

NARRATIVES OF BELONGING: HOME, EXILE, AND IDENTITY IN V. S. NAIPAUL AND CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the interrelated motifs of home, exile, and identity in the selected works of V. S. Naipaul and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. Although both writers engage with postcolonial displacement, their narrative temperaments differ sharply. Naipaul often represents belonging as fractured, unstable, and historically burdened, while Adichie presents identity as mobile, dialogic, and capable of renewal through memory, language, gendered agency, and return. Through a comparative reading of *A House for Mr Biswas*, *The Enigma of Arrival*, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, and *Americanah*, the study argues that the idea of “home” in postcolonial writing is not merely geographical; it is emotional, linguistic, racial, historical, and political. Naipaul’s fiction foregrounds homelessness as an existential condition shaped by colonial migration, while Adichie’s fiction transforms exile into a site of self-recognition and critique. The study concludes that both writers expand the meaning of belonging by showing how postcolonial subjects negotiate inherited histories and contemporary migrations.

Keywords: belonging, exile, home, identity, postcolonial literature, V. S. Naipaul, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

I. INTRODUCTION

The idea of home occupies a central position in postcolonial literature because colonial history repeatedly unsettled the relationship between land, language, memory, and identity. For writers emerging from formerly colonized societies, home is rarely a fixed or innocent space. It is marked by migration, racial hierarchy, cultural inheritance, and the psychic burden of empire. Edward Said observes that exile produces a condition of “discontinuous being,” where the subject remains attached to a lost or distant place while being forced to inhabit another world [1]. This condition is crucial to understanding both V. S. Naipaul and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, though they approach it through different historical and emotional registers.

Naipaul’s writing grows out of the Indo-Caribbean experience of indenture, colonial education, and migration to Britain. In *A House for Mr Biswas*, the desire for a house becomes a symbolic struggle for autonomy, dignity, and self-definition in a society shaped by inherited displacement [2]. In *The Enigma of Arrival*, the narrator’s movement to England does not resolve exile; rather, it deepens his awareness of historical decay, cultural distance, and the fragility of arrival [3]. Adichie, writing from the context of postcolonial Nigeria and contemporary transnational migration, examines identity through civil war, race, gender, and diaspora. *Half of a Yellow Sun* reconstructs the trauma of Biafra as a national and personal crisis of belonging [4], while *Americanah* explores migration to the United States and Britain as a process through which Nigerian identity is tested, racialized, and reimaged [5].

This study argues that Naipaul and Adichie transform home into a contested narrative category. For Naipaul, home is often desired but never fully secured. For Adichie, home may be wounded, unequal, or politically unstable, yet it remains a space to which the self can return with sharper consciousness. Their works therefore offer two major postcolonial models

of belonging: one marked by estrangement and historical loss, the other by critique, mobility, and reconstruction.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: HOME, EXILE, AND POSTCOLONIAL IDENTITY

Postcolonial identity is not a pure return to origin; it is formed through rupture, negotiation, and cultural translation. Stuart Hall argues that cultural identity is not an essence fixed in the past but a “positioning” shaped by history, representation, and difference [6]. This view is relevant to both Naipaul and Adichie because their characters do not inherit stable identities; they must construct themselves within conditions produced by colonialism, migration, race, and memory.

Homi K. Bhabha’s concept of hybridity further clarifies this condition. For Bhabha, colonial and postcolonial identities emerge in an “in-between” space where cultural meanings are translated and contested [7]. Naipaul’s Indo-Trinidadian characters inhabit such a space because they are neither securely Indian nor fully rooted in the Caribbean colonial order. Adichie’s diasporic Nigerians also occupy an in-between position, but her fiction treats hybridity less as paralysis and more as a field of self-awareness, especially in relation to race, language, and gender.

Exile, however, is not only a theoretical condition; it is also emotional and ethical. Said emphasizes that exile creates permanent tension between memory and present reality [1]. Salman Rushdie similarly argues that migrant writers often work with fragments because physical separation from the homeland makes memory partial, revised, and imaginative [8]. Naipaul and Adichie both write through such fragments, but Naipaul often stresses the loneliness of fragmentation, while Adichie stresses the possibility of narrative repair.

III. NAIPAUL: HOME AS POSSESSION, ANXIETY, AND HISTORICAL DISPLACEMENT

In *A House for Mr Biswas*, Naipaul gives the idea of home a concrete and symbolic force. Mohun Biswas’s lifelong desire for a house is not merely economic; it is tied to his need for identity in a world where he feels dependent, humiliated, and socially diminished. The Tulsi household, into which he marries, offers shelter but denies individuality. Hanuman House functions as a collective structure where personal identity is absorbed into hierarchy and obligation [2]. Mr Biswas’s desire for his own house therefore becomes a struggle against social erasure.

The importance of the house lies in its symbolic connection with selfhood. Mr Biswas’s final house is structurally imperfect and financially burdensome, yet it represents personal achievement. Naipaul does not romanticize this achievement. The house does not produce complete liberation, but it allows Mr Biswas to die with a measure of dignity. In this sense, belonging is not presented as emotional harmony; it is presented as fragile ownership in a world of dependence. The house becomes the material form of an incomplete but meaningful self.

Naipaul’s treatment of home is inseparable from the history of Indian indenture in the Caribbean. The descendants of Indian migrants in Trinidad inherit cultural memory without direct access to an original homeland. Their rituals, names, and customs preserve fragments of India, but these fragments exist within a colonial Caribbean society structured by racial and economic hierarchy. Critics have often observed that Naipaul’s fiction returns to the problem of “unhousing,” where individuals are physically located but culturally unsettled [9]. Mr Biswas’s predicament reflects this historical condition: he lives in Trinidad, carries Indian

cultural traces, and receives colonial education, yet none of these worlds gives him full belonging.

In *The Enigma of Arrival*, Naipaul shifts from the colonial Caribbean to rural England. Here, the migrant writer arrives in the imperial center, but arrival does not produce possession. The English landscape initially appears stable, old, and culturally authoritative. Gradually, however, the narrator recognizes decay, change, and historical illusion [3]. England is not the secure center imagined by colonial education; it too is marked by decline and impermanence. This recognition complicates Naipaul's earlier longing for metropolitan validation. The imperial center is revealed as another unstable space.

Thus, Naipaul's narratives of belonging are governed by irony. The colonial subject desires a house, a tradition, or a metropolitan center, but each object of desire is compromised. Home is necessary, but it is never whole. Exile is not only geographical; it is ontological. The Naipaulian subject experiences identity as a burden of historical dislocation.

IV. ADICHIE: HOME, RETURN, AND THE REWRITING OF IDENTITY

Adichie's fiction also begins from historical rupture, but her narrative method differs from Naipaul's. In *Half of a Yellow Sun*, home is represented through the violence of the Nigerian Civil War and the failed dream of Biafran nationhood. The novel shows how political conflict transforms homes into refugee spaces, intellectual communities into survival networks, and ethnic identity into a matter of life and death [4]. Yet Adichie does not reduce belonging to victimhood. Through characters such as Olanna, Kainene, Ugwu, and Odenigbo, she presents identity as relational, ethical, and historically accountable.

The Biafran home in *Half of a Yellow Sun* is both intimate and national. Kitchens, classrooms, compounds, and refugee camps become spaces where political history enters everyday life. Adichie's narrative insists that national belonging is not abstract; it is experienced through hunger, fear, language, love, and mourning. The novel also questions who has the authority to narrate collective suffering. Ugwu's movement from houseboy to writer is significant because it shifts testimony toward a socially marginal figure. Through this device, Adichie democratizes the act of historical narration [10].

In *Americanah*, the question of belonging moves from war and nation to migration, race, and return. Ifemelu leaves Nigeria for the United States, where she discovers that blackness is not merely a biological or cultural fact but a racial category imposed by American society [5]. Her identity changes because the host country reads her body through a history different from her Nigerian experience. The blog form in the novel allows Adichie to analyze race with irony and directness. Ifemelu's writing becomes a mode of self-definition, converting alienation into critique.

Unlike many exile narratives that end in permanent loss, *Americanah* gives return a central role. Ifemelu's return to Lagos is not a simple restoration of origin. She comes back changed, critical, and aware of the contradictions of both Nigeria and America. Home is neither idealized nor rejected. It is chosen after disillusionment. This gives Adichie's model of belonging a dynamic quality. Identity is not recovered as purity; it is rebuilt through movement, comparison, and self-recognition.

Language also plays a major role in Adichie's construction of belonging. Nigerian English, Igbo expressions, American racial vocabulary, and migrant speech patterns mark different social worlds. Adichie's attention to hair, accent, naming, and speech shows that identity is lived through everyday signs. Scholars have noted that *Americanah* connects race, gender, and migration in ways that make the diasporic body a site of cultural negotiation [11].

Ifemelu's hair, for example, becomes a visible sign of racial pressure and self-acceptance. The personal becomes political without losing its intimacy.

V. COMPARATIVE DISCUSSION: ESTRANGEMENT AND RECONSTRUCTION

Naipaul and Adichie are both postcolonial writers of movement, but the emotional direction of their work differs. Naipaul's characters often move toward disillusionment. Their search for home exposes the impossibility of complete belonging. Mr Biswas gains a house, but the victory is modest and shadowed by suffering [2]. The narrator of *The Enigma of Arrival* reaches England, but England loses its imagined authority [3]. Naipaul's world is therefore shaped by irony, solitude, and the recognition that colonial history has damaged the foundations of identity.

Adichie's characters also experience displacement, but her fiction allows more space for repair. In *Half of a Yellow Sun*, war destroys homes, yet storytelling preserves memory [4]. In *Americanah*, migration produces loneliness and racial injury, yet it also produces insight, authorship, and return [5]. Adichie does not deny historical violence; rather, she places it within networks of friendship, love, gendered strength, and political speech. Her characters are wounded by history, but they are not wholly defined by dispossession.

The difference also lies in narrative ethics. Naipaul's prose often maintains distance from collective belonging. His narrators observe societies with sharpness, sometimes with severity. Adichie's narrative voice is more invested in community, intimacy, and recovery. This does not make one writer more serious than the other; rather, it reveals two different postcolonial sensibilities. Naipaul writes from the anxiety of deracination, while Adichie writes from the tension between critique and attachment.

Their works also revise the meaning of exile. In Naipaul, exile is frequently a structure of consciousness. Even when the character has shelter, employment, or literary success, the self remains divided. In Adichie, exile is a historical and social experience that can generate new forms of knowledge. Ifemelu's American experience exposes racial structures that were invisible to her in Nigeria [5]. Her return is meaningful because it is informed by exile, not because it cancels exile.

Both writers therefore reject simple nationalism. Naipaul rejects romantic ideas of ancestral or colonial belonging. Adichie rejects sentimental nationalism by showing Nigeria's corruption, class divisions, gender inequalities, and historical wounds. Yet Adichie retains a stronger belief in the possibility of ethical return. Naipaul's belonging remains haunted; Adichie's belonging remains unfinished but active.

VI. CONCLUSION

The narratives of V. S. Naipaul and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie show that home in postcolonial literature is never merely a physical location. It is a symbolic field where history, memory, language, race, gender, and power intersect. Naipaul's *A House for Mr Biswas* and *The Enigma of Arrival* present belonging as fragile, ironic, and deeply marked by colonial displacement. His characters seek houses, landscapes, and cultural centers, but these spaces remain unstable. Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* and *Americanah* also represent displacement and historical trauma, yet they imagine identity as more dialogic and reconstructive. Her characters confront war, racism, migration, and return, but they also claim the right to narrate themselves.

The comparative significance of Naipaul and Adichie lies in their different answers to the same postcolonial question: what does it mean to belong after empire? Naipaul's answer

emphasizes loss, estrangement, and the incomplete nature of arrival. Adichie's answer emphasizes memory, critique, mobility, and the possibility of return without innocence. Together, their works demonstrate that postcolonial belonging is not inherited intact; it is written, tested, broken, and remade through narrative.

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