

Communication and Impact of Cultural Identity out of Naipaul's Classic Works in China

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Abstract

The mixed cultural identity of the characters and the change of V.S. Naipaul's own cultural identity are reflected in the Chinese versions of Naipaul's two novels *A House for Mr Biswas* and *A Bend in the River*. This study explores the communication of historical culture, customs, values and religion in China through the translated works to achieve the literary exchange and cultural transmission, which inevitably intensifies the cultural shock and consciousness in Chinese readers. Such readers' response is mainly embodied in the sympathy and concern about the national culture and social development in the Third World, hence reinforcing Chinese people's faith in their independent national culture and bringing about new insight of the path of socialism with Chinese characteristics.

Keywords

Naipaul's classic works; Cultural identity; Chinese readers' response; National culture.

1. Introduction

V.S. Naipaul was the winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2001. Firstly, the late author himself enjoys high reputation and honor in the Western literary circle, and tens of thousands of readers are interested in his literary works. Secondly, after Naipaul won the Nobel Prize, there was an upsurge in the translation of his literary works in China, followed by a large number of research on Naipaul and his works. His two novels *A House for Mr Biswas* and *A Bend in the River* are the typical representatives for the prize, of which the former, based on Naipaul's father, was created in the 1960s and the latter, praised by the media as "the last great epic of modernism", was completed in the 1970s as Naipaul's peak masterpiece. These two works were enlisted as two of the 100 greatest English novels of the 20th century, so they are worthy being typical examples and very persuasive for the study of Naipaul and his works. On Naipaul and his literary works, cultural identity has become a global research highlight. Cultural identity is a concept under the study of post-colonial theory. According to Stuart Hall's, cultural identity refers to the common culture, which reflects the common historical experience and social symbols of a nation with the characteristics of existence, and a dynamic process of change. How cultural identity out of Naipaul's works communicate and impact upon Chinese readers?

2. A Brief Review of the Study of Naipaul and His Works

Since the 1970s, there have been more and more papers and books on Naipaul in the Western academic circle, including the discussion of Naipaul's works from the perspective of cultural identity, for example, *London Calling: V.S. Naipaul, Postcolonial Mandarin* by Rob Nixon, *The novels of V.S. Naipaul: quest for order and identity* by N. Ramadevi.

The domestic translation about Naipaul was relatively late. It is Zhang Zhongzai's article "Along the Track of Pursuing Truth, Goodness and Beauty—Reading V.S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas*", published in *Foreign Literature* in 1986, that made the earliest detailed review of Naipaul in China. The first domestic translation of Naipaul's novel was completed in 1992. The

earliest systematic introduction and discussion of Naipaul's works in China appeared in 2000, which was Mei Xiaoyun's article "Writing on the Margin—Naipaul as a 'Post-Colonial Writer' and His Works" published in *Journal of Shenzhen University (Humanities and Social Sciences)*. After Naipaul won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2001, China soon witnessed a surge in the translation and publication of Naipaul's literary works. Naipaul's classic works *A House for Mr Biswas* and *A Bend in the River* were first translated and published by Yilin Publishing House in 2002 in Nanjing. It must be admitted that Naipaul's novels were more widely translated and published in China, although his works include travel notes, essays and the like. On the one hand, the return of literature itself is advocated in domestic literature studies, on the other hand, under the influence of the British cultural studies and the post-colonial theory of the United States, so the research papers on Naipaul continued to appear, and one after another were keen on the author's cultural identity and cultural awareness.

When discussing the cultural identity of Naipaul's works, the Western academic circle goes beyond the cultural level and gear deep into the analysis and criticism of Naipaul's political stance, interpreting Naipaul as a critic of the Third World, as cited above.

Domestic research focused on Naipaul's own cultural identity and the cultural identity of the characters in his literary works and translation research was scarcely conducted by scholars. The domestic research findings were typically manifested as doctoral and master's theses, among which there are more than 20 master's theses on "*A House for Mr Biswas*" as the research object, in addition to some journal articles and books. The themes of the study were mainly focused on the analysis of cultural identity and cultural awareness, such as post-colonialism, cosmopolitanism, diasporic identity, cultural identity, marginalization, identity crisis and contradiction, which is Naipaul's cultural choice between the West and the former colonies. The research shows that Naipaul is more of a cultural diaspora, who is not only at a loss for the culture closely related to him, but also suspended in the immigrant social culture. It can be seen that the cultural identity of immigrants is not invariable, but fluid and complex, and identity contradictions and anxiety are bound to appear, so the immigrants' identity presents multiple mixes and the struggle of their origins.

As stated above, there are many research achievements on the cultural identity concerning Naipaul's works, and the analysis is relatively comprehensive, with the value of literary communication in a great sense, but most of them are standing on the level of literature. It is significant to conduct a research on the communication of cultural identity out of Naipaul's classic works in China and the impact on Chinese readers from the perspective of cultural communication, and such research is conducive for Chinese readers to form an important insight of the independent development of national culture, and further strengthen the firm confidence in the path of national progress.

3. Communication of Cultural Identity in China

Cultural identity is an individual's self-awareness and cultural belonging. Individual cultural identity is not innate, but constructed in the society on which the individual lives and is in a process of dynamic change. In particular, cultural identity is characterized by subjectivity and initiative according to postcolonial theory. With the values as its core, cultural identity research mainly focuses on the national, ethnic, racial, religious and other aspects, and is bound to be linked with ideology and cultural politics.

3.1. Cultural Understanding from *A House for Mr Biswas*

In the translated novel *A House for Mr Biswas*, cultural aspects are diverse ranging from the characters to the environment as it spreads in China. The main content of the novel tells that Mr. Biswas is an Indian "small potato" living in colonial Trinidad, who struggles for a house of

his own through his life, representing the Indian immigrants' desperate pursuit for a place to settle down and a sense of belonging. Mr. Biswas embodies the people from the former colonies who spare their efforts to be in search for belonging as much as those abroad. The Indians who have arrived at Trinidad have a complex identity background, including Hinduism, Islamism and the like, as well as different castes. They are far away from the home Indian culture and cannot integrate themselves into the Trinidad culture, resulting in the deep crisis of cultural identity. In the story, some people stick to Hinduism, some imitate the Western colonists, and others rebel against Hinduism, each group striving for their own identity in a alien specific environment. As their living environment, ideology, belief, cultural knowledge and value orientation are gradually alienated from the Indian home culture, they are neither able to go back to their motherland nor want to live in a colony while they "honorably" imitate the former colonists and accept their education system. Therefore, the Indian cultural enclaves overseas is doomed to decline and collapse.

The pursuit of cultural identity had been the lifelong issue for Mr. Biswas while the people of his kind found the fact that the third generation of Indian immigrants here could no longer speak Hindi, a startling gap from mother culture. Certainly the change and wane fell onto Hanuman House and its arcade acted only as a temporary shelter where people made a gossip about India. Furthermore, many more cultural images can be found in the novel by Chinese readers in terms of cultural change and adoption. A mud hut symbolizes poverty and the loss of personal identity. Different values, living habit, belief and learning are found in the Indian immigrants as they have been trying to survive the Trinidad home. People are ready to celebrate Christmas. Mr. Biswas was made to read books and newspaper for Ajohha and given a penny and lunch, which may impress readers as Hedonism in Ajohha. Ajohha's house is teeming with modern elements, such as calendars and pictures of female movie stars. Mr. Biswas is now reading English poetry, learning geography, arithmetic, history and other courses. When he writes the billboards, he is trying to find inspiration by consulting foreign magazines in order to satisfy his clients' extravagant need. Owad has known much better the Western distinguished men such as Russell, Joad and Molotov, while he holds antipathy towards his homeland, believing that colonial Indians are superior to native Indians. "And in one afternoon the family reverence for India had been shattered." Shekhar is wearing the Christian cross while he keeps the Hindu tradition in him. Different sorts of cultural images are transmitted to the Chinese readers in the translated novel. No one can deny the fact that readers shall be stunned with such a big change of cultural awareness and identity in those immigrants, thousands away from their Indian home culture.

3.2. Cultural Transference from *A Bend in the River*

Readers are guided to shift from central America to Africa as to the Third World social situation stated in the other works *A Bend in the River* by Naipaul. The novel mainly tells the story in some African countries after Western colonists ended their rule over there where there is left still poverty, ignorance, chaos and cultural emptiness for the people as they struggle to find security, hope and cultural identity. Some of the people blindly follow traditional African culture, some are poorly imitating Western colonists, and others stray between local culture and Western culture. Generally speaking, they are all dressed in an awkward and confused cultural identity full of uncertainty, and trapped in a crisis of searching for cultural identity. The story can also be interpreted as an accusation and criticism of Western colonial rule over this continent.

Salim is the main character in the novel, a descendant of Indian immigrant living abroad. He has received a good higher education and thus been offered a senior position in a government agency. But he had experienced a long transition as a boy searching for his cultural identity, in which the hazy seen in the small town at the bend in the river was in fact a strong sense of

alienation without being needed. He obtains confidence by mimicking others, first acting as a businesswoman like his mother, then as a European school teacher and finally an imaginary aspiring African young man. He is fascinated with the White's world so that he is eager to gain a new cultural identity through his sexual relationship with the white woman, Yvette. He always expects "an adventure with Yvette", through which he shall be removed from the life he had.

Still more changes are obvious in cultural aspects of the African people. Due to the colonial influence, people's voracious need in the consumption of imported goods, such as Nescafe, cameras, binoculars, electric battery, ironmongery of sorts and other little gadgets, has driven them farther and farther away from traditional culture. Even the President himself is always playing the ape through the political life, for instance, copying the former French President Charles de Gaulle. You can find Hellenic Club, Bigburger franchise, bars in the town, which may give you the touch of Europe and the big city. The London building is a microcosm of African emulating its European masters, however mimicking is likely to impair the independence of African culture. The colonial influence is so obvious that one can easily see the ashy African rubbish, just like solid little hill as high as box-like concrete houses, and to Salim rubbish hills and the old tires in the dust were features of the cités and shanty towns. Readers can find the cultural image out of colonial rule and the disgusting environment, as a token of poverty and disorder.

As for the historical and social cultural background stated in the above two novels, Chinese readers can be deeply moved since China was once subjected to aggression, exploitation and semi-colonial rule by Western powers in history, so that the cultural identity can be recognized in Chinese readers to a great extent.

4. Chinese Readers' Cultural Consciousness

Changes of national cultural aspects and the struggle for cultural identity strike Chinese readers as the translated works are popular in the target China, triggering profound cultural awareness and consciousness about the Third World peoples, as the crisis can be easily seen in many aspects such as religious belief, national language, values orientation, and survival.

4.1. Readers' Response about Immigrants in Trinidad

The Indians immigrants desired to put down roots, to be independent, and to build a life in peace in a strange and alien land. They immigrated to the island with a different language and culture from those of the natives, and they had no political suffrage and were marginalized in the new society. It is unfair for them and equality is necessary in the long run. Mr. Biswas's life story symbolizes the general plight of the people of the former colonies, overseas people's rootless wander and search for belonging. Mr. Biswas as well as his follow people has experienced a hardship through the life, thus the house in the novel also serves as a metaphor for the author's quest for cultural identity. Even worse V.S. Naipaul himself can only speak English, which indicates he has lost almost everything as the Indian original offspring. Language, like country and community, being a necessary factor determining identity and a measurement for a nation to find its position in the world, is a core cohesive force that forms a sense of national identity, and an indispensable organic component of national definition. Naipaul, the third generation of the Indian immigrants speaks no Hindu, hence it is definitely difficult for the national culture to be carried down as language normally plays the role of carrier for culture. A big block may exist when Indian civilization is in the process of communication or the overseas Indian offspring intend to introduce their ancestral culture to others.

On the island of the West Indies the immigrants found it hardly stay away from the influence of colonial culture which had been strongly implanted in them, so that they began to mock the Western colonists. Unfortunately, since the immigrants are increasingly assimilated by

Westernized ideologies, values, lifestyles and even religious beliefs, finally the youth particularly came to have a yearning for the metropolitan state of Britain. The assimilated Indian immigrants considered it a great honor to go to Britain for education. Children's ideological awareness is being modified unconsciously because of English education in the colony. First witnessed the marginalization of the native language, then the reverence for Hinduism rituals faded, then the family and ethnic consciousness became faint, and finally, the meaning of the word India receded. Owad, Mr. Biswas's youngest son, has ever studied in Britain whose comment "Never trust your people" was evidence that family trust vanished basically. The motherland India has become strange and alien, which the immigrants have been clamoring to return to.

From the Indian immigrants' experience in Trinidad, one can penetrate that the Third World was remarkably effected by colonialism, lying in a few aspects such as values, views on life, ways of life, as well as education system. Owing to the education, cultural variety exists in one person as a mixture, and people of this kind are often not limited within a single value designation in their soul but have a display of some unstable identifications.

A gigantic shock happened to the immigrants' religious beliefs so that Hinduism was found in a crisis. Naipaul himself too committed a sin in Hinduism because he married a British girl. Some of the most important requirements of Hindu tradition are the respect for Hinduism, the practice of marriage within the caste, the supremacy of Brahmins, and the taboo against unclean food. Apparently Naipaul didn't obey the Hindu instruction of marriage practice. In the novel it can be seen that the owner of the house, Mr. Biswas, is also a typical representative of Indian immigrants who intended to be unshackled by Hindu traditions. However, as the major traditional religion in India, Hinduism ranks an important position in India. India, one of the oldest civilizations in the East, boasts of a splendid culture for thousands of years, in which Hinduism has shaped people's values, outlook on life and spiritual temperament that consist of Indians' spiritual life today. Consequently there happened the disintegration of Hindu spiritual world in the roots. Mrs. Tulsi came to believe in Roman Catholicism with a cross arrayed in her room and her youngest son went to Catholic school wearing both the Hindu sacred cord and the Catholic cross.

Mixed-race is described by anthropologists as the most thorough form of cultural blending. One possible option for overseas Indians is to marry outside their race, resulting in what is called "mongrel" or "cultural hybrid", which is the most dreadful and dramatic change for Brahmins who place great emphasis on blood stock.

4.2. Readers' Response about the African Peoples

The story of cultural influence did not only happen in the West Indies, Central America as the Third World had been ruled over by the West colonists. In fact one can easily find the similar tragic fate existence in African peoples, about which Naipaul made it known to world readers in his *A Bend in the River*.

The novel states the chaos, political dictatorship, poverty, backwardness and primitively barbaric situation in African countries after European colonists were forced to retreat. It conveys the close concern and deep thinking on the history, national culture, economy and politics of the black African continent and even the whole Third World countries in the post-colonial era, which also reflects Naipaul's dream for freedom, democracy and human rights.

In the eyes of Chinese readers, because China once suffered considerably from Japanese aggression and enslavement and the still earlier war and reckless depredation of Western powers in history, they can be quickly touched and are ready to share the miserable feeling of being trampled and ravaged, so that they are sympathetic and plead the cause of the Third World nations. Furthermore, it also prompts Chinese readers to pay close attention to and think deeply about the history, national culture, economy and social politics in African countries and

even the whole Third World nowadays. Their economic development, social progress and cultural independence are necessary to follow the rest of the world.

The fact is that the colonist rule not only wildly plundered the material wealth of colonial countries, but also tremendously blocked their normal civilization process, resulting in the current economic collapse and cultural nihilism of these countries. The situation of the Third World countries in the post-colonial period is even worse than it was before independence. African peoples found it unable to start a brand new life of hope and a sense of security, where there is no order, simply teeming with greed, jealousy, hatred, and killings. Dramatic changes are seen in African peoples out of the colonist governance in terms of cultural awareness and mindset.

Western religions such as Christianity came to Africa with a dominant position, which brought Western civilization and colonialism over to African continent. In Ferdinand's view, Western religion threatened to depersonalize Africa, which demonstrates his growing national feeling and nationalism rose in him as the gods of Africa encouraged him with faith. Ferdinand made himself and his cultural identity lost in the fervent national affection and finally fell into a serious identity crisis.

After graduation, Indar had to face discrimination against non-Westerners — the University Student Employment Council was set up simply to find jobs for British students, not foreigners like Indar although "there was London in his clothes, the trousers, the striped cotton shirt, the way his hair was cut, his shoes".

When the Third World peoples have the misfortune to pin their hopes on the social identity they desire, they completely lose their own identity. They shadow and echo the colonialists so that they are fully committed to the identity of Western culture. Because the Western technology and values were transferred to the post-colonial societies, the colonial people fell into deep depression without the sponsorship of the Westerners, thus seeking the sense of security again. Students in the new Domain are the future of the new Africa, but they are unable to be rooted in the local culture, just addicted to copying and attaching to European culture. Salim, with a multicultural background, descended from an Indian Muslim in East Africa, counted as no real African, and different from Arabs and other Muslims on the coast, who cannot be classified as an Indian group either. Truly engaged in bewilderment about his own identity with solitude and melancholy, he holds that the local culture cannot be integrated with the external culture. Remaining still the otherness in the Western world, he is always fluctuating precariously between European and native cultures. Generally speaking, three groups of people are in discussion in the novel, among which the first are full of enthusiasm about Africa's traditional culture, the second are taking the Westerners as role models and trying to imitate what the colonists say and do, and the third, in a neutral position, are willing to accept both ways and hovering in the between.

4.3. Chinese Readers' Cultural Association

Different cultural images and the dramatic changes of people's cultural tags are apparently understood by Chinese readers as the colonial impact, and people's gender, race, mindset, mimic and mixture, which triggers readers' exploration in values, custom, religious belief and post-colonial culture. It is imperative and necessary to achieve cultural independence and maintain the national progress, in particular in the Third World countries. Chinese readers are dismayed at the loss and confusion cultural identity as narrated in the two novels, thus they are firmly convinced that national traditions have to be kept and carried down to emerge as cultural diversity on the globe with equality and fairness.

Luckily, great changes had taken place since the founding of new China and particularly its achievements in national culture and social development are outstandingly world-known since reform and opening up. Chinese readers are coming to acknowledge that based on national

independence the traditional culture is necessarily important to be carried towards progress in order to retain the cultural identity. Moreover Chinese readers hold a firm attitude toward the national advancement process with a strong faith in the path of social development.

5. Conclusion

Corresponding responses are found in Chinese readers when they penetrate different cultural aspects such as religious beliefs, history, geographic information, customs and values embodied in the two novels, it can be fully understood that the characters in the novel are featured with multiple identities of the immigrants, connected with specific regions and racial groups. With the effect of literary exchange and cultural communication, associated with the specific cultural environment of China, Chinese readers are made to ponder over the poverty and struggle resulted from colonial rule together with the confusion of cultural identity, which is likely to bring psychological shock and sympathy to Chinese readers. They are all the Third World peoples, who share the hatred of colonists' rule and the hope for national economic development and cultural prominence. At the same time, Chinese readers are inspired to pay close attention to and think deeply about the history, national culture, economy and politics of all the oppressed Third World countries, firmly promoting the development and independence of national culture along the road of socialism with Chinese characteristics.

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