trajectory of Naipaul's evolving concerns**: from the material quest for belonging (*A House for Mr Biswas*) to the psychological and philosophical exploration of exile (*The Enigma of Arrival*). Their comparative study enables a comprehensive understanding of how Naipaul's fiction engages with the unsettled self across different contexts and stages of his career.

## **Reading the Novels**

### **A House for Mr Biswas (1961): The Quest for Home and Identity**

Naipaul's *A House for Mr Biswas* is one of his most celebrated novels, and it dramatizes the struggle for stability and autonomy within a colonial society. Mr Biswas's lifelong quest to own a house becomes a metaphor for the postcolonial subject's search for rootedness and legitimacy. Critics note that while the house represents material and psychological security, it is also precarious, reflecting the fragility of belonging in colonial Trinidad (King, 1993). The narrative portrays how displacement operates even within one's own society: as an Indo-Trinidadian, Biswas is alienated from both the dominant Creole culture and the colonial authority. His final achievement, a modest house, is less a triumph than a symbolic gesture toward fragile selfhood (Naipaul, 1961/2001).

### **The Mimic Men (1967): Political Alienation and Mimicry**

In *The Mimic Men*, Naipaul turns to the alienation of colonial elites. Ralph Singh, the narrator, recounts his life from exile in London, reflecting on his political failures and fractured identity. His sense of being "a man without a true place" exemplifies the postcolonial condition (Naipaul, 1967/2002). Singh's narrative voice—fragmented, self-conscious, and filled with irony—enacts the unsettled self as both a personal and cultural reality. Homi Bhabha's (1994) concept of mimicry is particularly relevant here: Singh's political and cultural identity is constructed through imitation of the colonizer, but this mimicry produces not empowerment but hollowness. Critics argue that Naipaul uses Singh's perspective to illustrate the ambivalence of postcolonial modernity, where elites remain suspended between colonial inheritance and local realities (Singh, 2006).

### **In a Free State (1971): Exile and Disrupted Belonging**

Naipaul's Booker Prize-winning *In a Free State* foregrounds mobility and disruption, with its characters constantly on the move across geographies marked by violence and instability. The central novella, set in Africa, depicts a road journey during political upheaval, where characters confront the collapse of certainty and the impossibility of belonging. The episodic and fragmented narrative structure itself reflects displacement—stories of migration, estrangement, and interrupted lives are juxtaposed, suggesting that alienation is not confined to one space but is a recurring feature of postcolonial existence (Naipaul, 1971). As Parry (1987) observes, the novel resists the romanticization of liberation, instead revealing exile as a permanent condition of modern identity.

### **A Bend in the River (1979): Outsiderness in Postcolonial Africa**

Set in a newly independent African nation, *A Bend in the River* explores alienation through Salim, an Indian Muslim trader. Salim is doubly displaced: as a diasporic outsider within Africa and as a subject navigating the volatility of postcolonial nationhood. His alienation is sharpened by the collapse of social order and the violence of political change. Naipaul portrays postcolonial Africa not as a site of renewal but as a landscape of uncertainty, where the individual's search for stability is thwarted by larger historical forces (Naipaul, 1979/2002). Nixon (1992) argues that Salim embodies Naipaul's critique of rootlessness in postcolonial societies, as he remains perpetually unsettled—economically insecure, socially marginal, and emotionally adrift.

### **The Enigma of Arrival (1987): Exile as an Existential Condition**

By the time of *The Enigma of Arrival*, Naipaul shifts toward a more meditative and autobiographical exploration of displacement. The narrator's life in rural England might seem like an arrival, but it is instead marked by estrangement and acute awareness of change and decay. The novel emphasizes perception, memory, and the passage of time, suggesting that exile is not merely geographical but existential: even in apparent settlement, the self remains unsettled (Naipaul, 1987). Nixon (1992) reads the novel as Naipaul's acknowledgment of the paradox of migration: one may arrive, but never fully belong. Unlike earlier novels where alienation is dramatized through failed ambition or political chaos, here alienation is internalized, rendered through reflection and observation of landscape, mortality, and cultural distance.

## **Discussion: Patterns and Tensions**

The readings of Naipaul's selected novels reveal recurring patterns of displacement and alienation, but they also highlight tensions in his representation of the unsettled self. These patterns can be grouped around three interrelated dimensions: the duality of displacement as both social and psychic, the ambivalence of mimicry and hybridity, and the ethical paradox of exile.

## Displacement as Social and Psychic Condition

Naipaul consistently portrays displacement as a **double condition**: external and internal. Externally, his protagonists are migrants, exiles, or outsiders caught between cultures and political transitions. Internally, they are haunted by fragmentation and self-doubt. For instance, Mr Biswas's search for a house represents a material quest for rootedness, yet his final achievement offers only partial stability (King, 1993). Similarly, Salim in *A Bend in the River* experiences outward dislocation in Africa, but his deeper alienation is psychological—an enduring sense of non-belonging (Nixon, 1992). In this way, Naipaul dramatizes displacement not merely as geographical mobility but as a **state of mind**.

### Mimicry, Hybridity, and Ambivalence

Bhabha's (1994) framework of mimicry illuminates the ambivalent status of Naipaul's characters, particularly Ralph Singh in *The Mimic Men*. Singh imitates the colonial structures of politics and education, but this imitation is incomplete and unfulfilling, leaving him estranged from both the colonial and indigenous traditions. This "in-between" position exemplifies what Bhabha calls the ambivalence of hybridity: neither full assimilation nor authentic independence is possible. Naipaul's novels thus complicate the idealized notion of hybridity as a productive space; instead, hybridity often becomes a site of anxiety, alienation, and fractured selfhood.

### Exile and Ethical Distance

Edward Said's (2000) reflections on exile emphasize its paradoxical character: exile is both a deprivation and a vantage point, producing estrangement but also critical insight. Naipaul's narrators often embody this paradox. In *In a Free State* and *The Enigma of Arrival*, the exilic condition produces heightened observation—characters perceive cultural and political realities with clarity precisely because they are outsiders. Yet this clarity comes at the cost of belonging and solidarity. Critics like Parry (1987) have argued that Naipaul's detachment risks reproducing Eurocentric judgments, while others, such as Gorra (1997), defend it as an honest articulation of postcolonial alienation. The ethical tension, then, lies in whether Naipaul's unsettled self should be read as a universal human condition of modernity or as a narrow, elitist perspective shaped by distance from community.

### Voice, Irony, and Compassion

Another notable pattern in Naipaul's fiction is the narrative stance—precise, ironic, yet occasionally tender. His irony often underscores the futility of his characters' quests for belonging, but his prose also captures small human gestures of dignity and vulnerability. This creates a **stylistic tension**: Naipaul is simultaneously sympathetic and critical. As Nixon (1992) observes, this duality mirrors the ambivalence of exile itself, oscillating between intimacy and distance. It also prevents his works from collapsing into either pure pessimism or uncritical nostalgia, instead presenting alienation as a nuanced and enduring feature of postcolonial life.

## Conclusion

V. S. Naipaul's novels consistently dramatize the unsettled self, a figure caught in the tensions of displacement and alienation. From Mr Biswas's lifelong struggle to build a home in colonial Trinidad to Ralph Singh's confession of mimicry and exile, from the fragmented narratives of *In a Free State* to the disillusioned outsider in *A Bend in the River*, and finally to the reflective meditations of *The Enigma of Arrival*, Naipaul portrays identity as perpetually fragile, incomplete, and unsettled. His characters seldom achieve wholeness or belonging; instead, they embody the ongoing negotiation between home and homelessness, memory and estrangement, imitation and authenticity.

Thematically, Naipaul's work illustrates that displacement is both material and psychological. His protagonists are not only physically uprooted by colonial histories, migration, and political upheaval but are also inwardly divided by self-doubt and alienation. The unsettled self, therefore, is not an exception in Naipaul's world but the condition of modern postcolonial subjectivity. Theoretically, Edward Said's (2000) reflections on exile and Homi Bhabha's (1994) concepts of mimicry and hybridity provide critical tools for understanding this unsettledness. Said reminds us that exile is both a deprivation and a vantage point, while Bhabha reveals the ambivalence of identities formed through mimicry. Naipaul's fiction embodies both perspectives: exile provides clarity but never comfort; hybridity generates identity but never stability. Naipaul's legacy, then, lies in his refusal to romanticize displacement or to resolve alienation into consoling narratives of belonging. Instead, he insists on representing the ambiguity, irony, and persistence of alienation as central to the human condition in a postcolonial world. His novels demonstrate that the unsettled self is not simply a symptom of exile but a defining feature of modern identity, forever negotiating the gap between where one comes from and where one belongs.

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