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THE CONCEPT OF IMAGINARY HOMELAND IN THE WORKS OF INDO-CARIBBEAN WRITERS

Manimangai Mani

manimangai@upm.edu.my

Abstract

The concept of imaginary homeland is often found in the works of postcolonial writers. This term is derived from Salman Rushdie's collection of essays titled Imaginary Homelands (2010). Imaginary Homeland is often found in the settings of the novels produced by immigrant writers. This paper intends to highlight the use of imaginary homeland in the settings in the works of selected Indo-Caribbean writers who originate from the islands of Trinidad and Tobago. The writers that will be discussed are V. S. Naipaul, Lakshmi Persaud and Shani Mootoo. These three writers are descendants of immigrants who moved to Trinidad during the colonization of Britain. The selected novels will be studied under the light of postcolonial theory to point the effects of migration on the immigrants. This paper will further highlight how these writers use imaginary settings to vent out their dissatisfaction upon their status as immigrants. These imaginary settings give them the liberty to create characters to act as their inner voice and finally these imaginary settings actually reveal their longingness for their motherland.

Keywords: *imaginary homeland, settings, immigrants, colonization, migration.*

Introduction

The phrase "Indo-Caribbean" refers to a mass of people, who migrated from India to the Caribbean Islands. These people left their homeland and settled in the Caribbean islands after the emancipation of slavery in 1833 in all the British colonies. Many freed slaves left their masters and this created an economic chaos in all the sugar plantations that were owned by the British. The work in sugar plantations required docile and low-waged labour force. Since by the 1830s, a larger part of India was already under the British rule, the British decided to look for cheap labour in India. The British crafted a new legal system of forced labour, which in many ways resembled enslavement. Instead of calling them slaves, they were called indentured labourers or coolies. Thus, this system permitted and commenced the migration of thousands of Indians to an alien land thousands of miles away from the year 1836 onwards. The first ships carrying indentured labourers for the sugarcane plantations left India in 1836. During this period, the Indian indentured workers were permitted to bring their families with them and it was not uncommon to place people from the same districts in India on the same estate in the Caribbean. Over the next 70 years, numerous more ships brought indentured labourers to the Caribbean, as cheap and docile labor for the harsh inhumane work. The slave labour and indentured labour - both in millions of people - were brought into Caribbean, as in other European colonies throughout the world. Indian men from Calcutta and Madras along with much smaller number of women, especially in the first few decades of indentured migration, were herded into "coolie" ships, confined to the lower deck. The women were subjected to

the lustful advances of the European crew. According to Gaiutra Bahadur, in her book titled *Coolie Woman: The Odyssey of Indenture*, the women onboard the ships were never safe from sexual exploitation.

It is hard, in these glimpses, to escape the angle of sexual exploitation by figures of all ranks and races. In these archives of misconduct, the women appear resisting advances. (Bahadur, 2014: 61)

Sometimes condemned to eat, sleep, and sit amidst their own waste, the indentureds were just as often without anything but the most elementary form of medical care. Many did not survive the long and brutal "middle passage"; the bodies of the dead were, quite unceremoniously, thrown overboard. After the three-month long travel, more cruelties awaited the 'coolies' on their removal to the plantation. The working day was unduly long, the idea of a rest day inconceivable; the labourers found their movements severely curtailed, and indeed they were caged within the walls of the plantation. The indentured labourers are bound to serve five years, it being understood that the planters would pay for their passage, and at the end of this term the indentured labourers were to receive their freedom. Besides, the Indian workers were paid considerably less than their African counterparts. If they wished to return, they could return to India at the expense of their employer, or they could settle in their new homeland, and gain the rights accorded to free men, or at least such rights as coloured people could expect. Unfortunately, the Europeans almost never adhered to these agreements. So, many Indians were stranded in the Caribbean. Many were unable to return to India as well because the management companies would not pay for

the cost of having them sent back to India. Most ships would not take them unless the ships were filled to capacity and some ships became so full that many were abandoned. So, many decided to stay and make the best of their situations. With newly acquired skills they set up businesses and thrived in their new culture, eventually inter-marrying with the larger African population. Over time, most of them became Christians and acquired anglicized last names like Williams for instance. The majority of Indians in the English speaking Caribbean came from Uttar Pradesh and Western Bihar. The Indians that are now in the Caribbean are the descendents of indentured servants brought over by the British. This paper will only focus on works produced by writers who hail from the islands of Trinidad and Tobago. This paper will discuss the selected works of V. S. Naipaul, Lakshmi Persaud and Shani Mootoo.

The Concept of Imaginary Homeland in the works of Indo-Caribbean Writers

Migration involves resistance: resistance against the loss of culture, loss of memory and the language. It causes losing one's country, language, and culture and finding oneself forced to come to terms with another place, another way of speaking and thinking, another view of reality. Thus, immigrants writers have the tendency of trying to reclaim whatever that is lost in their new home and society. To these writers, having imaginary settings in their novels, paves way to vent out their disappointments and loss. The trend of creating an imaginary setting is common among the Indo-Caribbean writers. These imaginary homeland settings give the writers the liberty to act as a platform to voice out their dissatisfaction upon their status as immigrants in the Caribbean islands. They often create an imaginary setting in their fictions to show that they are people who don't really have a place to call as home. Thus, we will find that many Trinidadian writers prefer to live outside the Caribbean. These West Indian literary exiles often look back at their country with a sense of loss compounded by disappointment.

This term "imaginary homeland" is derived from Salman Rushdie's collection of essays titled *Imaginary Homelands* (2010). All the essays are based on the experience of Salman Rusdie's and his contemporary time scenario, written from 1981 to 1992. This book has also collected many controversial issues of the decade. Rushdie says the following in his title essay:

Writers in my position, exiles or emigrants or expatriate are haunted by some sense of loss, some

urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt (Rushdie 2010:10).

The people especially writers from this region cannot reclaim their past. Culture and tradition is mutated and tampered by the dominant culture of the new land. Rushdie reiterates this again:

... we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind (Rushdie 2010:10).

This situation of loss gives room to the writers to come up with their own imaginary homeland in their settings of their novels. The migration and the lives of their forefathers were tough and this has left certain impacts in the psyche of these writers. One of the most popular Caribbean writers is Sir V. S. Naipaul who has put the Caribbean Islands on the pedestal of popularity. Naipaul won the Noble Prize for literature in 2001, for his novel, *Half a Life*. He was knighted in 1989. In the 1880s, his grandparents emigrated from India to work as farm labourers. Living among the Indian immigrant community in Trinidad, Naipaul's father became an English-language journalist, and in 1929 began contributing articles to the *Trinidad Guardian*. In 1932, the year Naipaul was born, his father joined the staff as the Chaguanas correspondent. Sir V. S. Naipaul is best known for novels, *A House for Mr. Biswas* (1961), *A Bend in the River* (1979) and *A Way in the World* (1994). His novels, set in developing countries, are known for their pessimistic and cynical tone, often referred to as "suppressed histories." He has also written several works of non-fiction including *An Area of Darkness* (1965), *India: A Wounded Civilization* (1977) and *Among the Believers: An Islamic Journey* (1981), as well as travel writing and several essays. One of Naipaul's popular novels, *The Mimic Man* is set on an imaginary place called Isabella. The novel takes the form of memoirs of Ralph Singh, the protagonist who is a West Indian politician from Isabella. Now, Isabella is an imaginary setting which was created by Naipaul for this novel. The novel itself is divided into three parts. In the first part, Singh is a disgraced politician who is in exile in London for short while and attempting to write his political memoirs. He is contrasting his new impressions of London with those he had in London when he was a student and after the war. He talks about his marriage to an English girl named Sandra and his return to Isabella. Earlier, in the immediate aftermath of decolonization in a number of British colonies in the late 1950s and early 1960s, Singh had shared political power

with a more powerful African Caribbean politician. Soon, the memoirs take on a more personal aspect. There are flashbacks to the formative and defining periods of Singh's life. In Part Two, Singh moves back to his childhood days. In Part Three, the narrator concentrates on his political experiences and then back to the present London including an affair with Lady Stella. In many of these, during crucial moments, whether during his childhood, married life, or political career, he appears to abandon engagement and enterprise. These, he rationalizes later, belong only to fully made European societies. Thus, an imaginary setting was needed for Naipaul to create fictional character that was full of flaws and was imitating the White people. Their inner voice- angry with the Indians way of life. So, the imaginary settings give them the liberty to scold the immigrant Indians. The excerpt from *The Mimic Man* show the vulnerability of the Indian immigrants and how powerless they are in Trinidad.

Above all, we lack power, and we do not understand that we lack power. We mistake words for power; as soon as our bluff is called, we are lost. Politics for us are do-or-die, once-for-all-charge. Once we are committed we fight more than political battles; we often fight quite literally for our lives. Out transitional or makeshift societies do not cushion us. (Naipaul 2001:8)

This imaginary homeland, the island of Isabella, is used as a setting for this novel with a purpose. Naipaul himself indicates the relevance of this novel to other ex-colonies as it reflects on the powerless immigrant politicians who try to mimic the colonizers. This imaginary island of Isabella gives the liberty to Naipaul to give a degrading description of the West Indian society. This fictitious setting saves him from criticism as no specific indication is given on the country. Caryl Phillips in his collection of essays titled, *A New World Order*, quotes the following about Naipaul.

Having fled to 'the outside', to England, where he 'discovered' his 'two spheres of darkness', Naipaul then proceeded to people these 'spheres' with ungenerous, unsympathetic portraits of 'primitive' people, all the while sponsoring the myth of himself as exhausted story-teller whose dispatches can only be fully understood in the context of his own remarkable journey. (Phillips, 2002:218).

Naipaul did not want to be a stereotype writer, he decided to go beyond what was in front of his face, beneath his feet, and underneath his nails; beyond what was, in fact, in his soul (Phillips, 2002:214). So, an

imaginary home would be good to set his characters and control them as they way he pleases. An imaginary home also gives room to explore his imaginations.

Likewise, Lakshmi Persaud, another Indo-Caribbean writer, in her novel entitled, *Raise the Lanterns High* also uses an imaginary home as an escapism. While Naipaul used an imaginary Caribbean setting, Persaud uses an imaginary Indian setting in this novel. Persaud gives a vivid picture of the Indian immigrants in the European colonies. Persaud was born in Trinidad and Tobago and brought up in Caribbean cultural background which is an obvious indication of her Caribbean culture. She is a descendent of Indo-Caribbean family that settled down in Trinidad. Persaud's ancestors were Hindus from Uttar Pradesh who migrated from India to the Caribbean Islands in the last decade of the nineteenth century. Her parents worked in the retail business to get by their harsh life. When she grew up, she left Trinidad and Tobago to study at Queen's University Belfast, Northern Ireland. Then, she attended University of Reading in the United Kingdom, majoring in education. Persaud led an academic life in the United Kingdom. Persaud's academic vision is considerably projected in her fiction. Persaud's notable works include *Sastra*, *Raise the Lantern High*, *Butterfly in the Wind*, and *For the Love of My Name*.

In her novel, *Raise the Lantern High*, the protagonist Vasti, on the eve of her wedding, finds her arranged marriage is to the rapist she saw through a curtain of sugar cane stems years earlier. She can either speak out, defy convention and shame her family or succumb to tradition and submit to her fate silently. With a liberal thinking, well educated and widely travelled woman that she is; she's very sceptical about the arrangement right from the beginning. She's torn between the anguish for her own future and is concerned about her widowed mother who is the only reason she has agreed to the marriage. As she debates with her muddled thoughts of how she could tell her mother or sister about it now, when she hadn't told anyone about the incident then; of what had come over her on that day when she chose to silently witness the abomination; of how to cope with it in her present situation; of what her mother would have to go through if she defied convention of marriage, an overwhelming tiredness overcomes her. She falls unconscious and the story takes a dramatic turn. Vasti in her dream-like state is transported to the Indian Kingdom of Jyotika when King Paresch reigned in the 1800's. The King having been killed in a battle-field, preparations are being made for the sati ritual of his 3 queens, where they will have to climb onto his

burning pyre and leave this world with him. When Vasti regains consciousness, she feels strangely light. She realises that even today, the social pressures are very much the same as 200 years ago. She also feels she has learnt some important things and in return she makes some firm decisions about her future. Persaud uses this imaginary home to highlight her stand on the issue of women being victimised and oppressed centuries after centuries. With no history of her own country, Persaud had to take refuge through the settings of her story to another imaginary home in India, the home of her forefathers. This imaginary setting gives her room to reinvent the characters to recollect the strength from the land of her forefathers to stand for the rights of the women in the Caribbean island.

Another notable Indo-Caribbean writer is Shani Mootoo. She was born in Dublin to Trinidadian parents. Her father Ramesh Mootoo was a medical family doctor and a Trinidadian politician. It is to be noted that much of Shani Mootoo's personal and literary life has been focused on political activism. Mootoo's first literary publication, *Out on Main Street* (1993), a collection of short stories, was solicited by the Vancouver-based feminist publishing house Press Gang in 1993 and was the beginning of her literary career. Her notable novels are *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996), *The Predicament of Or* (2002), *He Drown She in the Sea*, (2005), *Valmiki's Daughter* (2010) and *Moving Forward Sideways, Like a Crab*, (2014).

Her first full-length novel, *Cereus Blooms at Night*, published by Press Gang in 1996, was shortlisted for the Scotia Bank Giller Prize in 1997, the Ethel Wilson Fiction Prize, and the Chapters Books in Canada First Novel Award, and was long-listed for the Man Booker Prize. It has been published in 15 countries and won the New England Book Sellers Award in 1998. Set on a tropical island, the novel is narrated by a male nurse and caretaker, and explores trauma, madness and redemption, the legacies of sexual abuse, and the boundaries between heterosexual and homosexual desire.

This novel is also set on the imaginary island nation of Lantanacamara, in the city of Paradise, and the novel is narrated by Tyler, Lantanacamara's only male nurse, and caretaker of Mala Ramchandin, whose life story is the novel's central plot. Tyler received his training in the Shivering Northern Wetlands, where he also came to terms with his attraction to men. Mala, an old woman who does not speak, binds the novel's characters together. They find each other through some connection with her, and because of her, gain a different understanding of their lives. As a child and young adult, she suffered constant

sexual and other abuse by her father's hands. The abuse begins when her mother leaves her father for the woman who had rejected him; and he decides to visit his revenge upon his two daughters. Mala's sister runs away as soon as she is able to work, yet Mala stays, feeling guilty for her mother's abandonment of her father. Made insane by abuse, Mala starves her father to death and it is only by chance, as an old woman, that she is suspected of murder, and eventually placed in a nursing home, where she is placed in Tyler's care. Through her, Tyler meets Otoh, the "son" of Mala's childhood friend. Otoh, born a girl, was convinced that she was in fact a boy and soon convinced everyone else that of that belief. The secondary story in the novel, is that of Tyler's romance. Tyler, mocked and isolated because of his sexuality, falls in love with Otoh, and the two begin a romance that defies the labels of heterosexuality or homosexuality. Questioning the "reality" of gender, Mootoo self-consciously connects these outsiders. Mala is shunned because "her father mistook her for his wife," Tyler is mocked because of his failure to perform conventional masculinity, either in bearing or profession, and Otoh cannot expose himself, because his body remains female. The novel ends with Mala placing her trust in Tyler, experiencing the pleasures of freedom from abuse and of acceptance. This fictional Caribbean island called Lantanacamara, *Cereus Blooms at Night* unveils the mystery surrounding Mala Ramchandin and the tempestuous history of her family. This could be a story that happened to any of the Caribbean Indians in general as there is no indication of a proper setting. This imaginary setting which is Lantanacamara, actually helped to expose these taboo incidents that actually would have taken place in Trinidad which involves rape, incest and heterosexuality.

Conclusion

The works of Indo-Caribbean writers like V. S. Naipaul, Lakshmi Persaud and Shani Mootoo involves heavy use of imaginary settings. The fondness in creating an imaginary homeland can be found in most works of these authors. They needed an imaginary setting to pour out their feelings and dissatisfactions as immigrants. Today, the new Caribbean stands at a political and moral crossroads in the hands of the Indo-Caribbean writers. These writers are given the mandate to act as voice to their people's history, to create a modern literature for their respective countries, to re-examine the whole legacy of a colonial past. Imaginary homelands as settings in the writings of Indo-Caribbean writers take them one step above compared to other writers as their message is

intended to a general group of people and not to a specific national group. All the three authors have voiced out their disagreements on certain issues and even degraded certain community. This choosing of imaginary homes, gives them the asylum and licence to critique people from certain regions without any restrictions. Furthermore, when the characters are trapped between two cultures or face the challenge of straddling two cultures, an imaginary setting is selected by these writers.

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