

Naipaul's The Enigma of Arrival in Viewing the Past Due to the Context of Human Civilization

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Abstract: The gloominess of *The Enigma of Arrival* has started since the opening of the story, and it seems also to end all the events, which mount in the story about the ceremony of farewell against someone's death. However, there is a distinctive gap of understanding due to the comparison of gloominess at the start and at the end. The start shows that gloominess is the consequence of being displaced and uprooted from the past, while the end emphasizes the optimistic will in leaving the past. These different perspectives about the past and its gloominess are more or less the portrayal of human development in the term of civilization. It means that actually in each era of development steps human civilization characteristically holds its own value, which possibly is conducted to surpass the previous past. Therefore, an era of civilization is always considered to renew the past.

How *The Enigma of Arrival* renders human values, especially in the context of civilization, is an interesting topic to discuss and observe. Here, the role and position of "the past" are significant due to its problem in presenting new insights and values of "the future."

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I. Introduction

So far the novel *The Enigma of Arrival*, written by VS Naipaul, has been controversial, since its content is accused to position the colonizer being eternally superior than the colonized. Even, the fact about VS Naipaul himself, who then became the citizen of the UK, gave emphasis to it. However, it is very common that readers sometimes are hard to split the phenomena dealing with a text and its writer. The case of Salman Rusdhie may be the other example, and in Indonesia what happened to Pramudya and his texts is always politically sensitive for both parties opposing and defending him. Nevertheless, this paper would discuss mainly on the text's autonomy without being disturbed by the existence of its writer VS Naipaul.ⁱ

The Enigma of Arrival, later addressed EOA, is postcolonial in discussing the interplay between Trinidad, the colonized, and Britain, the colonizer. The existence of "I" who represents someone moving from the homeland of Trinidad to the new land of Britain experienced some stages in life from his lowest position to the utmost one. The structure or order of events is chronological by rendering firstly the coming of the character "I" in a new environment, though in fact the land was not really new for him.

For the first four days it rained. I could hardly see where I was.... But just then, after the rain, all that I saw—though I had been living in England for twenty years—were flat fields and a narrow river. (EOA, 5)

The closing event of the novel eventually shows how the character could completely control the previously foreign condition. Different from his first time of coming, in which he seemed strongly reluctant leaving the past, the novel provides an event about "I" who was the master of the environment and life, in which he proudly stated that the past actually belonged to death. The development or change of paradigm in dealing with "the past" is the emphasized point found in EOA. In other words, EOA more or less is questioning the traditional postcolonialism which has uplifted the paradigm of the past as the way of resisting the continual cultural hegemony of the colonizer, as Said's statement about the ancestor identity.ⁱⁱ

The meaning brought by its title, *The Enigma of Arrival*, may lead readers into the understanding that the novel is questioning any mysteries of future, and this is gloomy since the future is still unpredictable in comparison with the past which has been fixed. However, as a matter of fact the novel tries to suggest a new perspective in answering any questions about the unpredictable future. The key to understand the future finally depends on

how the control against the past is undergone. In this case, the past may not be the burden in facing the future. Otherwise, an effort to establish identity for the sake of postcoloniality is in vain. How to control the role of the past is interestingly discussed by EOA. Indeed, the novel is actually uncommon, like the others delivering events in a constructed story, since the story is dealing with many descriptions bringing significant ideas about the past due to establishing identity of postcolonialism.

Therefore, by discussing EOA readers would be enriched with a new perspective of postcolonialism, different from the traditional perspective which has been proud in emphasizing the ancestry tradition as the source of identity. However, EOA views the ancestry tradition as part of the past which should be treated smartly because it is the source of stigma of being inferior in comparison with the superiority of the colonizer. In addition, EOA is an interesting novel, which more or less provides a new genre of telling the story. Generally a novel depicts it in the arrangement of events to satisfy the requirements of plot rules; EOA deconstructs the canonical plot by rendering many descriptive situations and environments. This method would lead readers into a new understanding of plot which is not merely about events but ideas, because each description is in fact to deliver implicitly an idea. In this context readers eventually would be exposed to a new paradigm about the novel, since at first perhaps readers have been occupied by the issue of the novel due to its being controversial.

II. Discussion

Referring to the events of EOA, as previously mentioned, the novel is postcolonial, since it is about the relation between Trinidad, the colonized, and Britain, the colonizer.ⁱⁱⁱ Concretely, the main story lies on the individual trips, i.e. the character "I", in establishing his identity from being inferior to superior. There are some trips or journeys that he had to undergo, and each represents his leaving "the past" to the new era for his life. Leaving the past in this case may bring the meaning of gaining freedom from the condition of being weak, inferior, poor, uneducated or colonized. The first is about I's journey to become a writer.

This journey began some days before my eighteenth birthday. It was the journey which—for a year—I feared I would never be allowed to make... It was the journey that took me from my island, Trinidad, off the northern coast of Venezuela, to England. (104)

The purpose of this journey is obvious by the following quotation.

I had written a lot, done work of much difficulty; had worked under pressure more or less since my schooldays. Before the writing, there had been the learning; writing had come to me slowly. Before that, there had been Oxford; and before that, the school in Trinidad where I had worked for the Oxford scholarship. There had been a long preparation for the writing career! (100)

However, there is another trip for him in order to gain a better condition as well. The establishment, of being better from "the past," he has gained by the first trip or journey seems incomplete. Therefore, he decided to undergo another journey to renew his old idea about freedom.

A great packed education those two years had been.... And behaved foolishly. Without waiting for that response, I dismantled the little life I had created for myself in England and prepared to leave, to be a free man..... Now eighteen years after my first arrival, it seemed to me that the time had come.... And I had to return to England (101-102)

And, this novel *The Enigma of Arrival* is the reflection of his second trip. By his first journey, he gained the purpose of becoming a writer in order to change the past representing inferiority of being uneducated and poor. By his second one, he had the purpose of being a free man. If on the first trip he underwent it by scholarship, on the second trip he totally paid by himself. [t]his second trip to England was paid for by me, precious money from my very small store (150). Indeed, through I's second trip, the novel renders significant ideas or concepts dealing with postcoloniality.

In shorts, postcoloniality may simply be perceived as the attempts of establishing new conditions to replace the past ones, which were caused by colonialism. Ashcroft ET all (2007) explicitly stated the concept of postcolonialism as to examine the processes and effects of, and reactions to, European colonialism. There are obviously two significant clues to understand: the past, which represents the processes and effects of European colonialism, and the future, which represents the reactions to European colonialism. In this context, the past points the conditions of being colonized and the future the new conditions different from the past. Through this phenomena, Said's *Orientalism* in emphasizing the importance of the ancestry identity takes the prominent role to stand against the colonialism. Due to the colonizer's deeds the original identity of the colonized society has been repressed and destroyed and replaced by the existence of the colonizer. The position of being colonized is about lowering the dignity of the colonized into the condition of being inferior, since the colonizer imposing the identity of being superior. Consequently, there are class divisions between the superior and inferior.

Therefore, in the era of postcolonialism it is logical to give rebirth to the ancestry identity of the colonized. For Said, the only weapon is cultural identity belonging to the ancestor.

However, since the idea of giving rebirth culminates in going back to the past, i.e. the identity of the ancestor, postcoloniality of this kind may be addressed to postcolonialism of the past. It means "the past" is the most important and prominent factor in renewing the condition of the ex-colonized. By proposing "the ancestor" this postcoloniality imposes the previously old identity to offend and reject the colonizer's oppression. The ex-colonized group would prove that their identity is still alive. In this case, the duration of colonialism will determine the possibility of returning back to the past identity. Since the new generation has been born and the ancestry identity is also foreign for them, postcolonialism of the past is impossible but postcolonialism of the future.

Postcolonialism of the future puts the focus on a totally new identity. There are some possibilities of this condition, such as the long duration of colonialism which has completely destroyed the colonized's cultural traditions and cultures, the birth of the new generation who is really ignorant towards the ancestry identity, and the absence of the ancestor. As a matter of fact those factors have been the Caribbean's experiences.^{iv} In comparison to the other parts of the world, Caribbean area is unique and characteristic due to the experiences of being colonized. There were many islands colonized by some European colonizers, who from the very first underwent the system of slavery before being abolished from the face of the world. Many African slaves were transported to the area. However, after the slavery era the European colonizers applied the different strategy of creating workers by the system of paid laborers. Figueredo (2008) wrote that in 1845, 225 East Indians, the first laborers from India, arrived in Trinidad, and even by 1915 the population was about 143,000 people. There were also those coming from China and the other parts of the world. The history of elimination of the local natives should be an important part of Caribbean colonialism because then it resulted to the absence of the local identity for the lands. Therefore, during the era of decolonialism, which has been significant to Caribbean postcoloniality, the act of negotiating among many ethnics living in Caribbean in identity establishment has been characteristically Caribbean. Consequently, those phenomena of the past suggest another way of undergoing postcoloniality for the Caribbean groups of people, including the society of Trinidad, and brilliantly EOA depicts it as the arrangement of events and ideas for its plot.

By locating the emphasis on the two different trips, mentioned previously, the following is the discussion how the first trip tends to be postcolonialism of the past and the second to be postcolonialism of the future. The clue dealing with "the past" is the main text to discuss, since both position it as the triggering aspect to establish identity. The past for the first journey is significant, in terms of the background to be left and the foreground to go, precisely to return. The idea of background in it is the reason why "I" had to leave Trinidad and go to England. For him the past is inferior and it could be solved by only a new status, i.e. to become a writer (104). The only reason of gaining this status is because of the bad conditions of "I" in Trinidad, such as poor, uneducated, innocent, solitude. Therefore, by changing the status he imagined to be able to be free from those conditions.

And everything I saw and felt and experienced then was tinged with celebration: That landscape—.....—had always, since I had known it, been the landscape of anxiety, even panic, and sacrifice... I had never, as a child, felt free (151-152)

His paradigm on freedom is about to be wealthy, to be educated, and also to be famous and popular. All finally he could achieve as he gained the position of being a writer and he were successful in writing some books (156). The past gave him the reason of uplifting a new condition and position, especially when he returned home to apply his capability for it.

However, for the second journey the significance of the past lies as the background to be left. Here is the different perspective of viewing the past. The past is not merely about the conditions but it is the realm covering many aspects. To start the journey he daringly put behind them.

Now, eighteen years after my first arrival, it seemed to me that the time had come. I dismantled the life I had bit by bit established, and prepared to go. The house I had bought and renovated in stages I sold; and my furniture and books and papers went to the warehouse (102)

As a result, on his arrival due to the second trip the condition of being alienated happened to him. Even, he felt foreign to the place he had been there before (5). The message of a painting's written title, *The Enigma of Arrival*, is precisely in accordance with his new presence. The painting represents his present condition.

What was interesting about the painting itself, "The Enigma of Arrival," was that—.....—it changed in my memory.... The scene is of desolation and mystery: it speaks of the mystery of arrival. It spoke to me of that, as it had spoken to Apollinaire (98)

In this context, clearly "I" suffers from being alone since he has left everything behind. He cuts totally the past off him, and nothing about the past is his. Despite the fact that England is physically not new, this place is new. Its newness lies more culturally. It means by leaving his cultural or ancestry root, he has no place any more to stand since he has lost the original root of identity. He is in the crisis of identity.

Nevertheless, his position of being displaced and uprooted, which represents his crisis of identity, gradually vanishes as the story's events of the novel depicted. The first part, *Jack's Garden*, presents how the character "I" mingles with the first phenomenon about the existence of a garden cultivated by a gardener named Jack. The will to well control his suffering from being alienated drives him to carefully observe the garden, from all the aspects it has. Not only is it about the gardener who is responsible for the cultivation, the garden gives insights as well about the climates, the objects living inside, the position, and many more. Finally, he could overcome his solitude, and he seems to find a new identity. *One cycle for me, in my cottage, in the grounds of the manor;...* (94). Even, by this he could arrange himself in preparing for the next steps during his second trip.

Meanwhile, in the second part, *The Journey*, the novel renders the reflection done by "I" due to his previous and present journeys to England. The other depictions, stated in the parts of *Ivy*, *Rooks*, and *The Ceremony of Farewell*, are about his development of processes in establishing identity in England after leaving totally his past in Trinidad. Especially the last part, *The Ceremony of Farewell*, provides a different atmosphere, from the first part, dealing with the way that "I" treats the past. His being alienated and uprooted, due to his displacement from Trinidad to England, oppresses him into the condition forcing him to handle. *The antique ship has gone. The traveler has lived out his life* (99). The future is not present yet and even is still blurry, but the past has gone. The atmosphere of gloominess is obvious. However, in the last part telling the ceremony for the death of Sati, the sister of "I," the atmosphere of gloominess is present any more, despite the event of cremation ceremony of the dead Sati.

....—our sacred world had vanished. Every generation now was to take us further away from those sanctities. But we remade the world for ourselves; every generation does that, as we found when we came together for the death of this sister and felt the need to honor and remember... It showed me life and man as the mystery, the true religion of men, the grief and the glory (354).

Here, the process of being aware against the identity is sure. His new position (345) qualifies the identity and enables him to view differently the past, represented by death. For him death is a way of renewing identity, or otherwise there would be no new identity. *Death was the motif; it had perhaps been the motif all along* (344).

III. Conclusion

Postcolonialism of the past is a paradigm of postcoloniality in preserving the ancestry identity as the main and significant part of the establishment of identity. Though it seems the easy way undergone, since the identity has achieved its final structure, there is at least one disadvantage dealing with it. The stigma of being inferior and colonized would be eternal because of the success of the ex-colonizer in putting it in the lower position. In other words, the fact of colonialism is historical and it's eternal because of its impossibility in recreating it otherwise. However, postcolonialism of the future gives emphasis more on the future and the past is considered as belonging to the realm of death.

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ⁱ Barthes's "The Death of Author" (Waugh: 272, 2006)

ⁱⁱ EW Said in *Orientalism* (1979)

ⁱⁱⁱ Figueredo, DH, and Frank Argote-Freyre, *A Brief History of The Caribbean* (2008).

^{iv} Figueredo, DH, and Frank Argote-Freyre, *A Brief History of The Caribbean* (2008).