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Research Article

V. S. Naipaul's *In a Free State:* Contours of Exile and the Paradox of Freedom

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Abstract: V. S. Naipaul's *In a Free State* comprises a prologue, three central narratives, and an epilogue, forming a distinctive sequence that explores the emotional and psychological costs of migration, political decolonization, and cultural uprooting. Across several locations—Greece and Egypt, the United States, Britain, and an unnamed African nation—Naipaul shows how exile and alienation shape the lives of servants, migrants, tourists, and expatriates. These figures move in search of safety, dignity, and opportunity, yet they usually end up in a state of suspension, uncertainty, and inner conflict rather than in genuine belonging. This paper explores the "contours of exile" in the book—the psychological, spatial, and symbolic boundaries within which Naipaul's characters are forced to live—and examines the paradox of freedom that emerges from the text: political independence and personal mobility appear to promise liberation, but they regularly produce new forms of insecurity, violence, and self-division instead. Building on Dr. Seerat Munir's reading of exile and alienation in the work, and drawing on postcolonial critics such as Gillian Dooley and Timothy Weiss, the paper also considers Naipaul's use of the mirror image, the motif of journeys, and intertextual links with Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass* to show how the identities of postcolonial subjects remain unstable even when they live "in a free state."

Keywords: Exile; Alienation; Decolonization; Postcolonial identity; Paradox of freedom

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Introduction

In a Free State (1971) holds an important place in Naipaul's career. It stands at a crossroads between his early novels set in the Caribbean and his later, more global writing that moves between continents and cultures. Instead of a single plot, the book presents what many call a "novel in stories" or a "sequence." All five parts—the prologue, three central stories, and the epilogue—speak to each other. Naipaul himself insisted that they must be published together because each sheds light on the others and adds depth to the overall design.

The central characters—Santosh in "One Out of Many," the unnamed Caribbean narrator in "Tell Me Who to Kill," and the English expatriates Bobby and Linda in the title novella—have all left familiar places. They travel from village to city, from colony to metropolis, or from imperial center to former colony. They leave in search of work, status, security, or simply a fresh start. However, rather than finding a firm sense of belonging, they end up in what Munir calls a "purgatorial position": they are never fully accepted in the new environment, yet they cannot return to the old one either. They are suspended between worlds. The title *In a Free State* itself raises an important question: what does it mean to be "free"—for a person and for a nation? The African country in the book is formally independent, governed by African leaders after the end of colonial rule. However, this political freedom does not bring peace and justice. Instead, it coexists with ethnic conflict, political rivalry, and constant fear. Similarly, many of Naipaul's characters gain new personal freedoms—freedom of movement, wage labor, and new legal status—but these liberties also heighten their awareness of vulnerability and loneliness. This paper, therefore, focuses on two linked issues. First, how does *In a Free State* map the contours of exile in different places and for different kinds of people? Second, how does it show that "free" individuals and "free" countries can still be haunted by unfreedom, dependence, and inner division?

Munir's article clarifies the key ideas of exile and alienation that underlie Naipaul's fiction. Traditionally, the word "exile" referred to forced banishment from one's city, region, or country. It involved physical removal and was often accompanied by legal or political punishment. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, however, writers and thinkers began to broaden the term. Charles Baudelaire, for example, spoke of an "internal exile"—a psychological condition in which a person feels estranged from their own society even if they have not been physically driven out. Alienation is a related but distinct concept. It refers more directly to emotional and social disconnection. An alienated person feels cut off from others, from shared values and customs, and sometimes even from their own past self. They may live among people, but they feel profoundly alone. Munir points out that in much postcolonial writing, exile and alienation often overlap. A person who is separated from cultural norms and their community is not merely physically elsewhere; they are also seeking a new sense of self, often under difficult and hostile circumstances.

Naipaul's work has often been read in this light. Critics like Chandra B. Joshi describe him as a "voice of exile," recording the experiences of Indians in the Caribbean, migrants in England, and wandering figures in Africa, India, and beyond. *In a Free State*

compresses many of these concerns into a relatively short but complex book. Each story offers a different perspective on migration, dependence, and the fragile, sometimes painful process of building an identity in a world in which old structures have collapsed, and new ones are not yet stable. Munir stresses that *In a Free State* is not just a loose collection of tales but a very carefully structured sequence. It begins with a prologue in which a narrator travels by ferry from Piraeus to Alexandria. It concludes with an epilogue set in Egypt, in which the same or a similar narrative voice reflects on tourists, performers, and poor local children. Between these frames come the three central stories: about an Indian servant in America, a Caribbean migrant in England, and two English people in an African state.

Naipaul reportedly refused an editorial suggestion to publish only the African novella, insisting that the whole sequence be kept intact. Munir reads this as evidence that the shorter pieces are not secondary but essential. They create a "hall of mirrors" effect, where each narrative reflects aspects of the others. No single story is complete on its own. Instead, each re-presents similar themes—exile, freedom, violence, belonging—from a slightly different angle. The mirror motif is crucial here. It appears quite literally in "One Out of Many" when Santosh first sees his face clearly in an American mirror. It also appears figuratively in the way each narrative reflects and distorts the others. Munir links this mirror image to Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass*, where Alice steps through a mirror into a reversed world that is familiar yet strange. In Naipaul's book, the mirror suggests the inverted and confusing nature of modern displacement. The familiar categories of "home" and "away," "center" and "margin," and "colonizer" and "colonized" are inverted or blurred.

Thus, the sequence's structure and the recurring mirror imagery mutually support one another. Each part of *In a Free State* can be seen as a reflection of a different aspect of exile, and, taken together, they make it difficult for the reader to settle into a single, fixed, comfortable viewpoint. Santosh, the central figure in "One Out of Many," is a poor Indian man who works as a servant for a bureaucrat in Bombay. When his employer is posted to Washington, D.C., Santosh follows him, not because he has his own American dream, but because his life is tied to that of his master. A previous movement—from a hill village to the streets of Bombay—has already trained him to adapt to new settings, but it has also prepared him, perhaps unconsciously, to be uprooted again. In Washington, Santosh's life is first confined to a small, cupboard-like space in the employer's apartment. He experiences the airplane journey and the tall building's elevator as frightening and suffocating. When he finally steps outside and tries to find his way through the city, that physical struggle becomes a symbol of his attempt to move beyond his narrow life as a servant.

The turning point occurs when Santosh arrives at a public park, which he calls a "green circle." There, he sees different groups: African Americans (whom he calls *hubshi*), white Americans, and Hare Krishna followers chanting religious songs in Sanskrit. The scene shows the diversity and confusion of the American city. Santosh quickly realizes that none of these groups "expects" him or has a place ready for him.

Unlike the Bombay pavement where he had a circle of fellow walkers, here he is simply one more invisible person.

Even so, America at first feels exciting and full of possibilities. Santosh escapes from his employer, with the help of another Indian man, Priya, and obtains employment at a small restaurant. He begins earning wages and feels proud that he is earning "real money." However, as Munir notes, this rise in status is deceptive. Santosh is still undocumented. He lives with constant fear of raids and the police, and his inner sense of stability is weak. Time seems to pass in an unusual way; events occur, but he does not feel that he is developing or progressing. His relationship with an African-American woman, whom he calls *hubshi*, leads to marriage and the promise of a green card. In theory, this marriage should secure his legal position and, by extension, his freedom. In practice, it deepens his sense of being trapped. He is now tied to someone he does not truly love or understand, and he feels even more confined than when he was a servant. Eventually, he chooses to shut himself away in his room, hardly moving at all, even though he could, in principle, walk around the city. The heart of his experience is captured in his reflection that all his freedom has given him only the knowledge that he has "a face and a body" that must be kept alive. The mirror scene is more than a simple moment of looking; it marks his awareness of himself as a vulnerable, aging body without strong roots. The American dream, which is supposed to offer growth and self-realization, seems, in his case, to provide only a clearer view of his weakness and isolation. His exile is not only geographical; it is also an exile into an uncomfortable self-consciousness.

The second story, "Tell Me Who to Kill," moves from South Asia and the United States to the Caribbean and then to England. It is narrated by an unnamed man whose life revolves around his younger brother, Dayo. On their island, the narrator feels that he has "no life" of his own. He pours his energy and income into supporting Dayo, believing that his brother's success abroad will redeem and justify the family's struggles. When the narrator later relocates to England, he finds that his own existence is one of endless work. He takes factory jobs and later operates a small grocery shop. Dayo, meanwhile, seems unable to find his footing, failing both in educational and business ventures. The older brother's mixture of love, envy, and disappointment grows more intense, especially when Dayo marries a white woman. The narrator believes that his sacrifices have been in vain and that his brother has betrayed him.

Munir suggests that this story develops the mirror theme at a deeper, more psychological level. Santosh's mirror at least offers a single, if disturbing, image. The narrator of "Tell Me Who to Kill" cannot maintain a coherent sense of himself or his life. His narrative jumps in time; he slips into daydreams; he hints at violent acts but does not clearly describe them. The famous line, "You had better kill him before he kills you, once you figure out who your opponent is," reveals a mind haunted by fear and confusion. Language becomes a key marker of exile in this story. At one point, the narrator claims that he has "turned [his] back on the English language" and does not want to read or understand anything. This is not only a literacy issue. It symbolizes a refusal or inability to inhabit the language of the former colonial power and of the new

host society. While Santosh's alienation is felt mainly through his body and legal status, this narrator's exile takes the form of broken speech, half-told stories, and a failure of communication. Munir notes that Naipaul's own early experiences in London—struggling to make a living, working briefly in a factory, and feeling deeply unsure of his path as a writer—echo faintly in this narrative. However, the story should not be read as a direct autobiography. Instead, it dramatizes a broader pattern: the postwar migrant who imagines that "real life" exists elsewhere, only to find that the new place is just as harsh, and that the pressure of expectations leads not to fulfillment but to breakdown. In terms of the paradox of freedom, this narrative shows that travel and migration, which are supposed to open doors, can also destroy the fragile structures of self and family. The narrator's efforts to give his brother the freedom to succeed eventually rob him of his own sense of purpose and control.

The title novella, set in an unnamed African country, draws together the personal and political strands of the book's themes. Here, the question of national freedom—decolonization, self-rule, and the authority of African leaders—comes into direct focus. The country is formally independent, but the narrative reveals it as a space of tension and instability: a president and an exiled king compete for power, and ethnic loyalties are used to mobilize violence. The main figures through whom we see this world are Bobby, a civil servant recovering from a mental breakdown, and Linda, the dissatisfied wife of another official. They travel by car from the capital to a southern district, passing through military checkpoints, hearing news of arrests, and sensing a growing mood of threat. The landscape they traverse is not the exotic, romantic Africa of earlier colonial literature, but a politically charged space fraught with fear. Munir reads this journey in relation to *Through the Looking-Glass*. Earlier imperial narratives often followed colonized characters moving toward the metropolitan center. Naipaul reverses this pattern by sending British characters into the African "outback" at a time when colonial rule is already over. The road trip becomes a long confrontation with state power: soldiers who can beat citizens at will, officers who humiliate travelers, and crowds that may turn hostile without warning.

Many critics have objected to Naipaul's portrayal of Africa in this novella. Munir refers to arguments that regard Africa as an "African Orient," a generalized, stereotyped space. The continent is portrayed as lacking stable culture and development, and African characters rarely exhibit complex inner lives on the page. They are often shown as waiters, soldiers, or servants whose main function in the story is to reflect the unsettled feelings and prejudices of the white protagonists. This has led some to accuse Naipaul of reinforcing negative images of Africa.

At the same time, the novella does not glorify the white characters. Bobby and Linda are hardly models of colonial heroism. Bobby is fragile, uncertain, and marked by his earlier breakdown. Linda is restless, seeking sexual attention and emotional validation. Both are self-absorbed and often careless in their dealings with local people. Naipaul's narrator even criticizes the "colonial state of thought," saying it recognizes no responsibility. Bobby and Linda commit exactly this kind of error: they focus on their private frustrations and desires while the country around them is in deep trouble.

The paradox of freedom is sharpest here. The African state is "free" from colonial rule, but its freedom is expressed through authoritarian control, ethnic hatred, and random violence. Bobby and Linda, as foreigners and former colonizers, still have certain protections and privileges, but these fail at key moments. Soldiers beat Bobby. Both face situations where their class and race cannot fully shield them. Their personal freedoms—sexual freedom, travel, professional roles—rest on very shaky ground and can collapse suddenly. The prologue and epilogue broaden the book's scope beyond particular nations and migrations. In the prologue, the narrator observes an English tramp on a ferry between Piraeus and Alexandria. The tramp is mocked and bullied by Lebanese merchants and looked down upon by Western travelers. He is dirty, eccentric, and seems out of place. Munir compares him to some of Carroll's strange characters—figures who do not fit into neat social categories and become objects of ridicule. When the tramp eventually says that he is a "citizen of the world," his statement sounds both defiant and tragic. It claims a broad kind of freedom, but it also reveals that he has no home anywhere. For others on the ship, this lack of national and social anchoring makes him seem dangerous. He does not belong to the normal map of identity.

In the epilogue, the narrator again finds himself abroad, this time in tourist areas of Italy and Egypt. He notices a troupe of Chinese performers whose polite, formal behavior appears charming in one context and jarring or out of place in another. One disturbing scene shows a waiter violently chasing poor Egyptian children who are asking tourists for food. This repeats the pattern of bullying and exclusion observed in the tramp in the prologue, suggesting that such acts of casual cruelty are common in contexts characterized by strong divides between the rich and the poor, insiders and outsiders. The narrator attempts to intervene and protect the children, but he quickly recognizes that his individual action cannot alter the deeper structures. Munir argues that at this point, the book emphasizes uncertainty and moral complexity. National labels—Lebanese, English, German, Italian, Chinese, Egyptian—lose their clear boundaries. In a globalized world of travel and tourism, people constantly cross borders, yet inequalities remain sharp. Everyone is watching and being watched; everyone is both part of the system and, at times, its victim.

Here, the idea of a "free state" moves beyond any particular country. The modern world as a whole becomes a kind of free state: people can travel, work abroad, and adopt new identities, but they also live with deep insecurity and a lack of firm belonging. Exile, in this sense, is no longer an exception reserved for a few; it becomes a widespread condition. One of Munir's most important insights is her tracing of the mirror image throughout the sequence. The mirror is not just a physical object in Santosh's room. It becomes a metaphor for writing, self-reflection, and the gap between who we think we are and what we actually see when we look closely. In "One Out of Many," the mirror shows Santosh a face he had never fully recognized before; he becomes aware of himself as an individual body in a strange land. In "Tell Me Who to Kill," the narrator's inner "mirror" is broken. He cannot produce a stable narrative about his life; his story fragments into bits and pieces. In the African novella, Bobby's and Linda's perceptions of Africa function as a distorted mirror of the continent. They project their fears and desires onto a place and a people they never really try to

understand. Munir links this to Robert Young's warning about "othering"—the habit of turning other people into simplified, distant objects. Naipaul, she suggests, uses the mirror trope to show that no identity, whether of colonizer or colonized, is stable or simple. The five parts of the book are described as "unshaped" and "in a free condition," meaning that they resist neat classification. The form of the sequence itself, with its gaps and changes of voice, mirrors the uncertain, shifting identities of its characters.

Language supports this effect. Santosh's limited and sometimes naive English, the Caribbean narrator's rejection of English, and the cool, observational tone of the frame narrator all point to the difficulty of finding one voice that can fully express exilic experience. Naipaul distances himself from traditional realist novels that end with tidy resolutions and comfortably integrated characters. Instead, he presents a world in which plots break off, voices do not fully converge, and identity remains unresolved.

When we look across all five parts of *In a Free State*, a clear pattern emerges. Freedom—whether it is a nation's independence, a person's ability to move and work, or a writer's freedom to break away from conventional forms—does not automatically produce harmony and fulfillment. Very often, it exposes how fragile things really are.

- Santosh's move from servant to wage earner and legal resident brings him new choices, but it also makes him painfully aware of his loneliness and physical weakness.
- The Caribbean narrator's migration to England gives him new opportunities in theory, yet in practice, it leads to exhaustion, disappointment, and a collapse of his inner world.
- Bobby and Linda's position in a "free" African state shows that political independence can coexist with violence, fear, and moral confusion.
- The tramp's global "citizenship" and the tourists' easy travel highlight that mobility can go hand in hand with humiliation, exploitation, and a lack of real community.

On the level of literary form, Naipaul's choice to write a sequence instead of a traditional novel is itself a kind of freedom. A single plot or point of view does not bind him. However, this structural freedom yields a book that is deliberately replete with gaps, overlapping images, and unresolved endings. The stories do not come to comforting conclusions; they simply stop at points where the reader feels that life will go on, but probably not in a straightforward or hopeful way. In this sense, the exiled characters are "in a free state" not because they are safe and content, but because they are unanchored. They are between homes, between languages, between identities. They must continue, but they do not know where they truly belong. The discussion above shows that *In a Free State* offers a richly layered picture of exile and freedom in the postcolonial world. Building on Munir's insights, we can see that Naipaul does not present exile as a simple, chosen path. Rather, his characters are pushed into exile by historical processes—colonialism, migration, economic need—and must then try, with mixed success, to construct a livable self within this "free" yet unstable condition. By tracing different contours of exile—from Santosh's bodily self-consciousness to the

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Caribbean narrator's broken language, from Bobby and Linda's dangerous drive through a "free" African state to the tramp and tourists adrift on the Mediterranean—Naipaul reveals how deeply homelessness and restlessness are woven into modern life. Freedom, in this book, is a double-edged gift. It removes certain chains, but it rarely brings peace. Instead, it often means living without secure boundaries, always moving, always negotiating, and never completely at home.

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