

From Tramp to Traveller: V. S. Naipaul Mirrors Immigrant Experiences in *In a Free State*

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Abstract

There is a scene in 'One out of Many' in *In A Free State* where Santosh, a character from the foothills of Himalaya, looks at himself in the mirror and realises that he is an individual. He takes the step of breaking away from his employer and seeks his own identity in the big city of Washington DC. What does the mirror stand for in the the scene? Is the mirror symptomatic of colonial subservience, or economic servility, or caste demarcations that he must transcend to achieve individuality? Or is the mirror the medium to bridge the gaps between tradition and modernity, community and individuality, faith and rationality? Ironically, Lewis Carroll uses the mirror in *Through the Looking Glass* to invert the everyday world and reflect on reality. The article compares the text to Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass* in a bid to read Naipaul's mirroring of immigrant experiences by presenting various personas from and in different parts of the world. Their immigrant experiences differ in specifics but all of them sense alienation from their environment and their communities. The same is reflected in the narrator's experiences in the Prologue and the Epilogue with the tramp and the traveller being eternally alienated from their fellow travellers.

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V.S. Naipaul's early novels were all based in the Caribbean. He then expanded his oeuvre to writing travel narratives about Trinidad and India. *In a Free State* marks a break and a return to Naipaul's earlier fictional writings. He returns to fiction with a short story format, akin to *Miguel Street*, except that the stories are no longer bound by a time or a place or a region. The three narratives about immigrant experiences, an Indian in America, a Caribbean in England, and two English people in Africa, are framed in by a narrator's own travels across the Mediterranean from Piraeus to Alexandria and by a trip to the pyramids in Egypt. However, *In a Free State* also marks a break from the form of the novel because Naipaul insists on piecing together separate pieces as a whole. Naipaul recounts that in 1971, Diana Athill wanted to publish the African novella, 'In a Free State,' leaving out the other pieces because it was a complete story by itself.¹ However, Naipaul insisted that there was to be no publication unless all the pieces were published simultaneously as a sequence because he felt that the other pieces defined the novella.

There is an extended passage in *The Enigma of Arrival* about 'In a Free State', which its narrator says he was writing at the time of his arrival in Wiltshire.² In the passage, the narrator writes that he was reworking the theme of a traveller disembarking and entering a new space and

¹ V.S. Naipaul, Preface, *In a Free State* (London: Picador, 2008) v-vi.

² Though *The Enigma of Arrival* is titled a novel, critics including Dooley, John Thieme, Rob Nixon, Vijay Mishra and Timothy Weiss have read it as a semi-autobiographical text.

returning to the shore only to find that the ship had already left. He has nowhere to go. Naipaul attempts to capture such colonial anxieties across different nation states through different geographical settings of the stories and providing different lineages and legacies to his characters in *In a Free State*. Peter Kalliney argues for the crucial role that BBC Caribbean Voices programme and the Bloomsbury group played in providing Naipaul, Selvon, Braithwaite, and Lamming a literary atmosphere with easier access to a reading, writing and publishing audience. This literary exchange allowed ‘modernist tropes of urban alienation [to be] ... readily adapted to representations of migrants suffering racism, deracination, and poverty.’³ Though such a consideration tends to read all West Indian literature of the time as immigrant literature, it also allows Naipaul’s personal anxieties as an immigrant in England to be read into his writing. The sense of dislocation that Naipaul must have felt growing up in a Hindu society in the West Indies would have doubled as he travelled to England.

Each of the five pieces explores the human psyche and how migration makes unnatural demands on the person. The themes in *In a Free State* pertain to being and becoming, who is free or not, and whether a nation state can be a free State or not. Equally, the text explores the theme of immigration in postmodern England at the end of the Second World War and colonialism. Gillian Dooley argues that the text shows ‘Naipaul’s quest for the correct form’ pointing out that the ‘themes in this novel include the image of the journey, the many facets of the idea of freedom, and the accommodat[ion] of a variety of subject positions.’⁴ Timothy Weiss argues that while in the early novels of Naipaul, journeys or voyages ‘signify openness, discovery, growth, potentialities in general, ... *In a Free State* recounts journeys of loss, waste, absurdity, humiliation, brutality.’⁵ Naipaul recognises that immigration, whether voluntary or involuntary, involves a renegotiation of one’s ties to family, race, class and/or nation such as in the case of Santosh and his ‘new’ relationships with Priya and the ‘hubshi’ woman. It also involves renegotiating the relations that one had in the ‘home’ country as in the case of the narrator’s relationship with his brother in the second tale. However, the English expatriates in the third tale do not renegotiate the new environment and this proves tragic. Reading the five pieces together is as if Naipaul is presenting various facets of the immigrant experience in a hall of mirrors where each image is individual and complete yet displaces all previous images, constantly defining and re-defining the self.

This article uses the image of a mirror, which is first used in ‘One Out of Many’, to read the ‘sequence’ of narratives as variations upon the theme of immigrant experience. The gap between an object and its image or enantiomorph is similar to the gap between the narrator and his writing. One cannot exist without the other and the writing/mirror hides/shows as much as it absorbs/reflects. One of the lasting images of the use of mirror in English literature is Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking Glass* which details the journey of Alice through an inverted nonsensical world. *Through the Looking Glass* has been read as children’s literature and as

³ Peter Kalliney, ‘Metropolitan Modernism and Its West Indian Interlocutors: 1950s London and the Emergence of Postcolonial Literature,’ *PMLA* 122.1, Special Topic: Cities (January 2007) 89-104.

⁴ Gillian Dooley, *V.S. Naipaul, Man and Writer* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2006) 60.

⁵ Timothy F. Weiss, *On the Margins: The Art of Exile in V. S. Naipaul* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1992) 208-09.

nonsense literature. The popularity of the nursery rhymes and characters playing chess, hide and seek, cards ensure the recall value of the text. Supplanting the child with an immigrant, Naipaul is able to make sense of the immigrant's expectations from a parent and a host country. Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*, much like *In a Free State*, can be read as a challenge to the novel of social manners with its well-ordered plots and neat endings with non-confirmative elements being shipped away or transformed and brought within acceptable social norms and everybody 'living happily ever after'. The purpose of this comparison is not to imply that Naipaul uses it as a model for his own writing but to see the variation in the use of a familiar trope. The references from Carroll's text comment on the appropriateness of the lines to the five sections of *In a Free State*. The significance of this reading lies in recognising subtle patterns of influence such that new meanings may be given to Naipaul's text. It also enables us to read Lewis Carroll's text as a text about the unsettling nature of the experience of displacement. By articulating a response to their new environment, Naipaul's protagonists renegotiate and 'theorise' about the place that they are from, creating a critical distance between their previous selves and their present state, destabilising unified subjectivity both at the point of departure and arrival. My interest is to see how Naipaul uses the trope of the mirror to reflect an immigrant's anxieties about 'home' that, paradoxically, had either been left behind or is deferred to the future but never realised in the present.

'So I wasn't dreaming, after all, unless – unless we're all part of the same dream'⁶

In the above lines, Alice, after crossing over to the other side of the mirror, is ruminating if her experiences are a dream. The text, *In a Free State*, begins with a Prologue with the narrator travelling on a ship from Piraeus to Alexandria. The location of the narrative's beginning is important because it is in international waters, away from strict societal strictures, and the focus is a Tramp who defies these very structures by his non-conformity. The Tramp is not particularly English but as Naipaul writes, he could be an English romantic, wanderer or a writer. While the Tramp travels cabin class, like the narrator, he is a misfit in society because he wears motley unwashed dress and eats and behaves in a manner that agitates the others, ranging from Lebanese business travellers to American students. Like one of the characters in Carroll's tale, the tramp is an idiosyncratic character who dines alone and tears up his magazine in a fit of anger to gain attention and then runs away. He is completely at odds with himself: 'He looked for company but needed solitude; he looked for attention, and at the same time wanted not to be noticed.'⁷ The Lebanese sellers of wares indulge in a cat and mouse game where they bully the Tramp into fleeing the dining room and hiding in the toilets. The Tramp triumphs by blocking the Lebanese out of their cabin. The Tramp proclaims, 'I think of myself as a citizen of the world (IFS 11). The declaration is significant because the world undivided by barriers of class, race and nations does not exist. It is equally ironical that the Tramp should feel threatened by perpetrators

⁶ Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass: And What Alice Found There*, Project Gutenberg, The Millennium Fulcrum Edition 1.7. Chapter VIII. eBook. Web. 8 April 2016. <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/12/12-h/12-h.htm>. Further references to this text will be included in parentheses in the text preceded by TLG.

⁷ V.S. Naipaul, *In a Free State* (London: Deutsch, 1971) 13. Further references to this text will be included in parentheses in the text preceded by IFS.

of these barriers. Hence, the ‘citizen of the world’, rather than being a free individual, is seen as a threat to freedom by such non-compliance. He betrays an inability to accommodate or protect. The narrator never makes this clear but the theme of freedom continues in the next narrative with the social misfit getting transformed into a colonial misfit.

Humpty-Dumpty: ‘When I use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less’ (TLG Chapter VI)

In ‘One out of Many’, Santosh is a lower class Indian immigrant who achieves his American dream but feels hollow in his success. The narrator speaks in a displaced narrative of ‘both here and in India’ (IFS 25). Santosh has a previous history of migration from the hills to Bombay, leaving his wife and children, in search of employment and money. In Bombay, he lives a fairly contented life sharing camaraderie within his own community of footpath dwellers. The physical dislocation from his village to the city is a back-story when we first meet him working for a bureaucrat in Bombay. It is the second more comic and dramatic transition that sets the story in action. His boss is given a transfer to Washington DC and the servant Santosh accompanies him. The plane journey is a grand comedy of errors with Santosh travelling with his bundle of clothes and spitting betel juice all over the airplane alley and toilet. The claustrophobic journey in the plane is symptomatic of his life ahead in a cupboard-like space in his boss’s apartment.

His claustrophobic world collapses when he struggles through the apartment and the even more claustrophobic elevator before he reaches the green circle where he sees *hubshi*,⁸ Americans and the dancers with men wearing saffron robes and girls in saris chanting Sanskrit words in praise of Lord Krishna (IFS 34).⁹ Yet, he feels he has nowhere to go because there is no community or friends awaiting him. He realises that people are in communities while he is alone. Santosh finds America invigorating only because its race inequalities do not touch him. However, the feelings of loneliness become more and more exaggerated as he is seduced by the Afro-American woman. He runs away from the employer, starts life afresh as a cook and begins to earn ‘real money’. However, his fear of the unknown and of the past catching up makes him unstable and neurotic. In a world where he is free to move around, he wilfully locks himself in his room. He is unable to talk with his employer on equal terms and soon realises that he has to marry the African maid to gain his green card and legitimately live in America.

The desire to see the world and *not to return* remains a very important aspect of immigration. Somehow, a return is mired in loss, regret and failure and is never an option for the immigrant. Naipaul obliquely comments on the need to marry to get a green card. There are many layers to Santosh’s American dream. In the first instance, Santosh never had the American dream, yet he is sucked into it unconsciously. The narrator allows the transition to be so smooth that the reader never realises when Santosh begins having the American dream. However, the ring of hollowness around Santosh’s success (‘All that my freedom has brought me is the knowledge

⁸ A reference to Afro-Americans. In Santosh’s mind, the *hubshi* (black) and the Americans (whites) are two separate entities, even though later, he marries a *hubshi* to acquire the green card.

⁹ The latter are probably affiliated to ISKCON, the International Society of Krishna Consciousness, which is a Hindu religious organisation, often seen to propagate their religious ideals on the streets through the use of a van, pamphlets, music and dancing.

that I have a face and have a body, that I must feed this body and clothe this body for a certain number of years. Then it will be over' (IFS 61)) and his loneliness ('In this city I was alone and it didn't matter what I did' (IFS 60)) defuses the American dream with America being the great melting pot. Santosh seeks the company of fellow men such as Priya but fails to keep up the pretence of equality. He does get his way by getting a clever pay hike but money and success do not earn him camaraderie and friendship.

Santosh is slowly sucked into a time capsule where events are fast paced and the reader is made to forget if Santosh's success came in one year or a couple or ten or twenty years. His unnamed employer, the black woman and Priya all understand him better than himself. His confessions to them come too late exposing his ineptitude at triumphing over the world. What endears Santosh to the readers is that he is not a trickster or a social climber. His aspirations are clothed in understatement of his ability to negotiate. The only incident that stands out is his looking into the mirror and finding an image of himself that he does not recognise but desires so deeply that he acquires it. The mirror becomes a symbol of Santosh's aspirations for finding money, status and stability in life. Inversely, it makes him aware of his own vulnerability and inability to survive by himself. The motif of seeing – the unnamed employer sees efficiency, Priya sees potential, and the hubshi woman finds him attractive – is offset with what Santosh feels – failure. Yet, paradoxically, Santosh is narrating his own story of 'accomplishments.' The green card is an ambitious undertaking for the rather uneducated unassuming Santosh. Just as Humpty-Dumpty argues, in the quotation from *Through the Looking Glass* above that the word means only what he wants it to mean, neither more nor less, this story is reflective of the narrator's desire that people read his life for what he wishes it to mean, neither more nor less.

The loss of control not only over words but their meaning is compounded in the next story. While Santosh sees himself and then is unable to un-see himself, the narrator of the next story is unable to recognise the image he sees in his mirror. The narrator plays upon 'real' and 'un-real' as benchmarks of living, unable to realise whether he is dreaming or not. Similar to Humpty-Dumpty's loss of control over his fate, Naipaul presents a narrator who loses control over his words and his fate.

Jabberwocky: 'It seems very pretty but it's *rather* hard to understand' (TLG, Chapter I)

In 'Tell Me Who to Kill', the unnamed narrator manages to convey the unreality of living on the islands compared to the realities of living in London. The un-real nature of living is highlighted by the narrator who says that there was never a dream, never an ambition to pursue and reach somewhere on the island. His home is isolated from the rest of their community, and in his memory, has no specifics of place or time attached to it. The predominant theme in the early part of his narrative is that the narrator feels he had 'no life' (IFS 67). While he feels he had no life on the island, he knows he has thrown away life in England. The mirror effect is more dominant here than in the other narratives. The contrast between what he sees is played against an almost metaphysical awareness of life. His life in London is by no means easier than on the island. At both places, he toils hard for his money while his brother wastes away his life presumably on educating himself: 'The ambition is like shame, and the shame is like a secret, and it is always hurting' (IFS 71). This is similar to Santosh and his fear of his success. The younger brother plays with the expectations of the narrator. While the narrator feels that if he had the opportunity

he would have succeeded in the 'real' world with proper education, the younger brother falls through not doing well either at studies or in business.

The hollowness of the narrator's life accompanied by an investment in an ambition for his brother burn him out. When his younger brother, whom he sponsors, stops sending letters to him, he embarks on a journey to England. However, he is crushed by poverty, racism, indifference and betrayal by the brother. Unlike Santosh, the narrator does not respond to his surroundings. He lives in his own world even while working at the cigarette factory and later opens a food stall in England. His hard earned money fritters away leaving him embittered with no escape: 'When you find out who your enemy is, you must kill him before he kill you' (IFS 83). He feels that the whites are his enemies yet cannot see *how* because the ambition is also a blessing given by the same culture. Yet, in the last measure, his brother is getting married to a white woman, a lasting betrayal, while he is struggling to keep himself out of jail.

This story is a twice-displaced narrative about living in the Caribbean because the narrator feels that 'real' life was elsewhere, either at the point of the East Indians' original point of travel in India or at his point of destination in England. Life on the island carried a feeling of transition, a movement that is yet to reach its final destination. There is also an autobiographical element here. Naipaul writes in 'Reading and Writing', 'For five months I was given shelter in a dark Paddington basement by an older cousin, a respecter of my ambition, himself very poor, studying law and working in a cigarette factory.'¹⁰ This is Naipaul's own description of his early days of struggle in London. It is as if Naipaul was writing his own life story. Ironically, though, Naipaul does not write in the autobiographical mode here but chooses the consciousness of the unnamed narrator, the elder brother, on whom Dayo lives almost parasitically and marries a white woman.

Moreover, the piece is also autobiographical in Naipaul's return to use of Trinidadian locutions (French 287). Naipaul's position on his own immigrant status states he was rather unwilling to re-view himself, 'Hysteria has been my reaction and a brutality dictated by a new awareness of myself as a whole human being and a determination, touched with fear, to remain what I was' (*An Area of Darkness* 16). And, where he was. His initial anxiety to become a writer soon transformed itself into hysteria at losing the ground beneath his feet, literally. Hysteria begins to affect him only after success and achievement of his initial goals of leaving Trinidad at 18 and becoming a writer. Naipaul, at this time of his career, had been contemplating a move to America or Canada but eventually settles in Wiltshire in England for the next ten years.

The narrative, 'Tell me who to kill', works through a lot of poses, alternately confiding in and distancing the reader. While on one level, the unnamed narrator is telling his tale, on another level, he does not possess the ability to critically distance himself from the tale he is telling. It is similar to Alice trying to figure out her own experience and at pretending to understand the nonsense poem, 'Jabberwocky', written in mirror writing. Unlike Santosh, the unnamed narrator fails to tell his story cohesively, falling into reveries of unclear happenings. The story is interesting, not in questioning the boundaries of freedom like the first tale, but in questioning the boundaries of expression. Santosh had closed his mind to new learning: 'I have closed my mind

¹⁰ V.S. Naipaul, *Reading and Writing: A Personal Account* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2000) 14.

and heart to the English language ... I do not want to understand or learn any more' (IFS 61). The unnamed narrator of the second tale closes his mind and heart to English people, while questioning who were his enemies.

Both Santosh and the unnamed narrator question the gap between words and feelings, between success and accomplishment, between aspirations and failed goals. While Santosh has a comfortable life, he fails to make a transition to a new personality knowing that he has become the image he saw in the mirror. He knows that his green coat is oversized and hangs over him more as a burden than fit attire. In the second narrative, the unnamed narrator fails to make eye contact with his image and is locked in a world where conflicting images appear to overshadow the sequence of events leading to a negative image, poor self-esteem and poor rapport with his acquaintances.

The Walrus and the Carpenter: 'Well! They were *both* very unpleasant characters' (TLG Chapter IV)

In the third narrative, much like Alice's suspended moral judgment in *Through the Looking Glass*, Naipaul inverses the roles of the travellers from the colonised to the colonisers. Just as Alice passes through the mirror to the inverted world, Naipaul writes from the other side of the mirror about the coloniser's experience of the colony. The transition is also made from the autobiographical mode to the omniscient narrator who is always hidden and never scrutinised directly within the narrative. This also ensures that the narrative control is never lost.

'In a Free State' is about Bobby and Linda's journey through the outback in a fictitious African country. The story explores various facets of violence in imposition of State and nationhood upon 'free' people whose cultures have not self-generated these concepts. It leads to internal unrest within these 'new' nation states since various systems co-exist and compete for power. A battle for supremacy breaks out between the African President and the African King while Bobby and Linda take the road back from the capital to a Collectorate in the South. According to Naipaul, the journey replicates the journey 'from Kampala in Uganda to Nairobi in Kenya'.¹¹ The conflation of various independent African nation states into a single state suggests Naipaul's design of defining the colonisers' experience without particulars. However, it also presents Africa as a single state with no distinctions, exposing Naipaul to the charge of writing a deeply orientalist African novel.

Czajka in his essay outlines the features of the African Orient that renders Africa a category lower than its Asian counterpart as defined by Edward Said. Czajka mentions striking differences in the representations of Africa and Asia that include:

the notion that Africa lacks all evolution and culture, while Asia has actually de-evolved from a previous state of cultural greatness (albeit one still inferior to that of the Occident); interest in the related cognitive under-development and childishness of the African; and, the obsession with the 'under-evolved' African body (133).

In Naipaul's text, we see the presentation of this African orient in Bobby and Linda's brief

¹¹ Naipaul, Preface viii.

interactions with the Africans (after all, there can be no meaningful dialogue with them).

There are three public spaces that are in focus in the text: the Bar in New Shropshire, the Hunting Lodge and the Colonel's Resort. In the Bar in New Shropshire, the whites appear in 'native' shirts woven in Holland in bright colours while the blacks wear suits. The young Zulu African leads Bobby on and then spits on his face. The pattern is repeated with the Africans spurning Bobby's offers whether it is at the Colonel's resort or when he finally reaches the collectorate. At the Hunting Lodge, Bobby and Linda meet with the American 'free bird' in Africa. It is an interesting meeting because the American can claim to be not part of the colonial regime yet enjoy all its benefits including proximity to Linda. On their way out, Bobby gives a lift to an African who then asks another African to board the car and then begins to direct Bobby to a place. Bobby loses patience and drops them off at an edge in the rain – the exploiter and exploited borderline is close to breaking point. At the Colonel's Resort, the Colonel repeatedly makes Peter say he is foolish. Peter, on the other hand, uses the Colonel's resources for his own social advancement in his social sphere. There is a sense of the order passing from the British to the Africans. However, Africa is portrayed as a backdrop for the main protagonists' journey and as a decor inside the public spaces.

Naipaul has been criticised more for the presentation of the Africans than the presentation of the expatriates. However, while the typical colonial explorer in Africa was characterised as white, heterosexual, middle-class man with woman either absent or as accompanying partner, Linda and Bobby are non-conformists and sexual deviants. In spite of being colonisers, they do not have the confidence or the ability to survive without the accompanying paraphernalia of the colonial mission. They rely upon voice, facial expressions and vanity to survive in the colonies. Even when, at the end of the story, Bobby contemplates firing his attendant, lack of English moral superiority and Christian values are highlighted. In each instance of interaction with the Africans, Linda and Bobby fail to make genuine contact or conversation. Gillian Dooley believes that Naipaul's presentation of Bobby is 'far more damning than Santosh's Hindu-based racism or Dayo's brother's pathological confusion.'¹² Since 'the colonial state of mind is one that does not accept responsibility',¹³ Naipaul condemns both the colonisers and the colonised. Instead of imbuing Bobby and Linda with the characteristics of the values expounded in 'Our Universal Civilization', Naipaul shows the colonisers as inept examples of whites obsessed with themselves. It is mentioned that Bobby had a meltdown in England and Africa is helping him to heal. Linda is looking for love while the Africans are trying to find their own voice. In the scene when Linda and Bobby go out walking by the Colonel's Resort, they are faced with dogs. Much like the ganging up of the Africans against the whites, and the latter beating up Bobby upon his entry into the Collectorate, the dogs seem innocuous when they are separate. However, once they are confident in their numbers, Linda and Bobby literally have to run to save their lives. There is recognition that an immigrant is always more prone to an attack than a native because he/she is seen as an intruder, irrespective of who holds the political reins.

¹² Dooley 65.

¹³ Dooley 61.

‘Which Dreamt it?’

The Epilogue, much like Alice’s questioning in *Through the Looking Glass*, presents another transient travel experience, this time through a tourist town in Egypt. The Prologue and the Epilogue are mirror images of the narrator who doesn’t act in the first and intervenes in the second with no better results. The separation from the Lebanese, English, Germans and Italians that the writer had maintained in the Prologue is not so neat here. The overall tone of the ‘sequence’ is bewilderment. The narrator meets a Chinese circus troupe in Milan in Italy and then at Luxor in Egypt. The Chinese behave similarly in the two different geographical spaces. However, for the narrator, their gestures carry different meanings at the two places. While in Milan their pleasantries are a sign of their culture, in Egypt the very same pleasantries become insensitive displays in a self-obsessed world. The Chinese are no different to the Greek and Lebanese businessmen reading French and English newspapers because they fail to see the ‘distress of Egypt’ in little children competing to get sandwiches and apples from tourists. The mindless game between the waiter and the children affects the narrator who stops them. But he soon realises that there are too many people in the frame. The cat and mouse game between the waiter and the poor children is reminiscent of the one played between the Lebanese and the Tramp in the Prologue.

The various protagonists in the five pieces display different facets of the immigrant experience. The Tramp never overcomes the anxieties of a first time traveller. Santosh is an unwilling immigrant who sees continuity in travel. The narrator of ‘Tell me who to kill’ travels because he feels hollow in his own country. Bobby and Linda seek their own rehabilitation from failed relationships in Africa. The narrator of the Prologue, unlike Santosh and the unnamed narrator in the second story, holds back from action and responsibility. The narrator of the Epilogue, like Bobby and Linda who are ineffectual in a fast deteriorating colonial Africa, takes part to no avail. The narrator feels that perhaps his vision is flawed, ‘Perhaps that had been the only pure time, at the beginning, when the ancient artist, knowing no other land, had learned to look at his own and had seen it complete’ (IFS 255). Unlike the artist, the narrator’s vision discovers that nothing is pristine, that the immigrant is inevitably a latecomer, who must adjust to the inequities of the ‘new’ society because his ship has already left the shores and he can neither go on nor return.

Robert Young urges the need to stop the ‘othering’ of the other because as long as we have an Other, epistemological or otherwise, narratives are caught in the stream of definitions and categorisations.¹⁴ In a similar attempt, Naipaul uses the trope of the mirror to unsettle unified subjectivities. The five pieces exist ‘in a free state’ without a form containing them. It is their content that connects them in a ‘sequence about displacement’ that mirrors Naipaul’s search for a form that deconstructs fixed identities and decodes bearings of identity, place and traditions. In this respect, *In a Free State* is like Carroll’s text: it is often Alice who, like Naipaul’s narrators, is intervening in the perfectly structured and ordered world of the chess pieces in the inverted world.

¹⁴ Robert Young, ‘Postcolonial Remains’, *New Literary History* 43 (2012): 19-42.

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