

The Prisoner of “Freedom”: Cultural Displacement of Santosh in Naipaul’s *In a Free State*

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In a Free State is a post-colonial novel written by Naipaul. “One out of Many” is one of the stories in this novel to explore the freedom of the culturally rootless. The protagonist, Santosh, lives under the collision between the Indian culture and American culture. In the “crevice” of two different cultures, he is deeply involved in the tumultuous and painful process of cultural displacement. His behaviors in cultural displacement can be divided into three stages. Firstly, he has experienced a “cultural shock” after his arrival in Washington, D.C. as a new comer. Secondly, after being fully exposed to the host culture and American style, he has experienced assimilation and absorption to be like an American. Finally when he escapes from his employer and chooses his own way of living, he finds that he is not free at all because he is confronted with an awkward cultural dilemma: he can neither return to his past life; nor can he aspire to a better future. The anxiety about the dislocation causes misery for his fate. As a result, he becomes a prisoner in an unfamiliar culture, and his “freedom” can only be a rootless “freedom”.

Keywords: Santosh, *In a Free State*, Naipaul, cultural displacement, freedom

Introduction

In a Free State (1971), a post-colonial novel written by V. S. Naipaul (1932-2018), contains five separate stories that demonstrate the inescapable sense of alienation and lack of belonging for immigrants far from home in a foreign culture. As one of the stories, “One out of Many” depicts experiences of Santosh, an Indian cook who follows his employer to the United States with the intention of making a difference there, only to discover great difficulties for a marginalized cultural group to seek their cultural identity and senses of belonging in a multicultural society.

Each of the stories in this novel explores the issue of freedom for the culturally rootless. Some scholars hold that this freedom seems to only be “political” because the stories are set in independent, post-colonial states such as India, Trinidad or a confederation of African nations. This superficial freedom is theoretical and hollow, and the people living in it remain the dolls of the colonial powers. Thieme argues that this freedom is a psychological state that leads to suffering and a sense of abandonment (Thieme, 1987, p. 151). Deepadharshini argues that Naipaul’s world is not entirely pessimistic and gloomy. He holds that Naipaul is concerned with “a particular third world reality—the homeless man in search of an identity..... His protagonists, like Bunyan’s pilgrims, are to be admired on the journey (Deepadharshini, 2019, p. 28). He Shanxiu and Li Zong mainly contends that

Naipaul as an immigrant writer has his claims of cultural identity and a dislocated existence by using the "third space" theory. They argue that Naipaul's dual cultural identity compels him to create a third space, "a space that is neither here nor there" (He, 2011, p. 135). Shi Haijun suggests that when the colonial culture breaks an old world, a new world is created which even Westerners find incomprehensible (Shi, 2014, p. 75). He holds that when people are in a mentality of "mobile freedom", everyone is uprooted, traumatized, and also inflicts trauma on others (Shi, 2014, p. 76).

In this novel, all these five stories have the same main thread, that is the exotic cultural atmosphere in different spaces. The second story, "One out of Many", reveals that when an immigrant leaves far from his homeland for a more culturally "superior" foreign land, he will experience "cultural displacement". This paper intends to prove that when such cultural displacement happens, Santosh's behaviors can be divided into three stages. Firstly, he has experienced a "cultural shock" after his arrival in Washington, D.C. as a new comer. Secondly, after being fully exposed to the host culture and an adaptation into American style, he has experienced assimilation and absorption to be like an American. Finally when he escapes from his employer and chooses his own way of living, he finds that he is not free at all because he is confronted with an awkward cultural dilemma: he can neither return to his past life; nor can he aspire to a better future. The anxiety about the dislocation of cultural dilemma causes misery for his fate, causing his body and mind to change constantly in the process of cultural displacement. As a result, he becomes a prisoner in an unfamiliar culture, and his "freedom" can only be a rootless "freedom".

I. Discomfort and Emptiness: Santosh as a New Comer

Cultural exchanges between countries around the world have become more frequent with the development of globalization in recent years, but in the postcolonial context, it leads to immigrants' deepened anxiety about national identity and hidden worries about cultural colonization. In the story of "One out of Many", Santosh, who travels from Mumbai to the United States, chooses to go against Indian tradition and marry a hubshi woman in exchange for an American green card and a so-called legally "free" identification in the end. In order to survive in a heterogeneous culture, immigrants from the Second and Third World constantly reconstruct their identities to seek physical and mental stability. Homi Bhabha contends that the most fascinating aspect of culture is that it is often presented in the form of dislocation (Bhabha, 1994, p. 102). In the postcolonial context, cultural displacement refers to the transfer or dislocation when they are in a heterogeneous culture and gradually accept the host culture. It also implies the displacement of the native culture as a result of its communication with another culture.

Post-colonialism emphasizes the heterogeneity of cultures, because the colonial power has meant far more than just its control for land or sovereignty. Instead, it means the penetration of ideology and culture. Culture is not a seamless wholeness, but contains a plethora of different and discordant elements. In the postcolonial context, cultural displacement frequently occurs. Individuals, especially immigrants, have extremely strong wills about finding a sense of cultural belonging. Santosh is then deeply "displaced" by American culture. He travels to Washington, D.C., with his employer, and he is exposed to a new culture for the first time. He has already experienced cultural discomfort on the plane:

When we settled down I looked around for people like myself, but I could see no one among the Indians or the foreigners who looked like a domestic. Worse, they were all dressed as though they were going to a wedding and, brother, I soon saw it wasn't they who were conspicuous (Naipaul, 1971, p. 17).

Although they are on an Indian plane, everything with an American style on the plane looks disharmonious and has nothing to do with India, which only causes him a strong sense of psychological and even physical discomfort and dizziness. He "was vomiting all over my bundles, and I didn't care what the girl said or did" (Naipaul, 1971, p. 18). After arriving in the United States, Santosh cannot find any place that can accommodate himself, and he is even being kicked out of cafes because he is barefoot, sitting on the ground, bawling, because he does not know how to use the hotel elevator, so he sleeps all night in the hallway without a room card. After that, also to his surprise, he should spend nearly a month of his salary in one day. For him, everything in America leaves him in depression and emptiness. "Prisoner" is the very word he repeatedly uses to describe himself during this period.

II. Absorption and Assimilation: Be an American

After a period of "cultural shock", Santosh enters the second stage: the absorption and assimilation by American culture. Three factors prompt him to begin accepting and learning about his host culture: television, the supermarket cashier, and the Hubshi maid, which refers to African or Abyssinian enslaved person. Television is the window through which he acquires new information and reconstructs his perception for the United States as well as his personal world, while the cashier and the maid sexually evoke his identification with exotic women and cultures. Before he goes to America, he never looks himself in mirror; neither does he care about his outlook. However, after seeing the stylishly dressed Americans on TV, after a conversation with the cashier and having sex with that Hubshi maid, he becomes very concerned about his appearance. "I was found attractive: I wanted to know why. I began to go to the bathroom of the apartment simply to study my face in the mirror" (Naipaul, 1971, p. 25). This marks that he begins to be actively thrown into American culture. Santosh's first step of adaptation into the mainstream culture is to buy himself a green suit. But comically, the suit is too big for him. Yet Santosh insists on buying him anyway, eager to prove himself that he can also be like an American. He never wears that unsuited suit outside, only to enjoy it alone at home. According to Homi Bhabha's post-colonial theory, his behavior of "mimicry" proves his eagerness to integrate into a foreign culture though it is strange and inappropriate for him.

During this period, Santosh also gradually realizes that the old self is a shadow of others, a being without a self. In the text he repeatedly refers to his existence as part of the others', especially his employer's: "I experienced the world through him, that I was content to be a small part of his presence" (Naipaul, 1971, p. 27). But when he gets a taste of American culture, he begins to aspire to be a "free" man. His self-awareness gradually awakens and he begins to try to construct his new identity by showing imitation and positive attitudes towards the White culture: "I was ceasing to see myself as part of my employer's presence, and beginning at the same time to see him as an outsider might see him" (Naipaul, 1971, p. 27). Moreover, at this stage he even develops an uncontrollable sense of cultural superiority over his fellow Indians. Although he is always reminiscing about the good times he once had in India, such as some morning walks and evening gossips, he is aware that these memories will only remain in his memory and that he now is no longer the kind of people like his former companions.

III. Ambiguous identity: Facing a Cultural Dilemma

Culture is not a single and independent element. Santosh lives under the collision of both Indian culture and American culture, becomes a marginalized minority in American society. He runs away to live his own life rather than to be part of others. When he finds his job at an Indian restaurant, he has gone into the third phase of cultural displacement: facing a cultural dilemma. After Santosh escapes from his employer, he does not live a wonderful "free" life he once thought. On the one hand, he has the fear that his employers would find him and arrest him back; on the other hand, without a green card, he lives in the United States illegally. Between the two contexts of Indian tradition and American culture, Santosh is in a state of "displacement" with confusion and struggle in constructing his cultural identity. In this multicultural context, his cultural identity is ambiguous, which leads to his inability to acquire a sense of cultural belonging. He thinks that "It was worse than being in the apartment, because now the responsibility was mine and mine alone" (Naipaul, 1971, p. 35).

At this stage he is exhausted, physically and mentally, and he has lost his handsome looks. His working life in the restaurant seems to be a punishment for his eagerness to squeeze into a heterogeneous culture where he doesn't fit in. When the owner of the restaurant takes him to watch movies, he surprisingly begins to call him as "sahih", a term to show one's subordination in power relationship, which proves that Santosh has returned to his former state, a prisoner of "freedom". As he has noted later, "I was good-looking; I had lost my looks. I was a free man; I had lost my freedom" (Naipaul, 1971, p. 36). In the end, he is not caught back by his employer, but instead receives the green suit package posted from his employer, which becomes the last straw to crush him down. He begins to miss his old days in India again, but he knows fully well that it is impossible to return to Indian culture again. He has to leave his wife and children in India and continue to live in America. At this point, Santosh is caught "in-betweenness" in a cultural dilemma. As a member of a cultural minority in the United States, Santosh is deeply trapped in a turbulent and painful process of cultural displacement and transformation in rebuilding a sense of cultural belonging.

At the end of the story, Santosh goes against Indian tradition and marries a Hubshi maid in order to get a green card. At the same time, he closes his heart and isolates himself from the outside world: "But my strength in this house is that I am a stranger. I have closed my mind and heart to the English language, to newspapers and radio and television, to the pictures of hubshi runners and boxers and musicians on the wall" (Naipaul, 1971, p. 43). In the mixture of Indian and American cultures, despite Santosh's great efforts to rebuild his cultural identity and spiritual home, a complete integration into this heterogeneous culture for him is impossible. After experiencing cultural displacement, he is unable to go back to the past; neither can he accept the reality, thus becoming a "hanging man" without any attachment. The restaurant owner once tells him that if he marries this hubshi maid, he will get a green card and become a free man in the United States, but Santosh himself knows very well that he would never become a free man.

Cultural displacement is a focus of postcolonial literature and is where the identity crisis in postcolonialism lies. Stuart Hall points out that both colonial and colonized cultures merge and collide with each other (Hall, 1997, p. 209). Although Santosh has to live in America, he still cannot completely abandon the traditional Indian culture which is in his blood. After fleeing his employer to work in an Indian restaurant, he again finds himself unable to integrate into American culture and becomes a pure American. Thus, he faces an awkward cultural

dilemma. His anxiety about the dislocation of his identity is also felt more deeply at this time. There are constant changes in his mind and body after he arrives in America and cultural displacement is the main reason; his inner ambivalence and conflicts lead to his suffering and tragic end. Therefore, his “freedom” is rootless.

Conclusion

Santosh represents the colonized peoples of the past and the minority immigrants at the present have no choice but to live in an “intercultural” world, creating and negotiating their own cultural identities among contradictory and conflicting traditions. For immigrants, diasporas, or expatriates, getting rid of a sense of “unhomeliness” is too difficult. Nowadays, the process of globalization is accelerating and the world is integrated. Cultural displacement has become one of the concern to all countries and peoples. The cultural exchange activities among countries in the context of globalization are becoming more and more frequent. However, the exchange and collision of different cultures are bound to bring about problems. In the process of the reconstruction about the cultural identity, people of the Second and Third World are always in a dilemma. On the one hand, they want to absorb and integrate the culture of the host country; on the other hand, their own cultural identity is incompatible with dominant values of heterogeneous culture. Just like Santosh, many immigrants from the Second and Third world also face the dilemma in the midst of a heterogeneous culture. Therefore, in the context of multiculturalism, many immigrants’ identity becomes confused and bewildered, and naturally they cannot find their own cultural affiliation, resulting in a strong sense of “Unhomeliness”. People like Santosh, under the impact of heterogeneous culture, have a strong sense of identity crisis and cultural alienation. They are unable to establish their own cultural identity and belonging so as to gradually become rootless people wandering in foreign countries under the influence of cultural displacement.

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