



# Food Culture, Migration, and Memory in the Works of V. S. Naipaul

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**Abstract.** V. S. Naipaul's works profoundly engage with the varied themes such as the enigma of displacement, perturbed quest for belonging, and considered cultural memories. Though, these themes are globally debatable like the motifs of history, politics, and geography. Naipaul oeuvres also mediate the ordinary but evolutionary ideology of food, in his narratives. Through this paper, I tend to examine the interrelationship between food, migration, and memory in Naipaul's works, proposing that culinary practices and sensory occurrences function as potent testimonies of diasporic state of being. Food too becomes a locale where personal histories of progress, dislocation, and loss are retained and interpreted, enabling the migrants to reflect upon, revise, and negotiate their identities within unfamiliar cultural spaces. More than treating food as a source of comfort or nostalgia, Naipaul presents it as a complex cultural turner marked by the colonial histories, social hierarchies, and material conditions. By interpretation of food as a narrative and not a domestic detail, this study reveals how everyday acts of eating and remembering illuminate the fragile processes through which diasporic identities are formed, disrupted, and reconfigured. To supplement and complement my exploration I have taken into consideration Naipaul's select texts, *A House for Mr Biswas*, *The Enigma of Arrival*, *An Area of Darkness*, and *India: A Wounded Civilization* grounding well fully upon the ideology of postcolonial theory, cultural studies, memory studies, and food studies. Ultimately, the food remains a critically trans-cultural entity as well as a substantive element through which Naipaul's exploration of migrant subjectivity and the textures of everyday life can be more deeply understood and constructed.

**Keywords:** Hybridity, food culture, migration, memory, diaspora, postcolonial studies.

## 1 Introduction

Migration has been one of the most decisive forces that have drastically swayed the constructs of the modern world, (not excluding the colonial and the postcolonial histories) [1, 2]. The large-scale movement of people across world continents through voluntary migration, slavery or indenture, has resulted in formation of diasporic communities whose individualities are thwarted by displacement, hybridity and historical shatters [3–5]. Thus, the literature emerging from these contexts frequently articulates the enigma between loss and continuity, belonging and alienation [6]. Postcolonial writing, in particular, records how these communities negotiate identity in the later consequences of the empire [1, 2].

Among all postcolonial writers, V. S. Naipaul, the Nobel laureate (2001), exhibits a complex and often controversial identity. Born to a Dubey family from the East of India, which descended in Trinidad as an indentured labourer community and later settling in Britain, Naipaul embodies multiple histories of migration [7]. To many other writers of diaspora his themes of exile, cultural disintegration, and the psychological effects of displacement are frequently explored in his literary works [6, 5]. His books provide a prolonged engagement with the everyday realities of the diasporic way of existence, despite criticism for his questionable position on postcolonial nationalism [2].

Naipaul's portrayal of culinary culture has gotten very little scholarly attention, despite the fact that his subject of migration, identity, and colonial legacy has been extensively researched [1]. However, throughout his literary flora and fauna, there are appropriately sufficient allusions to food, cooking, meals, hunger, and domestic routines that address material poverty [8, 7]. In Naipaul's writings, food is never just a means of subsistence; rather, it is intricately linked to social hierarchies, economic circumstances, and historical events [9]. It is hence the task I take through this paper to substantiate the food culture in Naipaul's select works that can strongly be integrated with the subject of migration and memory. Culinary habitudes acquire transverse forms of culture that migrants carry within them, across geographical boundaries, enabling the partial preservation of ancestral conventions, at the same time reflecting alteration and loss [5, 4]. By examining food culture in addition to migration and memory, this venture demonstrates how Naipaul uses habits of routine to articulate the enigmatic stigma of identity and belonging [6, 3]. Thus, the paper adopts an interdisciplinary theoretical way and proposes thorough readings of Naipaul's select texts to substantiate how food culture, migration and their memory is a reservoir and a rare archive of diasporic acquaintance [10, 9].

## 2 Theoretical Framework

An interdisciplinary theoretical approach becomes a must to apprehend the conglomeration of food culture, migration, and memory in the sustenance of histories of the

diaspora and migrants negotiating their identities within unfamiliar cultural spaces. Hence, Postcolonial theory provides the root framework for reckoning Naipaul's engagement with colonial histories and cultural shifts. Initiating with Homi K. Bhabha's concept of hybridity the ambivalent cultural spaces produced by colonial encounters, emphasizes identities that are continuously negotiated rather than fixed [3]. This concept is particularly relevant to diasporic food practices, which reflect both its permanence and transformation.

Further, the diaspora studies acknowledge the relationship between migration and common cultural practices. Drawing on William Safran's theorisation of diaspora, identifies collective memory, displacement, and the preservation of cultural traditions are defining features of diasporic communities [11]. The retention of cultural identity within a diaspora is an important aspect of maintaining a diaspora's identity. As described in Cohen's typology of global diasporas, the food of a culture is a consistent manifestation of the diasporic experience [12]. Naipaul has incorporated the culinary customs of the Indian population into his writings to show how remnants of Indian culture can be retained and maintained in British and Caribbean societies. In addition to food, memory studies are also very important to understanding how and why the culinary customs of the Indian population are preserved in the UK and Caribbean, respectively. One of the key tenets of Pierre Nora's work on memory [10] is that as time goes by, it becomes increasingly difficult to connect lived memories with the rituals, places, and activities that embody those memories. Food serves as both a place of memory and a sensory representation of past experiences. Ambivalence about memory is reflected in Naipaul's work. Food studies allow readers to recognise the social and political implications that have been incorporated into our culinary practices. Colonial economics, power dynamics and class systems are all seen by Sidney Mintz as interconnected, through food [9]. By similar reasoning, Arjun Appadurai theorises that post-colonial and global identity is expressed through eating [13]. In addition, food in the works of Naipaul creates a metaphor of social hierarchy, economic scarcity, and the effects of colonialism; they illustrate the impact of historical forces on our everyday lives. Collectively, the perspectives cited above enable the reader to approach food culture as a tapestry woven from the threads of migration, memory and identity.

### **3 Migration and Diasporic Consciousness in Naipaul**

Naipaul's literary imagination revolves around migration. His characters frequently live in transitional environments influenced by cultural ambiguity and historical relocation. The Indo-Trinidadian community in *A House for Mr. Biswas* is a diasporic group whose ancestors arrived in Trinidad as indentured servants following the abolition of slavery [1]. Naipaul clearly places Biswas in a world where instability and a lack of roots are ingrained. The beginning of the novel discloses the bitter experience and the vulnerable situation of the belonging and their quest of existence was at stake: "He had been born into a family that had been displaced and uprooted, and he himself

grew up with no sense of permanence” (p. 15) [1]. The historical movement sets the backdrop against which individual fights for identity and agency.

Naipaul keeps circling back to migration, almost as if he cannot quite let it settle. His characters tend to live in in-between spaces, shaped by uncertain histories and cultural half-belongings. In *A House for Mr. Biswas*, the Indo-Trinidadian community is already marked by movement before the novel even begins. Their ancestors arrived in Trinidad as indentured labourers after the end of slavery, and that long history of relocation quietly shapes everyday life [1]. Biswas grows up in a world where instability feels normal, even inherited. Early in the novel, we are told that he was “born into a family that had been displaced and uprooted” and that he matured “with no sense of permanence” (p. 15) [1]. The line is blunt, almost resigned. History does not merely sit in the background here; it presses in on personal struggles for dignity, selfhood, and a place to stand.

What emerges, then, is a sense of migration not as a completed journey but as an ongoing condition. Biswas and those around him remain suspended between places. They are not fully absorbed into Caribbean society, yet India exists more as an idea than a lived reality [2]. These unease surfaces in small, telling ways, in the temporary houses, strained family relations, and the constant search for stability. Displacement works on two levels at once. It is physical, certainly, but it is also psychological, shaping how characters read their surroundings and understand themselves within them.

A similar sensibility appears in Naipaul’s nonfiction, though the tone is quieter and more inward. In *The Enigma of Arrival*, migration unfolds slowly, almost imperceptibly. The narrator’s life in rural England is marked by observation and long reflection rather than dramatic rupture. Displacement alters how memory functions and how landscapes are perceived, as though the act of looking itself has been reshaped by movement and loss (p. 98) [3]. Belonging, in this context, feels provisional. It arrives, lingers briefly, and then recedes.

Food offers a partial counterweight to this uncertainty. Familiar dishes provide moments of continuity, a way of holding onto something recognisable amid constant change. Yet Naipaul resists treating this as a simple comfort. Culinary traditions survive, but not without strain. They remain vulnerable to economic pressure, historical erosion, and the slow dilution that comes with time [4]. What persists, therefore, is not a pure cultural essence, but something fragile, adapted, and always at risk of slipping away.

#### **4 Food Culture as Cultural Memory in *A House for Mr Biswas***

An additional analysis of Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas* reveals that the matrix of migration, memory, and social hierarchy is reflected in food culture. Additionally, the

Tulsi household is a microcosm of Indo-Trinidadian society, where eating customs uphold power systems while preserving Indian traditions [1]. Meals are reminiscent of ancestral traditions adapted for a colonial Caribbean environment.

At the same time, food reveals household hierarchies. The distribution of portions, the control over cooking, and the work done by women in the kitchen demonstrate how tradition interacts with social and gendered power structures. Food is integrated into a framework of domestic authority and regulation in *A House for Mr. Biswas*. Food availability is controlled by hierarchy, as seen by the communal preparation and consumption of meals where “one ate what was given.” Because women are portrayed as “always busy, always cooking or cleaning,” their labour upholds gendered power disparities (p. 214) [1]. These domestic observations show that social relationships, rather than cultural memory’s neutral shape, influence it.

In daily consuming behaviours, food also highlights economic scarcity, deprivation, and unfair distribution. Hunger episodes and meagre meals highlight the material limitations that diasporic societies must deal with [5]. In summary, food culture documents colonial histories of exploitation and poverty in addition to memory. Culinary practices thus function as an archive of lived experience, preserving its continuance and complexity.

## 5 Food, Memory, and Place in *The Enigma of Arrival*

In *The Enigma of Arrival*, describes food in an understated but richly symbolical in contexts. The Scholar discovers, gardening, cooking, and eating remain integral acts into the narrator’s daily routine, functioning as reflective acts that connect memory with place [3]. These activities evoke childhood memories and earlier landscapes, allowing the narrator to negotiate a fragile sense of belonging in exile (p. 132).

*A House for Mr Biswas* suggests food far more different than communal meals. The food practice here is associated with solitude and contemplation. This shift reflects the narrator’s evolving relationship with migration and memory. Belonging is realized enough through everyday engagements of life rather than through collective traditions. Yet memory remains hegemonic and abstract entity, as food cannot fully gain a sense of home but marks a remarkable adjunct between past and present.

## 6 Hunger, Survival, and Colonial Histories

Another important and universal valid factor in Naipaul’s works is migration that too accompanied by economic hardship, identifying food as a matter of survival as well as symbolism. Hunger also remains a recurring theme reflecting broader conditions of colonial inequality. In *A House for Mr Biswas*, limited access to food mirrors the precarious economic position of Indo-Trinidadian labourers within the colonial system [1].

Mintz's argues that food cultures are shaped by historical and economic forces is particularly relevant here. As Sidney W. Mintz argues, food practices cannot be understood in isolation from history and political economy, since "food choices and eating habits are shaped by social, economic, and political processes that extend far beyond the individual" (p. 47) [6]. Therefore, food availability, cost, and distribution are determined by colonial institutions, which influence social interactions and diet. Naipaul's focus on straightforward, repeated meals highlights social hierarchy and poverty, reflecting how historical injustices shape daily existence.

## 7 Food, Memory, and Postcolonial Critique in Nonfiction

In his nonfiction, Naipaul engages food more directly, using it as a way to talk about postcolonial reality without much softening. Ordinary acts of eating are repeatedly tied to what he calls the "great fact" of material scarcity in *An Area of Darkness* [7]. Food, in this context, is never just nourishment or ritual. It is bound up with history that feels heavy and largely unworked. Ritual, Naipaul suggests, often survives as repetition "without belief," a gesture performed because it has always been performed. Against this backdrop, he insists that "poverty is the great fact of India" (p. 61), and everyday practices, including how and what people eat, are shaped by this condition. Food begins to register a tension. It signals continuity, yes, but also exhaustion.

A similar argument surfaces in *India: A Wounded Civilisation*, where food customs are folded into a broader sense of social stagnation. Naipaul situates eating habits within long-standing historical limits rather than personal choice. His observation that "Indian poverty is more dehumanising than any machine" points to how deeply material deprivation structures daily survival [8]. Elsewhere, he remarks that "India is old, and India continues" (p. 171). Traditions remain, but often through sheer repetition rather than renewal. Read this way, culinary practices appear less as expressions of individual identity and more as residues of inherited social systems.

## 8 Ambivalence, Hybridity, and Transformation

This ambivalence carries over into Naipaul's treatment of food in migratory contexts. Culinary practices do act as carriers of memory, holding onto traces of the homeland even as they travel and change [9]. However, that preservation is never intact. Flavours shift. Ingredients are substituted. Techniques are adjusted out of necessity. What emerges are hybrid forms that speak as much of loss as of adaptation. Food, therefore, communicates change while still gesturing toward continuity. Bhabha's idea of cultural reconstruction within the interstitial space helps make sense of

this process, where practices are neither simply retained nor entirely abandoned, but reworked under pressure [10].

Yet Naipaul remains sceptical of celebratory accounts of hybridity. He draws attention to how fragile these traditions really are, shaped by economic limits and uneven histories rather than creative freedom alone. This hesitation is central to his work. It keeps his writing from slipping into nostalgia. Food, in his hands, reminds us that memory is selective and incomplete, always constrained by what is materially possible.

## 9 Conclusion

Across Naipaul's writing, food culture, migration, and memory remain tightly interwoven. Everyday practices become sites where history is quietly negotiated, not resolved. Migration unsettles memory searches for continuity, and food sits somewhere in between, holding together fragments of both preservation and change. By anchoring culinary practices within postcolonial history and economic reality, Naipaul resists romanticising diasporic life. Food emerges as an embodied archive, recording survival, adaptation, and loss. Paying attention to these ordinary acts deepens our understanding of how identity, history, and belonging are lived rather than declared, and why the most familiar practices often carry the heaviest historical weight.

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