

The Sense of Identity in Naipaul's "One Out of Many" and Yerziska's "America and I"

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ABSTRACT

This paper sheds light on the sense of identity in the narratives of Naipaul's "One Out of Many" and Yerziska's "America and I". The struggle that two characters go through in the two narratives stems from their inability to adjust to the new environment and their strong connection to their previous environment. India, the Soviet Union, life challenges and personal experiences were things that the two characters failed to forget. Furthermore, the new environment, America, with all its glamorous life, freedom, and opportunity, could not win the hearts and the minds of the two characters. Their continuous struggle was a proof for that.

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We always emphasize that man is a sociable creature; which means that the individual tries to acquire his\her own surroundings, habits, culture, tradition, language, and other elements which provide a sense of security, stability and confidence. With the continuous movements or migration of people from their familiar surroundings to, for example, metropolitan cities or other countries or continents, maintaining or preserving clear or solid identity in such conditions and circumstances is extremely challenging.

This paper interrogates identity in the two narratives and the impact of geographical, cultural and social surroundings on the individual. Jan E. Stets and Peter J. Burke in their Article "Identity Theory and Social Identity Theory" Assert that: "the self is reflexive in that it can take itself as an object and can categorize, classify, or name itself in particular ways in relation to other social categories or classifications." (224) Furthermore, they believe that identity is a cluster of meanings and this meaning function through different condition and circumstances (229).

Both narratives deal with the movement or migration of individual and the loss of familiar milieu. For instance, Naipaul's and Yerziska's first person narrators retrace their journey, assembly after a sense of physical settlement at least in the new environment. In the case of Naipaul's, the narrator departs the crowded, semi tropical, and exotic Bombay and lands in Washington, the District of Colombia, where the sirens of police patrols and ambulance cars are the dominant alarms in such a metropolitan city. Similarly, Yezerska's narrator leaves Soviet Union -- land of fear, deprivation, oppression, poverty and misery "Choked for ages in the airless oppression of Russia" 172-- to the United States of America, land of opportunity, freedom, equality and



temptation; "From the other end of the earth from where I came, America was a land of living hope, woven of dreams aflame with longing and desire" (1729).

It seems that both experienced the sense of being rooted out from their original surroundings, culture and childhood, despite the harsh reality and rough life and lack of means the Soviet Union. Similarly, Santosh in Naipaul's narrative feels the burden and sense of estrangement in Washington, DC, and the one thing that gives him a sense of identity and belonging is the cardboard box, in his boss's apartment, even his bundle of clothes and the bag of "weeds" were not a part of the identity that he wished for. Bombay and its golden sun, and the open shore are no longer part of that identity, which he never thought before about all his days in Bombay. It is noticed that the two narratives reflect the sense of delusion and confusion and Naipaul's and Yeziska's. To compensate for the identity loss in both stories, there needs to be certain compromises or adjustments to the new reality in the Land of Freedom and Opportunity. However, this compromise is the synonym to "If you can not beat them, join them." Life in America is built on hard work, risk taking and self-reliance. In the working force of America, people are seen as numbers and nothing else. The value of the individual is appreciated through his/her contribution to the working force, team work, and productivity. Where as, issues like origin, creed or social background has no place in an ever changing and the speed of light moving society. It is the responsibility of the new arrivals to the "New World" to find their place, position and "identity". This task requires serious efforts, sacrifice, and new means for achieving that.

The primary task which is needed to be carried out, is to separate themselves from their past with all its "romantic" glorifications and to adjust to the new reality of being a number among many numbers in the celestial working force of this new culture. In Yeziska's narrative, for instance, our heroine has to find a way to make her living "But from my high visions, my golden hopes, I had to put my feet down on earth. I had to have food and shelter. I had to have money to pay for it" (1729). Luck takes her to work for the new terminology and tag or hyphenated names that were given to Americans. This time it is the Russian-American family who happened to migrate from the Soviet Union-- Russia. This family came from the same region of "America and I" heroine. "My first job was a servant in an Americanized family. Once, long ago, they came from the same village from where I came. But they were so well-dressed, so well-fed, so successful in America" (1729). Doing all housework, taking care of the children and preparing meals for the "Russian American" family was her primary job. In her mind, this family "got it made", nice house, fancy furniture, cute children and above all they speak English and they look Americans as well. She found a sense of security with this family, because of the so called similar backgrounds, yet there is no identity finding. Assuming that she is working for a sort of financial compensation, she believes, will lead to self satisfaction and identity compensation for the lost one and enhancement for the newly attained or in the process of being attained.

Much the same is true in Naipaul's "One out of Many," where Santosh is "stuck" with his homeland employer. His gourmet and exotic dishes and all the compliments from his employer's guests were not of value for him. His relocation from Bombay to Washington, DC was more than physical transformation. His feeling that he has to find himself and to himself and even to violate all the taboos of the culture by comparing himself to his employer: "Now I found that, without wishing it, I was ceasing to see myself as part of my employer's presence, and the beginning at the same time to see him as an outsider might see him" (2732). Before Santosh used to think or to see himself irrelevant next to his employer, "I used to tell him then that beside him I was dirt" (2732). This journey is an eye opener for Santosh.

It is noticeable that "In America and I", the narrator is in a continuous struggle for identity search. Leaping from a miserable job, to "the fire" is the main cause for this misery, confusion and total loss. The sweat shop and its button fixing, is no better than being a maid at the Russian house. The time she felt free, or having a sense of Identity is the where she experienced homelessness and street life. This temporary feeling is being shattered by the cruel reality of fear, hunger and selflessness. "I was driven out of cold and hunger. I could no longer pay for my mattress on the floor. I no longer could buy the bite in my mouth. I walked the streets. I knew what it to be alone is. In a strange city, among strangers. But I laughed through my tears. So I learned too



much already in America" (1732). During her interaction with the English teacher, which sponsored by the factory, where she worked, the teacher asked her; "What do you want to do?" and the answer came illusive and more challenging: "I feel. I see. I hear. And I want to think it out. But I I'm like dumb in me. I only feel I'm different—different from everybody" (1733).

Another crossing point between the two narratives is the misunderstanding or wrong perception about the new reality. In Yeziarska's "America and I" the heroine was confronted with the harsh reality, tough experiences and insults. For example, the Vocational center director told her; "America is no Utopia. First you must become efficient and earn a living before you can indulge in your poetic dreams." 1734 this tough response caused more pain and suffering. "I walked away from the vocational –guidance office with all the air out of my lungs. All the light out of my eyes. My feet dragged after me like dead wood" (1734).

In "Out of Many," Santosh's yearning for Bombay, caused suffering, pain, and confusion, "Aching for the Bombay ways, I spread my bedding in the carpeted corridor just outside our apartment" (2726). I understood I was a prisoner. I accepted this and adjusted. I learned to live within the apartment." (2729). The apartment, despite its good decorations and nice view yet "the view remained foreign and I never felt that the apartment was real, like the shabby old Bombay chambers with the cane chairs, or that it had anything to do with me" (2729).

Recognition of Identity in Santosh's case, is his awareness of his physical appearance, "The discovery of my good looks brought its strains. I became obsessed with my appearance, with a wish to see myself. It was like an illness" (2731). He compared this obsession with his attire and physical looks to the time in Bombay where such things did not matter; "Thought back to the time when these matter hadn't interested me, and I saw how ragged I must have looked, on the aero plane, in the airport, in the café for bare feet, with the rough and dirty clothes I wore, without doubt or question " (2731). Now I was glad I had so little of Washington to cope with: the apartment, my cupboard, the television set. And one day I found I no longer knew whether I wanted to go back to Bombay" (2731). Despite his continuous struggle to belong to the new society, the sense of belonging was never achieved:

I had watched the people in the circle long enough to know that they were in their city; that their television life awaited them, that their renunciation was not like mine. No television life awaited me. It did not matter. In this city I was alone and it did not matter what I did (2744). Even the house he lives in doesn't give him the sense of belonging. "Its smells are strange, everything in it is strange. But my strength in this house is that I am a stranger" (2744).

In Bombay Santosh enjoyed the outdoor life. He enjoyed walking at the beach of the Arab Sea and the Indian Ocean and was happy to sleep on the street pavements. His actions were a reflection of his Identity and personal decisions. However, this is not the case in Washington, DC. As Paula Morgan states in "Consorting with Kali" Migration and Identity in Naipaul's "One out of Many" states that:

Santosh who has not been homeless on a Bombay street pavement now is cast adrift seeking a context within which to locate himself. He learns painfully that Identity is first mirrored by community and subsequently appropriated by an individual. His caste sensibility imparts the fear of contamination that hinders him from making contact with other. (5)

It is clear that both narratives illustrate the continuous struggle and alienation by both characters. Both failed to adjust to the new reality and the codes and ways of life in the new environment. This alienation and estrangement are considered part of the new Identity of the two characters. Consequently Identity can be defined as a amalgamation of social\ cultural, spiritual and emotional traits which individual s possess and these traits will be compared, and mostly defended when individuals are exposed to new environments which differ from their original ones.

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