



QUEST FOR LITERARY IDENTITY IN *THE ENIGMA OF ARRIVAL*

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ABSTRACT: *The Enigma of Arrival* is the life-story of an Indo-Trinidadian writer during his ten-year stay in a country estate in Wiltshire. The solitude of the countryside and closeness to nature provide him an opportunity to reflect, in a self-critical fashion and in the form of a self-reflexive narrative, on his developing identity as a writer from his moment of arrival in England. The un-named narrator of the novel could be Naipaul, who came to England following his aspiration to become a writer. It could also be Anand of *The House for Mr. Biswas* who was sent to England in pursuit of his ambition for a better life. Whether it is Naipaul, Anand, or any other immigrant writer, the narrator reflects his literary identity and worldview.

Key words: *The Enigma of Arrival*, Literary Identity.

The Enigma of Arrival (1987) is the novel written in biographical form. Despite its subtitle, *A Novel in Five Sections*, this work has many similarities with Naipaul's own life and experience. *The Enigma of Arrival* is divided into five parts, *Jack's Garden*, *The Journey*, *Ivy*, *Rooks* and *The Ceremony of Farewell*. *The Enigma of Arrival* is focalized consistently through Naipaul's narrator. The novel begins with *Jack's garden*, which takes place in the beginning of the 1970s, twenty years after the narrator's first arrival in England. In the second section, *The Journey*, the story goes twenty years back in time, to the narrator's journey from Trinidad to





England and his first months there, in London. The following two parts, *Ivy* and *Rooks*, both take place after Jack's Garden. This is illustrative of the bi-ways taken in the rendering of information in the text. In the final and comparably shorter part, *The Ceremony of Farewell*, the narrator begins to write *The Enigma of Arrival*, thus completing a circle.

The novel begins with this narrator's life in a cottage on a large English countryside estate and its various inhabitants; the second part of the novel traces the narrator's journey from Trinidad to Britain by way of the USA and his increasingly illustrious career as a novelist and travel writer who sojourns in Africa, South Asia, and the Caribbean; the novel concludes with his return to Trinidad to attend his sister's funeral performed according to traditional Hindu rites. Although Naipaul's writing is often regarded as expressing colonial nostalgia for the idealized imperial England of his imagination. *The Enigma of Arrival* contains a more complex and nuanced treatment of England, Trinidad (Naipaul's home country), and post-imperial melancholy. Nixon comments, "Naipaul's self-interrogation ultimately repeats a late romantic ideology of the isolated, self-made author." (*London Calling: V. S. Naipaul, Postcolonial Mandarin*, p. 162).

The novel deals with the effect of writing and the experience of being a writer on a man's life. It shows how writing can be both a calming influence and an effective means of coming to terms with dislocation, as well as being an ethical means of living. *The Enigma of Arrival* is neither biography, nor the type of fiction that falls into the generic line of fictional-biographical prose novels, beginning with the first novel worthy of the title in English, Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*.





The novel appears to be focused on the realistic portrayal of the people whom the narrator meets while he is living in the ancient countryside around Salisbury; this is merely the story's facade. *The Enigma of Arrival* demonstrates that in the aftermath of the break up of the British Empire, the grand house of the empire appears to be as unhomey as the colonial house of the Trinidadian nation, depicted in *A House for Mr Biswas*. The true subject and the story's main source of development is rather the internal nature of the writer coming to maturity, the way he sees, meaning the ways he selects what to see and how to see it. In this way, Naipaul's narrator does not give a realistic picture of the world; rather he attempts to express the mediation that has occurred between him and the world.

The Enigma of Arrival has been placed into the category, along with many others of the so-called novels of post-colonial literature, of works that deal with the colonist's return-home. In *Geography, Literature and Migration* Paul White states, "it must be noted that amongst all the literature of migration the highest proportion deals in some way with ideas of return, whether actualized or remaining imaginary." (*Writing across Worlds: Literature and Migration*, p. 14). If there is a return, it is not considered to be an arrival, but always as a return to setting forth, a constant step into the unknown. Elleke Boehmer comments, "Cultural expatriation is the central motivation and intrinsic component of post-colonial literary experience (particularly in this novel's case), and that expatriation is also one of the most important driving impulses behind literature worldwide." (*Colonial and Postcolonial Literature: Migrant Metaphors*, pp. 232-3).

The novel's very title lays its most pressing concern. In the novel, the writer never arrives. In fact, the act of writing is always the act of the exile, of the person who can never





return. Like the impossibility of finding the far shore of identity in Naipaul's previous works, so it is the impossibility of reaching the world as seen by the young novelist at the center of *The Enigma of Arrival*. It is not mere pettiness or homesickness that makes the narrator uncertain on his arrival in England. The narrator says, "Just as once at home I had dreamed of being in England, so far years in England I had dreamed of leaving England." (p. 95).

Naipaul is able to mount this critique by transforming his migrant experience into a critical consciousness regarding British culture and society by placing it in dialogue with his sense of dwelling in Britain. His narrator, reflecting on the "accidents" of history that have brought him to Wiltshire, concludes that:

The migration, within the British Empire, from India to Trinidad had given me the English language as my own, and a particular kind of education. This had partly seeded my wish to be a writer in a particular mode, and had committed me to the literary career I had been following in England for twenty years. (pp. 52-3).

The writing of Naipaul, like the aesthetic claims of his narrator, is based upon the structure of exile—and this accounts both for his ability to synthesize the worlds and the cultures that make him and the slightly elegiac tone of the novel. For the novel is elegiac. It constantly reminds the reader of the uncertainty and ephemeral nature of the world, while offering the consolation that there is wonder to be found in precisely that uncertainty. Like the novel's aesthetics, this elegiac mood resides in the structure of the post-colonial's hybrid being and the fissures in his subjectivity. The narrator of the novel looks at the ruins and superseded things that seem to go hand in hand with the nature of the countryside in which he lives, and he





seems to see some aspect of their certain decay within himself: “That idea of ruin and dereliction, of out-of-placeness, was something I felt about myself... a man from another hemisphere, another background” (p. 19).

Homelessness is the central theme of most of Naipaul’s novels. Regarding his novels, Michael Gorra comments, “The relation between home and homelessness provides the central metaphor of all Naipaul’s work.” (*After Empire: Scott, Naipaul, Rushdie*, p. 64). In this novel, the narrator has a sense of homelessness which is constantly expressed in the way the narrator describes his surroundings. He is continually exploring and creating records of this exploration through his writing. He, also a number of times, describes himself directly as foreign. The point is also made that what was once somebody’s home does not necessarily continue to be so, for example when an old lady comes to the narrator’s house where she used to live, but finds it completely altered and does not recognize it. The narrator has rebuilt the house and what was once the lady’s home no longer exists.

Parallel to this, the narrator’s presence in the English countryside is an expression of change in the course of the history of the country. As mentioned above, a contrast that emerges through this text, and also in Dabydeen’s text, is the discrepancy between the narrator’s expectations towards England prior to arrival and his actual experience of the country. The encounter with an England different from his suppositions increases the narrator’s sense of homelessness. The grounds for the young man’s expectations are complex. The colonial background of Trinidad, with Britain as colonial power, is of course an important element. Growing up, the main character belonged to a society that was subject to systematic British cultural imperialism. The cultural influence from Britain seems to have had a greater





impact on the young mind than the formal political relationship between the colony and the colonial power.

The relative lack of a pre-colonial local history in the West Indies left it more open to such cultural influence than colonies in other parts of the world. This is illustrated in this novel by the degree to which the narrator is influenced by England, its history, and its authors. Ideas of the English landscape are also prominent. In the colony the narrator already has clear ideas of what the English countryside looks like, based on images from art, literature and advertising. He is excited when he recognizes some of these in England. A picture that reoccurs in his mind throughout the text is that of cows on tins of condensed milk. In Wiltshire he for the first time sees the real life version:

This was like the design on the condensed-milk label I knew as a child in Trinidad, where cows as handsome as those were not to be seen, where there was very little fresh milk and most people used condensed milk or powdered milk. (p. 38).

This image on the tin box has apparently made an impression on the main character, and has played a part in the shaping of the English landscape in his mind. In his article *The Passage of the Eye: David Dabydeen, V.S. Naipaul and the Tombstones of Parabiography* Tobias Döring comments, "Seeing the cows in the English countryside he is reconnected to the displaced and mediated views of his colonial childhood." (Alfred Hornung and Ernstpeter Ruhe, p. 159). The image expresses the glorification of England and how Trinidad through colonial eyes pales in comparison, since in England even the cows are handsome as opposed to the Trinidadian cows. However, as the narrator will discover, English agriculture has lost a lot of its





romance. The farmland surrounding him in Wiltshire is marked by deterioration. New buildings and devices substitute the old just like the condensed milk is a substitute for the real one.

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