MIN ZHOU
THE TRANSCRIPTION OF IDENTITIES
A STUDY OF V. S. NAIPaul’S POSTCOLONIAL WRITINGS

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From:

Min Zhou

The Transcription of Identities
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Based on a study of V. S. Naipaul’s postcolonial writings, this book explores the process of postcolonial subjects’ special route of identification. This enables the readers to see how in our increasingly diverse and fragmented post-modern world, identity is a vibrant, complex, and highly controversial concept. The old notion of identity as a prescribed and self-sufficient entity is now replaced by identity as a plural, floating and becoming process. Min Zhou shows how postcolonial literature, among other artistic forms, is one of the most representative reflections of this floating identity.

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Introduction

I belong to more than one world. I am a Palestinian Arab, and I am also an American. This affords me an odd, not to say grotesque, double perspective. In addition, I am of course an academic. None of these identities is watertight; each influences and plays upon the other. [...] It should be obvious that I cannot identify at all with the triumphalism of one identity because the loss and deprivation of the others are so much more urgent on me. (Said 2000:397)

The experience of exile, whether imposed or voluntary, is by no means rare through the course of human history. As an imaginative representation of reality, literature is fraught with works focusing on exile, from Homer’s Odyssey and The Old Testament of the Bible to V. S. Naipaul’s A Way in the World, to name but a few. The past century witnessed the most turbulent and vicissitudinous era of human history hitherto—the two World Wars, the Cold War between the East and West, and the subsequent economic and cultural globalization process, that exiled millions upon millions of people from their homes. The experience of exile not only draws the subject from his homeland, from all that is familiar, it also breaks the once solid orientation of identity. This shattered identity emerges with many new layers and facets that modulate each other, and invariably cause the subject to wonder who he really is, where he belongs or should belong, culminating in difficulties with understanding his place in the world.
According to Kobena Mercer, “identity only becomes an issue when it is in crisis, when something assumed to be fixed, coherent and stable is displaced by the experience of doubt and uncertainty” (1990: 43). In our increasingly diverse and fragmented world, many people are faced with the problem of identity because identity has become a vibrant, complex, and highly controversial concept. Some might argue that we need to find our “true identities” while others maintain that we are in an era of “identity crisis”. Regardless, we experience cultural identity at global, national, local, and personal levels in very real ways. The same unifying power of identity that creates cohesive communities also makes people go to war. Yet cultural identities are non-summative. One cannot simply quantify and separate the aspects of identity associated with culture, race, class, gender, or sexuality. Cultural identities cannot be cleanly dissected and compartmentalized into separate display windows. If anything, they can be paradoxical. When we express who we are in terms of our cultural identity, we create the illusion of belonging to a distinct category with shared beliefs, behavioral norms, and cultural practices. In fact, however, individual differences as well as our various belongings and their inherent social responsibilities, pull us toward many, sometimes conflicting identities.

In the wake of the polemics on postcolonialism, there emerges a proliferation of studies about exile and identity in critical poetics. Literature is in constant interchange with reality. Exile, and its ensuing identity crisis will undoubtedly find their representations in literary works, among which Naipaul’s have gained special attention from literary critics because his biographical history has long had “a symbiotic and self-consuming relation” with his writing (Hughes 1988: 11). As a writer who has always and only lived from his writing, Naipaul’s life is determined by writing, and dominated by visions of a world undoing itself. Naipaul’s lifelong writing career can be seen as an identity-seeking journey navigating between worlds. He was exiled from his ancestral culture by virtue of being born in the New World. The culture most familiar to him was English because of his colonial background. A brief sketch of Naipaul’s life is therefore
an indispensable entry point to studying Naipaul’s novels, and the postcolonial subjects’ quest for identity they represent.

V. S. NAIPOUL: A CONTROVERSIAL POSITION

Vidiahar Surajprasad Naipaul, the 2001 Nobel Laureate of Literature, was born on August 17, 1932, in Chaguanas, an impoverished, rural, Hindi-speaking area of Trinidad, a Crown Colony before acquiring its independence in 1962. Most Trinidadians are not natives, and the coming of independence created mutual fears of dominance between opposing ethnic groups: the Africans, the Indians and the Creoles. Naipaul’s ancestors immigrated to Trinidad from India as indentured laborers between 1845 and 1917 to relieve the labor shortage in the sugar plantations after the abolition of slavery. Termed East Indians in the West Indies, this predominantly rural population adhered strongly to the traditions of their native land, and remained largely distinct from the urban and creolized Afro-Caribbean majority, who resented them for depressing agricultural wages. Both groups tended to view the other’s culture as uncivilized, and the build-up to independence exacerbated these hostile feelings. Naipaul lived his childhood in poverty, among an almost completely isolated community of East Indians. At the age of 18, in 1950, with a hard-earned scholarship to Oxford University, Naipaul left Trinidad and went to England. He has remained in England, where he has written almost thirty books, won many literary prizes and was knighted for his services to English literature in 1990.

Naipaul’s background marks him as a typical product of multiculturalism, a legacy of colonialism, a man of no single nation, and a writer in exile. Naipaul’s exile is threefold: an exile from the Hindu tradition, an exile from Caribbean cultural heritage, and an exile in Britain. This complicated background gives Naipaul the advantage of viewing postcolonial society from both within and without, near and at a distance. It also sharpens his sensibility to the “true wonder” that Naipaul deems essential for a writer because in his eyes, “the
world we inhabit, which is always new, goes by unexamined, made ordinary by the camera, unmediated; and there is no one to awaken the sense of true wonder. That is perhaps a fair definition of the novelist’s purpose, in all ages” (REP 1981: 227). Influenced by his father, Seepersad Naipaul, a Trinidadian journalist and writer, Naipaul made up his mind to become a writer at the age of 12. Now author of 30 books, among which fiction and nonfiction are almost evenly divided, Naipaul has realized his childhood dream, and has firmly established his position as one of the best English writers of contemporary world literature. Remarkably, he has blurred the boundary between fiction and non-fiction, and has successfully found ways to express the postcolonial subjects’ experiences in today’s world of cultural mutation. Many of his works, like *The Enigma of Arrival* and *A Way in the World*, are mixtures of autobiography, fiction, history, and travel writings. Naipaul has literally lived by his writing alone, and has followed no other profession. His dedication to writing has been “complete to the point of complete self-absorption, notwithstanding the fact that his writing has been outward-bound in its fascination with the observed and recorded lives of many others” (Barnouw 2003: 30). Indeed, we can see the shadow of Naipaul himself in most of his fictional characters.

When awarded the 2001 Nobel Prize in Literature, Naipaul had already won almost every literary prize in England. Few readers doubted that he was a suitable recipient of the world’s grandest literary award, one for which he had been nominated many times before, in spite of some disagreement over its timing. Critics’ doubt mainly stems from the timing of the prize, which was announced one month after the September 11 attacks on the United States because Naipaul has written two controversial and sharply diatribed books on Islamic fundamentalism, *Among the Believers* (1981) and *Beyond Belief* (1998). Kumar even claimed that the prize was given to Naipaul by a “grateful West” for his “anti-Muslim” stance (140).
first subject, to now include India, Africa, America from south to north, the Middle East, and England. A “literary circumnavigator”, as he is called by the Swedish Academy, Naipaul’s oeuvre ranges from the impact of colonialism, its molding and destructive power on the minds of marginalized colonials of the former European empires, to the resulting disordered reality upon decolonization in newly independent states in the Caribbean, Asia, and Africa. As “a modern philosphe”, Naipaul has “united perspective narrative and incorruptible scrutiny in works that compel us to see the presence of suppressed histories” (Swedish Academy 2001); and with his vigilant style, he “transforms rage into precision and allows events to speak with their own inherent irony” (Swedish Academy 2001).

However, perhaps no significant contemporary writer’s works have been so acclaimed, and, at the same time, so condemned. In spite of his gift for provoking extreme admiration, Naipaul’s works also stimulate disagreement. Since he began writing, and through the development of his literary career, both Naipaul the writer and his works have been the target of acrimonious criticism. Critics from the Caribbean, South Asia, Arab, Africa, and Latin America excoriate him for being “a despicable lackey of neo-colonialism” (Singh 1969: 85), “a cold and sneering prophet” (Roach 1967: 5), and “a smart restorer of the comforting myths of the white race” (Achebe 1980: 113). He is criticized for traveling “to confirm his Eurocentric prejudices” (Winokur 1999: 11), and for being “England’s favorite 19th-century Englishman” (ibid: 11).

The negative criticism hints at postcolonial critics’ annoyance at the “Eurocentric” standpoints they believe revealed in Naipaul’s writing. To them, it represents a betrayal of Naipaul’s identity as a Third World writer from the ex-colonies. In contrast to other postcolonial writers who have built their writerly identity on the celebration of their cultural inheritance, Naipaul seems to be more critical, not only of the multiracial, multiethnic island of Trinidad, but also of his ancestral homeland of India. As we have already seen, Naipaul is a Trinidadian by birth, an Indian by blood, and a Briton by citizenship. His identity is therefore far from transparent. He has refused
to be identified as a West Indian writer, instead, he call himself a “citizen of the world” (IFS 1981: 11). The label “a citizen of the world” actually highlights Naipaul’s own perplexity over his identity in that it forever postpones a reconciliation of the tension between what is local and what is global in whom and what he is. Metaphorically one can be a citizen of the world, but in reality one has to face the choice of locality, at least in one’s passport. Identity for Naipaul is thus an inevitable dilemma. Reflected in his novels, many of Naipaul’s characters are also faced with this dilemma, which naturally results in their identity crisis. As “crisis” connotes a “new beginning”, “crisis of identity” can therefore be read as the beginning of one’s identity quest. With Naipaul, writing is the way by which he defines himself as a subject in the world. Since literature is in constant exchange with reality and, as an imaginative act, has its roots in life, Naipaul’s literary works naturally reflect his aporia in identity. As Landerg White observes, Naipaul’s “whole career is centered on the uncertainties of his own position” (1975: 2). This uncertainty of position mirrors Naipaul’s abiding perplexity in identification. Meanwhile, Naipaul’s books are fraught with characters who write, want to write or pretend to write; they are filled with parodies of bad writing, and with people who out of ignorance confuse serious literature with letter writing, bad journalism, pamphlets, who mistake prominence in the cultural industry, broadcasting or occasional book reviewing, as being a writer. All these writing efforts reflect the characters’ endeavors to define themselves in the world and construct their identity.

Naipaul often revisits people and places in his books, his Indian trilogy being the best example. In addition, most of his works incorporate an important element of autobiographical material, which is indicative of uncertainty in his identity, as well as of his efforts at identity construction. Indeed, Naipaul’s career as a writer actually parallels his life’s quest to seek and construct an identity. A new perspective to Naipul’s works would likely emerge from analyzing them from the perspective of the dynamic route to his identity against the background of the different cultures he has encountered.
This might lead to a better understanding of the formation of post-colonial subjects’ search for identity since it would necessarily be involved with the study of the identity of postcolonial subjects in general. Criticism focused on his identity has been largely based on the reading of an isolated book, which is understandable given that Naipaul is a living writer. However, such isolated criticism runs the risk of oversimplifying the complex meaning of the texts, and with it, the formation of Naipaul’s identity. This book will therefore try to offer a comprehensive study of the journey of identity construction through a close reading of major novels written at different periods of his life. Before delving into the labyrinth of Naipaul’s journey, it may be helpful to briefly review commentaries about Naipaul and his works.

Western scholars in particular, commend Naipaul’s achievements in shedding light on the misery of the Third World. He has been acclaimed for penetrating the chaos and dysfunction of post-colonial societies, and especially the suffering and deprivation experienced by victims of traumatic exploitation. Naipaul is praised for “writing with a strict refusal of romantic moonshine about the moral charms of primitives or the virtues of bloodstained dictators” and for being “the scourge of our disenchanted age, as free of colonialist bias as of infatuation with Third World delusions” (Feder 2001: 2), as well as “one of the finest living novelists writing in English” (Swedish Academy 2001), and “unarguably the most brilliant interpreter in English (perhaps in any language) of the maelstrom of the Third World” (qtd in Nixon 1992: 4). Naipaul is also singled out as “far and away the most talented, the most truthful, the most honorable writer of his generation” (Epstein 1987: 15).

Obviously, western scholars seem to agree that Naipaul’s works truthfully represent the situation in the postcolonial world. With a comprehensive study of Naipaul’s autobiography, his travel writings and fictions, Lilian Feder concludes that the central theme of Naipaul’s fictions is a “lifelong process of self-creation, an individual narrative of a search for truth that incorporates the historical and social framework in which it is enacted” (2001: 20). In Naipaul’s
Strangers, Dagmar Barnouw explores how Naipaul, whose works were profoundly shaped by his cultural background, has raised questions that go to the core of cultural (ethnic) plurality, the most important and difficult challenge to late modernity. She argues that he has learned to understand and document the difficulties of other cultures through his own difficulties in understanding his own multiethnic background, and has made their “disorienting strangeness intelligible” (Barnouw 2003: 2-4). In the second edition of V. S. Naipaul, Bruce King voices his support for Naipaul against charges by some critics that he has failed to see injustice and the effects of colonialism. He stresses that what Naipaul has done instead is to treat these themes with a complexity that acknowledges the rich, comprehensive and truthful ambivalence of the postcolonial reality, thus revealing it more acutely because “Naipaul does not choose sides, he observes what happens” (King 1993: 195). In general, in the eyes of Western critics, Naipaul’s depictions of the society and people of the Third World are trustworthy, and he is therefore an honest, objective and candid photographer and spokesman for the Third World.

Naipaul’s career and achievement can be seen as part of the worldwide political and cultural changes that have produced significant postcolonial writers such as Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, and Derek Walcott. True, Naipaul writes mainly about ex-colonies and developing countries, which may contribute to his being labeled a postcolonial writer. But he cannot be grouped with those postcolonial writers who idealize their ethnic culture and write from a conscious nationalistic perspective. In contrast, Naipaul is often accused of taking the point of view of Westerners, and looking down upon his ancestral Indian culture, and the place of his birth. In addition, Naipaul is not popular among fellow West Indian writers such as Derek Walcott and George Lamming, who glorify their homeland and find Naipaul contemptuous of the land of his birth. Naipaul is rebuked as a literal and political ingrate who has internalized colonial denigrations of the Third World, and holds a self-loathing view of his own country. In George Lamming’s Pleasure of Exile, there is a much-quoted diatribe against Naipaul:
What holds [Samuel] Selvon and myself together is precisely what could hold Indians and Negroes together in Trinidad. It is their common background of social history which could be called West Indian: a background whose basic feature is the peasant sensibility. Neither Sam nor I could feel the slight embracement about this; whereas Naipaul, with the diabolical help of Oxford University, has done a thorough job of wiping this out of his gust. (1991: 224-225)

Some postcolonial critics have also portrayed Naipaul as a traitor to the cause of the victims of colonialism, with whom they think he should have sought solidarity. In his scathing review of Naipaul’s Beyond Belief, Edward Said rebukes Naipaul as “a man of the Third World who sends back dispatches from the Third World to the implied audience of disenchanted Western liberals who can never hear bad enough things about all the Third World myths—national liberation movements, revolutionary goals, the evils of colonialism” (Said 2000: 101). After reading Among the Believers: an Islamic Journey, Said further observes that Naipaul has become “the celebrated sensibility on tour” (ibid: 113), who shows an “unexamined reverence for the colonial order” (ibid: 114). The “deep emptiness in Naipaul the writer,” according to Said, causes him “to promote an attitude of distant concern and moral superiority in the reader” (ibid: 117). Following Said’s steps, Nixon titled his monologue on Naipaul, London Calling: V. S. Naipaul, Postcolonial Mandarin, and maintains that what sets Naipaul apart from other controversial writers are the lines of the dissent: the rift between the “the United States and Britain, on the one side, from […] the Third World, on the other” (1992: 3).2

2 | Bruce King, in his V. S. Naipaul, has similar discoveries: “Behind most criticism of Naipaul, no matter how qualified by disclaimers, is the tendency to divide the world into such opposing polarities as center (England, imperialist, Western civilization) and margins (colonies, Third World, black)” (195). His conclusion, nonetheless, is contrary to Nixon’s in that he thinks that those against Naipaul are “usually nationalists, on the political Left, and tend to read literature as politics.” (195) Early in the 1980’s, Selwyn
While ruminating on the gulf between Naipaul’s reputations, Nixon warns that we should avoid the error of viewing Naipaul simply as a writer, instead, according to Nixon, we must realize that drawing on the advantage of his exilic condition, and with the rhetoric of displacement, Naipaul has successfully made himself a “buff on postcolonial politics” and is treated as “a mandarin possessing a penetrating, analytic understanding of Third World societies” (ibid: 4-16). Ostensibly, Said and Nixon’s criticism centers on the political dimension of Naipaul’s work.

Other critics believe that Naipaul sacrifices the truth of postcolonial reality to achieve an aesthetic impact, and that he writes from an Orientalist perspective. Homi K. Bhabha holds that Naipaul is so profoundly impressed by “the triumph of the colonialist moment in Conrad’s texts of the civilizing mission” that he “translates’ Conrad from Africa to the Caribbean in order to transform the despair of postcolonial history into an appeal for the autonomy of art” (Bhabha 1994: 107). Fawzia Mustafa, drawing on Bhabha’s reading of Naipaul, concludes in her monograph on Naipaul that “if a particular ‘civility’ and the ‘autonomy of art’ are indeed the grids whereby Naipaul constructs his narratives of the Caribbean and the greater Third World, then his relation to history is aesthetic rather than historiographical, and predetermined rather than explorative” (1995: 5). For Mustafa, Naipaul has failed to “historicize” the Caribbean experience since he has not seen it through the “transformative lens of colonialism” as has Fanon, because he is not involved in “the process of “decolonizing the mind”, where the alienation fostered by colonization becomes the site from which writers posit a “liberation” (ibid: 5-7). According to Mustafa, “Naipaul’s investment in the ‘Novel’ is deeply rooted in anxiety about ‘cultural’ rather than historical

R. Cudjoe contended that “a reading of V.S. Naipaul’s texts is, by definition, a political act” (4). Cudjoe draws a similar dividing line between those idealistic readings of Naipaul’s works from his materialistic reading, with a conclusion similar to that of Nixon.
authenticity,” and, with “his bookishness can with justification be read as Orientalist” (ibid: 6-7).

Besides those postcolonial readings of Naipaul’s works, the element most pointed out is his positioning of exile, and the consequent sense of rootlessness and homelessness. Many critics have talked about Naipaul’s feeling of congenital displacement, of having been born a foreigner, a citizen of an exiled community on a colonized island. He has no natural home except for India to which he often returns, only to be reminded of his distance from his roots, a sentiment evidenced by a quick scan of review titles of his work: *Writer without a Society, V. S. Naipaul, Man without a Society, Without a Place, Writer without Roots, Historicity and Homelessness in Naipaul, Exile’s Story, No Place: V. S. Naipaul’s Vision of Home in the Caribbean, Nowhere to Go.* To be an exile is to be a stranger. The position of an exile, is, as termed by Julia Kristeva’s, a “secret wound” that pushes the stranger into his wandering (1988: 13).

Despite the consensus among critics about Naipaul’s feelings of alienation, paradoxically, Naipaul’s position of exile has been given quite contradictory interpretations. Timothy F. Weiss posits that “for Naipaul, exile has been both an outsiderness and a state in-between different cultures and worlds” (1992: 222). Weiss reasons that Naipaul’s art of exile explores cultural shocks and collisions, and enables us to better understand ourselves, as well as others. It is therefore “about all of us in a world radically changing and in our awakening to the stranger without and within” (ibid: 225). For Weiss, given the radical changes of today’s world, the state of rootlessness is universal, and Naipaul’s position as both an outsider and a person between different cultures, makes his writing an exemplary guide to understanding others and ourselves. Selwyn R. Cudjoe, and Rob Nixon, in their commentaries on Naipaul, also pay attention to his positioning of exile, albeit with completely opposite conclusions. For Cudjoe and Nixon, exile for Naipaul is but a strategy he deploys to shed prejudices against postcolonial societies, and to win favor from Western critics. For Nixon, Naipaul applies the rhetoric of displacement and alienation to emotional advantage. Thus, British and American crit-
ics are won over by the dramatic appeal in Naipaul’s account of his uprootedness (1988: 20-21).

Beyond the disputes surrounding Naipaul and his works, as suggested by Nixon and King, there lies a lingering tendency to divide the world into the dichotomy of the occident and the orient, the center and the margin, the First World and the Third. As a matter of fact, we can relate the polemics around Naipaul’s writing to the debate between Aijaa Ahmad and Fredric Jameson. Jameson in his “Third World Literature in an era of Multinational Capitalism” claims: “What all third-world cultural productions have in common, and what distinguishes them radically from analogous cultural forms in the first world [is that] as third-world texts are necessarily [...] allegorical, and in a very specific way: they are to be read as what I will call national allegories, even when, or I should say particularly when, their forms develop out of predominantly western machineries of representation, such as the novel” (Jameson 1986: 67). He goes on to say: “Third world texts, even those which are seemingly private and invested with a properly libidinal dynamic, necessarily project a political dimension in the form of national allegory: the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society” (ibid: 67). Ahmad disputes Jameson’s tendency to judge literature against an over-determined binary world-view. He argues that “the ideolog-

3 | An allegory is “a Symbolic narrative” in which the major features of the movement of the narrative are all held to refer symbolically to some action or situation. Allegory has long been a prominent feature of literary and mythic writing throughout the world, but it becomes particularly significant for post-colonial writers for the way in which it disrupts notions of orthodox history, classical realism and imperial representation in general. Allegory has assumed an important function in imperial discourse, in which paintings and statues have often been created as allegories of imperial power. Consequently, one form of post-colonial response to this has been to appropriate allegory and use it to respond to the allegorical representation of imperial dominance. (Ashcroft at el. 1998: 9)
ical conditions of a text’s production are never singular but always several [...] there are more and more texts which cannot easily be placed within this or that world” (Ahmad 1992: 122), for this reason, Jameson’s ambition to construct a “cognitive aesthetics” for Third World literature can only be an impossible mission (ibid: 123). While stereotyping Third World literature, Jameson is actually attempting to suppress the prevailing existence of differences, and maintains a binary division comprised of the First and Third Worlds. There exists, therefore, a totalizing and universalizing tendency in Jameson’s argument. Stephen Slemon suggests that what is really wrong with Jameson’s argument is that he takes a Eurocentric literary notion of allegory and applies it to colonized societies. Since allegory has always been a dominant mode of colonial representation, as Slemon argues, we can see allegory as “a function of the conditions of post-coloniality” (qtd. in Ashcroft et al. 1998: 9), which may function as forms of counter-discourse. A deep analysis of the argument between them lies beyond the scope of this book, yet the idea that informs our discussion is that we should not read Naipaul’s works simply as a betrayal of the Third World nationalism and decolonization movement, nor should we think that since he comes out of the Third World, his depiction of those places must necessarily be true to fact. Following Ahmad’s argument that we cannot homogenize Third World literature as “national allegories”, we should not homogenize postcolonial literature and condemn Naipaul’s work only because he presents a picture different from that of nationalist writers. Neither the Euro-centric nor the nation-centric point of view is appropriate to the reading of Naipaul’s work.

Naipaul is becoming a hot topic in China as well, especially upon winning the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2001. By the end of 2013, 14 of his novels (The Mystic Masseur, The Suffrage of Elvira, Miguel Street, A House for Mr. Biswas, Mr. Stone and the Knights Companion, A Bend in the River, Magic Seeds, The Mystic Masseur, A Flag on the Island, In a Free State, Guerrillas, The Enigma of Arrival, Half a Life, and Magic Seeds), his Indian trilogy (An Area of Darkness, India: A Wounded Civilization and India: A Million Mutinies Now), and a col-
lection of letters between Naipaul and his father during his days at Oxford (*The Letters Between Father and Son*) have been translated into Chinese and published. Chinese scholars are showing increasing interest in Naipaul’s work. In mainland China, dozens of doctoral dissertations have been devoted to the study of Naipaul, focusing respectively on the postcolonial, political, cultural, and spatial dimension of his writing. More than 100 academic literary reviews have been written about his work. Among Chinese critics, the division between those in favor or against Naipaul’s writing is not as obvious as in international circles, but there also exist two voices: Naipaul as a truthful spokesman of the postcolonial predicament, and Naipaul as a racist and traitor to the postcolonial nationalist and decolonization movement.

Setting aside the more complicated motivations behind the disputes surrounding Naipaul, which, I am sure, are plentiful, diverse and may lead to quite a different kind of study, the key element, in my view, that initiates such debates is the issue of Naipaul’s complex identity. In defense of the accusation that Naipaul has been Anglicized, especially after publishing *The Enigma of Arrival*, Brent Staples writes:

> Few writers of V.S. Naipaul’s stature have been so consistently and aggressively misread on account of ethnic and racial literary politics. Much of the criticism stems not from what Mr. Naipaul writes but from expectations about what he ought (emphasis original) to write, given that he is a brown man (of Indian descent) born into the brown and black society that is Trinidad. Alas, after a 40-year-voyage as a writer, Mr. Naipaul has arrived at a time when his work is too often viewed through the filter of race. This would seem an impoverished way of seeing in any case. In V.S. Naipaul’s case, a strictly racial reading amounts to no reading at all. (Staples 1994: 1)

I think the reason Naipaul’s works tend to be read through the “filter of race” is due to a misreading of his complex identity. Unfortunately, the problem of Naipaul’s identity/ties has not been studied in any depth. A comprehensive study of Naipaul’s identity based on a close reading of his works is therefore necessary to better under-
stand both his writing and him as a person. At the same time, as a Brahmin-cum-Englishman in Trinidad, a European in India, an Indian in London, Naipaul is a typical legacy of colonialism, a product of multiculturalism, a postcolonial subject and a blend of Eastern and Western philosophy. His view of the world and experiences in life have shaped the vision of his work, and a study of his identity with regard to his own writing would probably shed new light to our understanding of the question of identity, especially that of the postcolonial subject.

**Problematizing Identity**

Identity is important because it gives us a place in the world. It gives us an idea of who we are, and functions as a link between us and the world. Identity marks our way in the world, and provides a way of understanding the interplay between our subjective experience of the world and the cultural and historical construction of our subjectivity. What is identity then? According to *The New Key Words: A Revised Vocabulary of Culture & Society*, identity has “to do with the imagined sameness of a person or of a social group at all times and in all circumstances; about a person or a group being, and being able to continue to be itself and not someone or something else” (Bennett et al. 2005: 172). In other words, our identity marks the ways in which we are the same as those who share that designation, and the ways in which we are different from those who do not because it is usually defined by what it is not, and frequently constructed in terms of oppositions such as woman/man, black/white, culture/nature, self/other etc. (Woodward 1997: 2). As Hall puts it, “Identity is a structured representation which only achieves its positive through the narrow eye of the negative. It has to go through the eye of the needle of the other before it can construct itself” (Hall 1990: 21). Therefore, identity is “an unstable effect of relations which define identities by marking differences” (Hall 1996: 89). In recent years, there has been a “veritable discursive explosion” (ibid: 1) around the
concept of identity. As such, it has become a word “in common currency” (Woodward 1997: 1). The concept of identity is now subject to a searching critique because most contemporary discourses are critical of an “integral, originary and unified identity” (Hall 1996: 1).

The OED says that the 17th century was the first time that the concept of identity was used with respect to the individual. What Stuart Hall calls the “Enlightenment subject” based on “the conception of the human person as a fully centered, unified individual, endowed with the capacities of reason, consciousness and action” came into existence at this time. During this period, the essential center of the self was a person’s identity (Hall 1992: 275). What Hall describes is individual identity, although there exists another dimension, a collective identity that concerns particular ways of imagining and instituting social groups and group belonging. With collective identity, as well as with individual identity, the principles of unity and continuity are at the fore. “The logic of identity has worked in favor of integrity and coherence with reference to what came to be figured as the collective self” (Bennett et al. 2005: 173). When the community is conceived of as a unitary and homogeneous entity with a shared substance, the internal diversity and the complexity of the group is disclaimed. Meanwhile, to solidify the unity of the group, it resorts to its heritage, memories, value systems and particular uniqueness and thus, as a consequence, historical change and discontinuity is denied. The “imagined community” (Benedict Anderson 1983) of the nation state is the most typical of this kind of collective identity. In the framework of this “imagined community”, the question of identity has been restricted to the dimension of belonging. “Belonging to such a community—a culture in common—has been regarded as the fundamental condition for self-expression and self-fulfillment” (Bennett et al. 2005: 173). Taking advantage of a person’s need for a sense of belonging and self-fulfillment, politicians have tried to essentialize this kind of collective national or ethnic identity, fascism being the most tragic example in human history. This idea of collective identity banishes or erases differences, and it motivates people towards “processes of interconnection in which individuality
is renounced or dissolved into the larger whole represented by a nation, a people or ethnic group” (Woodward 1997: 304).

The question of identity—both individual and collective—has become increasingly salient as a consequence of migration, displacement and the social and cultural transformations associated with globalization. There thus emerges a proliferation of pertinent theories, all attempting to decipher this reality. According to Hall, there are three possible consequences to globalization with regard to identity. First, globalization contests the settled contours of national identity and exposes it to the pressures of difference, “otherness”, and cultural diversity. Second, globalization strengthens local identities, which are seen in the defensive reaction of those members of dominant ethnic groups who feel threatened by the presence of other cultures. And thirdly, it may also lead to the production of new identities. Globalization, therefore, contests and dislocates centered and “closed” identities. Its impact on identity is pluralizing, producing a variety of possibilities and new positions of identification, and making identities more positional, political, plural, and diverse (Hall 1992: 304-309).

In face of the decolonization movement and globalization, Hall observes that a new kind of postmodern subject and identity is now emerging. Hall argues that “the subject assumes different identities at different times, identities which are not unified around a coherent ‘self.’ Within us are contradictory identities, pulling in different directions, so that our identifications are continuously being shifted about” (ibid: 277). Besides the postmodern subject, according to Hall, there exist two other concepts of identity: the Enlightenment subject and the sociological subject. The Enlightenment subject is based on the concept that people are fully centered, unified individuals, endowed with the capacities of reason, consciousness and action. This subject remains essentially the same throughout an individual’s experience. The sociological subject has been formed in relation to “significant others”, those who mediate the values, meanings, and symbols—the culture—of the worlds he inhabits. The notion of sociological subject does not believe in an autonomous and
self-sufficient subjectivity. Identity, in the sociological conception, sutures the subject into a structure, bridging the gap between the personal and public worlds (ibid: 275-277).

Scott Lash and Jonathan Friedman periodize identity into pre-modern identity, modern identity and post-modern identity. Pre-modern identity can be understood as externally determined, and is defined by kinship-ordered cosmologies. And in the archaic civilizations of world religions, the nominating powers emerge as a transcendental godhead, a pantheon or a hierarchy of deities. In modern times, with the demise of God, social space opens up the way for an autonomous definition of identity. Modernist identity recognizes two temporal elements: first, responsibility in modern times means responsibility for the consequences of one’s actions, a more and more difficult task in an increasingly complex society; second, identity has to do with the temporality of our existence. Modernist identity “privileges the cognitive and moral over the aesthetic and the libidinal, the ego over the id, the visual over touch, and discursive over figural communication. It gives primacy to culture over nature, to the individual over the community” (Lash and Friedman 1992: 5). The individual is “closed” instead of open, obsessed with self-mastery and self-domination. Two stances on post-modern identity are proposed by Lash and Friedman. The pessimistic outlook holds that postmodern landscapes function as mechanisms of social control and effectively constitute identities to function in the reproduction of transnational postindustrial capital. These landscapes take on the status of signifiers, of sign-values functioning in the reproduction of capital. “Responsibility for social control—and its definition and normalization of identities—has passed on such an account from the modern norms of Foucault’s social to the postmodern simulacra in Baudrillard’s astral empire of signs” (ibid: 7). The optimistic rendering of post-modern identity is aware of the identity choice since identity formation is freed from the sphere of production of consumption and leisure in the transition to postmodernism. Individuals can therefore consciously experiment with identity (Lash and Friedman 1992: 8). Postcolonial critics like Hall and Bhabha seem to view postmodern identity from an optimistic
perspective, and stress its capacity to produce new identities. With Hall, globalization is more likely to produce new “global” and new “local” identifications. Yet Hall also points out that the proliferation of identity choices is more extensive at the “centre” of the global system than at its peripheries (Hall 1992: 304-305).

Discourses on identity can be roughly categorized as essentialist and anti-essentialist. The debate between the social constructionists and the essentialists goes back to the argument between the Sophists and Plato. Following Plato’s argument, essentialist, reductionist rationality reigned until recently, when the postmodern turn reintroduced a different kind of logic based on the acknowledgement that things are local, inherently temporary, mutable, multiple, fragmented, and indeterminate. According to the essentialist view, identity is ascribed, natural, and fixed. Essentialists believe that one’s identity is the expression of some inner essence or property. The essentialist view is based on a belief that there is a sense of selfhood through which we can measure ourselves against the hectic upsets, discontinuities, and ruptures of history. Related to this understanding, lies the comforting idea that “around us history is constantly breaking in unpredictable ways but we, somehow, go on being the same” (Hall 1997: 42-43). Anti-essentialist discourse, however, emphasizes the socially constructed status of all identities. For the anti-essentialists, identities are not self-sufficient but socially and historically constructed. Therefore, identities are subject to continuous change and reconfiguration, and they are “in fact instituted through the play of differences, constituted in and through their multiple relations to other identities” (Bennett et al. 2005: 173). The essentialist view is now being replaced by the anti-essentialist premise that identity is constructed and historical.

In addition, some scholars also think that instead of preserving the binary division between the essentialist and the anti-essentialist, we should uphold a dialectic viewpoint toward identity. With these scholars, identity is a matter of “being as well as of becoming” (Hall 1990: 223). Taking Spivak as an example, she employs the term “strategic essentialism”, suggesting a “strategic use of positivist es-
sentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest” (Landry and Maclean 1996: 214). Similarly, to mediate the paradox of the relationship between essentialism and anti-essentialism, Satya P. Mohanty posits the “post-positivist realist” approach to identity, claiming that identities can be both real and constructed, both politically and epistemologically significant on the one hand, and variable, nonessential, and radically historical, on the other (qtd. in Moya and Hames-García 2000: 29-43).

Indeed, the question of identity has been at the fore of British cultural studies since the 1960’s. The continuing migrations of labor since the post-war period also served to accelerate the decline of the concept of Englishness. Following the two world wars, more and more ex-colonials immigrated to England, making the concept of Englishness no longer unquestionably clear and transparent. For centuries, white identities in Britain have been rooted in a sense of superiority derived from the power exercised over “racialised others” (Hall 2000). Yet Britain no longer has an empire and has now become, in a very particular sense of the term, a post-colonial nation. Decolonization in the former colonies brought many colonials back to England: “When finally Britain conceived itself it had to de-colonize, it had to get rid of them, we [people] from ex-colonies all came back home” (Hall 1997: 24). This home is not just England. Immigrants tend to seek the very center of England—London—as the home they are after. V.S. Naipaul’s very presence in London is a reflection of this phenomenon.

Paul Gilroy outlines three important themes that underpin the theoretical development in British cultural studies’ engagement with identity. The first is identity as subjectivity. Religious and spiritual obligations once defined subjectivity. Yet, there has been a loss of internal moral and spiritual certainty governing social interaction with the move from a religious to secular society. Digital technologies have now produced a “culture of simulation”, which has brought about fundamental shifts in our experience of what constitutes individual identity. Then there is the idea of “sameness”. Recognition of one’s similarity to and difference from others drives us to think
about collective or communal identity instead of the formation of the individual subject’s identity. If the first approach is subject-centered, the second concerns the inter-subjective dynamic. Differences appear within the self because it is no longer a unitary entity but changes constantly in its interactions with others. The third theme is “solidarity”, where connectedness and difference form the foundation for social actions to be produced (Woodward 1997: 313-318). Politically enabling, the focus of the third theme is on the “social structures which both limit and produce specific identities within specific historic conjunctures” (Turner 2003: 216).

Originally from Jamaica, Stuart Hall first went to England in the 1950s. His experience is similar to that of Naipaul, and his cultural theory on identity is especially informative to our understanding of Naipaul’s identity. When Hall first went to London, he thought he was going home, only to find that he was but an immigrant—the same feeling experienced by Naipaul and his protagonist in The Mimic Men and The Enigma of Arrival. While in Jamaica, Hall said he had never heard the word “black” because everybody was more or less black. It was only in the wake of the Civil Rights movement, the wake of de-colonization and the nationalistic struggles of the 1970s, that he began to hear the word “black” used (Hall 1997: 54-55). Inspired by his own experiences, Hall broaches that identity is not something pre-ascribed, waiting for us to discover, rather, it is identification we have to learn to see when we measure ourselves against others (Hall 1996: 4). Like Hall, Naipaul’s awareness of identity undergoes a similar journey. He went to study at Oxford in 1950, the period right after World War II, and observed “the beginning of a great movement of peoples after the war, a great shaking up of the world, a great shaking up of old cultures and ideas” (EA 1988: 159). Those people were driven by a “restlessness and the need for a new idea of self” (ibid: 159).

Hall argues that on account of the five ruptures in the discourse of modern knowledge, the concept and nature of identity is shifted from the Enlightenment concept of identity to a modern “de-centered” and “dislocated” identity (Hall 1992: 274-275). The five ruptures are as follows.
First of all, Marxism denies the universal essence of man, and contends that man cannot act without the historical conditions created by others. He is able to use only the resources provided to him by previous generations. Marx denies that there is a “single” and “real” subject because, for him, man exists in social relations, defined as modes of production, the exploitation of labor power, and the circuit of capital (ibid: 286). Marxist theory holds that the role of the material, and the relations of production and of collective action, especially class solidarity, are very important in forming social identities. Later developments within Marxism, represented for example by Althusser’s work, have given more emphasis to symbolic systems rather than material factors. For Althusser, the symbolic system, or ideology, to put it differently, interpellates the individual into the subject position unconsciously.

The second rupture in the development of modern discourse, according to Hall, happens in the field of psychoanalysis concerning the function of the unconscious. With Freud, identity is formed through the unconscious when a child looks at the “other”. The child enters the system of symbolic representation, such as language, culture and sexual difference at a given moment. Based on this concept, Lacan posits that entering of symbolic representation is the beginning of a split subject in that by entering into the symbolic system, the child encounters contradictory and unresolved feelings, such as the splitting of love and hate for the father. These contradictory feelings will remain with a person for life and leave him divided. As such, identity is not something born with us, but an ongoing process developed unconsciously. It “arises not so much from the fullness of identity which is already inside us as individuals, but from a lack of wholeness which is ‘filled’ from outside us, by the ways we imagine ourselves to be by others” (ibid: 287).

Thirdly, Ferdinand de Saussure’s structuralist thinking claims that we are not absolute “authors” of what we say because language pre-dates us. We can only use language to produce meanings by positioning ourselves within the rules of language and the systems of meaning of our culture. By using language, we enter a symbolic
system. The meanings of words are not fixed in a one-to-one relation to objects or events in the world outside language, but are instead decided by the differences and connections between signs. Hall’s reading of Saussure seeks to help us notice the analogy between language and identity. According to Hall, “I know who ‘I’ am in relation to ‘the other’ (e.g. my mother) whom I cannot be” (ibid: 288). Influenced by Saussure and the “linguistic turn”, many modern philosophers believe “despite his/her best efforts the individual speaker can never finally fix meaning—including the meaning of his or her identity” (ibid: 288).

Michel Foucault’s concept of “disciplinary power” articulates the formation of the subject by showing that a person, along with his moral and physical health, his sexual practices, and family life, is placed under strict discipline and control by the governing power. Its basic objective is to produce “a human being who can be treated as a docile body” (ibid: 289). Where there is power there is resistance. And there is likewise resistance on the part of the disciplined. The more collective and organized the institutions of the “late-modern”, the greater the isolation and individuation of the subject. This is the fourth rupture.

The fifth rupture concerns feminism, which, along with other social movements, paves the ways for identity politics. In the language of feminism, gender identity is not given but constructed through ambivalence. Feminism challenges the notion that men and women were part of the same identity—“mankind”—replacing it with the question of sexual difference (ibid: 290).

These ruptures reflect the increasing complexity of the modern world. Through them, we become aware that the subject in itself is no longer autonomous and self-sufficient. In Who Needs Identity, Hall further explores this idea and posits that “it is only through the relation to the Other, the relation to what is not, to precisely what it lacks, to what has been called its constitutive outside that the ‘positive’ meaning of any term—and thus its ‘identity’—can be constructed” (Hall 1996: 4-5). Hall also claims that cultural identity is both a matter of “being” and “becoming” (Hall 1990: 223) and it belongs to the
future as well as to the past because it has histories and is subject to constant transformation.

To understand cultural identity, Hall suggests we should approach it from two perspectives. First, we can understand it through our collective and shared cultural background, derived from a shared history and ancestry that provide us with “stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning” (Hall 1990: 223). The other way of defining cultural identity is to realize that apart from a common heritage, there exist significant differences. These constitute what we are and what we have become. Cultural identity in this second sense is a matter of both “becoming” and “being”, for it “belongs to the future as much as to the past” (ibid: 224).

According to Hall, it is only through the second perspective that we can understand the “traumatic character of the colonial experience” (ibid: 224). The dominant power of the imperial regimes positions the colonial to see himself as an “other”. This “otherness” is inscribed in the colonial by the colonial discourse. According to Bhabha, the identification of the colonial is neither that of the colonist “self” nor the colonized “other”, but “the disturbing distance in-between that constitutes the figure of colonial otherness (Bhabha 1994: 45). It is in this “third space” of in-between that the colonial constructs his identity. For colonials, the place of identification is a “space of splitting” (ibid: 45). They become neither the colonialist “self” nor the colonized “other”, which seems an impossible object, yet “It is in relation to this impossible object that the liminal problem of colonial identity and its vicissitudes emerges” (ibid: 45). Meanwhile, “the question of identification is never the affirmation of a pre-given identity, never a self-fulfilling prophecy—it is always the production of an image of identity and the transformation of the subject in assuming that image” (ibid: 45). Identification, as is suggested here, involves transformation of the subject.

Thus the issue of identity is naturally more complicated for the colonial. The moment he desires the identity of the colonizer, the splitting begins because while he transforms himself in order to claim the image of identity he produces for himself, the displace-
ment of the self happens simultaneously. The traveling of this self between the original place and the place it longs to occupy will produce what Bhabha calls a “hybrid” identity. The difference between Bhabha’s hybrid identity and Fanon’s colonials with black skin and white masks is that the hybrid identity is a breaking of the binary division of people into white and black. It is more optimistic, and can become a subversive political strategy for the colonial. The trajectory of this identification begins with the negation of the original identity, and undergoes a stage of mimicry before it acquires a hybrid identity. In mimicry, if the untranslatable chunk were to remain, it in turn would lead to the hybrid form of identity. The very notion of hybridity breeds a vernacular cosmopolitanism, for as Hall argues, globalization, instead of obliterating localism, more than ever encourages the flourishing of difference.

The reader should beware that important as the theory of identity is to the study of Naipaul’s novels, it will not be used in this book as a theoretically privileged approach, nor a better alternative, but instead as a means of exploring Naipaul’s identification more comprehensively. It is hoped that this exploration, tentative rather than dogmatic, will help reveal the route of postcolonial subjects’ identification.

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Literature has always been concerned with questions about identity, and literary works sketch answers, implicitly or explicitly, to these questions. According to Jonathan Culler, the theoretical treatment of identity may seem reductive in comparison with the subtle explorations done in novels, which are able to finesse the problem of general claims by presenting singular cases while relying on a generalizing force that is left implicit (Culler 1997: 108). Naipaul’s fictions can therefore make a very concrete example for the construction of identity of the postcolonial subjects, just as The Empire Writes Back demonstrates:
Naipaul’s position is a deeply ambiguous one in that his writing does not always carry the conviction of [a coherent] perception. The result is a curious ambivalence when the novel considers the authenticity of the margins. Yet such an ambivalence is by no means disabling, for it provides the tension out of which emerges a rich and incisive reconstruction of post-colonial experience. (Ashcroft et al. 1997: 91)

Salient in this “rich and incisive reconstruction of post-colonial experience” is Naipaul and his characters’ efforts at identity construction. The ambivalent position from which Naipaul projects his writing is an important element for the reading of Naipaul’s work because of the identity perplexity this position causes. This study of Naipaul’s writing is therefore limited to how Naipaul and his characters find their way in the world. It is my contention that Naipaul’s identification trajectory runs parallel to his writing career because writing is the only means Naipaul has used to learn about the world and himself. Through the study of identification in Naipaul’s characters, it may be possible to see how Naipaul, a typical postcolonial subject, orients himself in a rapidly changing world. Another reason to approach Naipaul from the perspective of identity is that this problem looms large in current identity politics. In addition, as the accelerated force of migration and globalization make the sense of rootlessness and perplexity of identity a universal issue, the study of identity of a writer with a typical colonial history background, displaced from his ethnic culture and home country under the guide of globalization, will not only be meaningful and valuable to a better understanding of the writer and his work, but may offer a new exploratory space for cultural identity.

This book attempts to explore Naipaul’s major novels along this line of reasoning, because for Naipaul, as well as for his protagonists, identity is a problem they must face and make choices about. My study will be based on a close reading of Naipaul’s major fictions from his early, middle, and late periods: *A House for Mr. Biswas*, *The Mimic Men*, *The Enigma of Arrival* and *A Way in the World*. I choose these four novels because I observe in them the common
manifestations of how a postcolonial subject constructs his identity. Written early in Naipaul’s career, *A House for Mr. Biswas* is the author’s first work dealing explicitly with a colonial man’s search for independent identity in a colonial society. The house on Sik-kim Street that Mr. Biswas finally purchased embodies a paradox by which “achievement and failure are aspects of a single experience typical of a world which is shot through with contradictions” (White 1975: 98). The evolution of Naipaul’s oeuvre shows the movement outward from the West Indian settings of his early work in the metropolis, to his ancestral India, and finally to the rest of the postcolonial world. After *A House for Mr. Biswas*, Naipaul wrote two travelogues, *The Middle Passage* and *An Area of Darkness*, the first about the bleak reality of West Indian society, and the second about India. While traveling in India, Naipaul wrote of an English character in an English setting, *Mr. Stone and the Knights Companion*. The novel is about the English man’s futile attempt to change the pattern of events, and assert the individual’s importance. Disappointment with both colonial society and the metropolis finds its expression in *The Mimic Men*, in which the protagonist travels between his colonial island and London to assert an independent identity. An important factor of mimicry in the identification of the colonial is elaborated in the novel. In 1987, after much traveling and writing, Naipaul published his autobiographical work, *The Enigma of Arrival*, in which he reflects on his own life in England, and the journey many years prior that took him to London from Trinidad. Intended as a summary of Naipaul’s life and writing, the book offers much to help us understand how Naipaul constructs his identity as a postcolonial subject, thus necessitating a detailed study. In *A Way in the World*, Naipaul’s vision becomes even broader. Ruminating on how colonial history is written, and on how historical figures assert their independent identities, Naipaul finally achieves a diasporic vision of identity against a global background. The works selected for discussion are those that best exemplify the process of a postcolonial subject’s journey of identification. In this way, I hope to map Naipaul’s path in the world—how he negotiates and translates his
political and cultural identities through a journey that runs parallel to his literary career.

It is true that in addition to novels, Naipaul has also produced a large number of very valuable travel writings and reportages. I choose to base my study mainly on his novels motivated by Naipaul’s own conception of fiction: “An autobiography can distort; facts can be realigned. But fiction never lies: it reveals the writer totally” (REP 1981: 6). During an interview, Naipaul once said that he regarded novel writing as engaging a truer part of himself (Wheeler 1977: 537). Also, as Naipaul says in Among the Believers, “people can hide behind direct statements; fiction, by its seeming indirections, can make hidden impulses clear” (AB 1985: 47). Recalling the years when he worked on A House for Mr. Biswas, he ruminates on the process of writing and believes the “novel called up its own truth” (HB 1983: 22). For him, the “wonder” of fiction lies in “the unsuspected truths turned up by the imagination” (ibid: 22).

I chose to approach Naipaul’s identity in a chronological reading of his novels instead of by categorizing elements affecting his identity’s formation, i.e., the act of writing, his understanding of history, the influence of Hinduism, etc., because, to use Hall’s words, “identities are (that) which discursive practices construct for us. […] They arise from the narrativization of the self” (Hall 1996: 4-6). A chronological reading facilitates a sharper view of “points of temporary attachment to the subject positions” (ibid: 5). In addition, this approach may help clarify the path Naipaul has lived. The novels I chose are intended to represent the key moments that led to Naipaul’s identification. The spectrum of these moments reflected in fiction should provide a more vivid image of Naipaul along the way, as well as a better grasp of how his identification changed and developed during different periods of his life. At the same time, based on a general understanding of identity formation as a process, and taking into account the fact that Naipaul is a living writer, the chronology of his identification can only be left open to interpretation.

I agree with Dagmar Barnouw’s claims that critical readings of Naipaul’s work have generally been divided into two groups: a
strongly focused postcolonial critique of his indebtedness to Western cultural values that does not address textual complexity, and literary studies of his fictional and non-fictional texts that do not address representational complexity, i.e. the texts’ connectedness to social and political realities (Barnouw 2003: 1). By locating the present study in a socio-cultural context, this book mainly adopts an eclectic approach to V. S. Naipaul based on a close reading of his novels in combination with his travel writings when necessary.

This book consists of four chapters as well as an introduction and a conclusion.

Chapter one applies Lacan’s theory to the study of A House for Mr. Biswas. The premise of the novel is that the main character, Mr. Biswas is doubly marginalized in colonial society because he was born into a symbolic system that is alien to his cultural heritage. Independent identity, as such, can only be a fantasy for him. The jerry-built house he finally acquires is an all-encompassing symbol of his struggle, as well as of the compromise he makes with his social and historical contexts. It is a departure from the postcolonial subject’s route of identification, rather than a symbol of the realization of an independent identity.

Chapter two discusses mimicry in The Mimic Men as a means to the colonial’s identification. Feeling shipwrecked in his colonial homeland, Singh goes in search of his identity in London as expected by colonial discourse. Mimicking the colonizers, however, does not prove fruitful in his quest for identity. In contrast to Bhabha, Naipaul is critical, satirizing colonial mimicry. He does not believe that it is the way out of the colonial’s identity crisis.

Modern theories of autobiography view it as a process through which the author attempts to construct one or several identities. Chapter three examines Naipaul’s heavily autobiographical work The Enigma of Arrival, and demonstrates how, through the process of writing
Naipaul, deconstructs the notion of Englishness, reconciles with his homeland, and establish for himself a positive hybrid identity.

Chapter four is a detailed examination of *A Way in the World*. In this book, Naipaul deconstructs the accepted history of the colonial, as written from a Euro-centric perspective, and rewrites it as a means to de-re-constructing the colonial’s identity. For Naipaul, then, history becomes a steppingstone beyond the land of one’s birth, beyond ethnicity and nationalities, in an attempt to reach for spiritual and intellectual development, and to start afresh by embracing a diasporic identification that privileges “route” over “root”.

The concluding remarks briefly summarize the route of the postcolonial subject’s identification and presents an analysis of the three factors affecting Naipaul’s identification: colonialism, his notion of history, and the course of his writing career. The final conclusion is that writing for Naipaul serves both as mimicry and revolution in the quest to assert his identity. This book also exemplifies how reading literature may provide a method to better understand world reality, whether directly or indirectly.