

Ethics of Belonging versus Aesthetics of Exile: Reimagining the Postcolonial Subject in the Fiction of Bhabani Bhattacharya and V. S. Naipaul

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Abstract

This article proposes a comparative framework for understanding the fictional worlds of Bhabani Bhattacharya and V. S. Naipaul through the conceptual lens of Ethics of Belonging and Aesthetics of Exile. While both writers engage deeply with postcolonial realities, their philosophical orientations diverge significantly. Bhattacharya constructs a moral universe in which history is capable of ethical renewal through collective action, Gandhian humanism, and social responsibility. Naipaul, in contrast, presents a fragmented postcolonial world marked by displacement, psychological instability, and historical discontinuity, where exile becomes both existential condition and narrative principle. Through close readings of key novels including *So Many Hungers!*, *He Who Rides a Tiger*, *A House for Mr Biswas*, *The Mimic Men*, and *A Bend in the River*, the paper argues that these authors represent two competing models of postcolonial subjectivity: one grounded in ethical community and the other in existential estrangement. The study contributes a new interpretive paradigm that moves beyond simplistic optimism–pessimism binaries and highlights deeper philosophical divergences within postcolonial fiction.

Keywords: Bhabani Bhattacharya; V. S. Naipaul; postcolonial fiction; belonging; exile; identity; nationhood; humanism; displacement

Introduction

Postcolonial literature is often treated as a unified response to colonial domination, yet it is marked by profound ideological diversity. Among its most revealing contrasts are the fictional worlds of Bhabani Bhattacharya and V. S. Naipaul. Both writers engage with colonial history and its aftermath, but they imagine postcolonial reality in fundamentally different ways.

Bhattacharya's fiction is grounded in ethical humanism. His narratives consistently affirm the possibility of moral regeneration through collective struggle, social justice, and Gandhian ideals. Naipaul's fiction, by contrast, depicts fragmented societies where political independence does not translate into psychological or cultural coherence. His characters inhabit

worlds of dislocation and uncertainty. This study proposes a conceptual framework: Bhattacharya represents an Ethics of Belonging, while Naipaul constructs an Aesthetics of Exile. Belonging signifies ethical participation in community and history; exile signifies existential fragmentation and cultural displacement.

Review of Literature and Research Gap

Bhattacharya's fiction has been studied as Gandhian realism and nationalist literature. Critics such as M. K. Naik and K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar emphasize his ethical commitment and social vision. However, his humanism is rarely treated as a theoretical system. Naipaul has generated extensive global scholarship. Bruce King and Patrick French highlight exile and autobiography in his fiction, while Edward Said and Homi Bhabha explore colonial discourse and mimicry. Yet exile is often treated as biographical rather than aesthetic. Comparative studies between Bhattacharya and Naipaul remain limited and mostly thematic rather than philosophical. This creates a gap for a deeper conceptual framework.

Theoretical Framework

This study draws on postcolonial theory and introduces the Belonging–Exile Paradigm.

Ethics of Belonging

Collective responsibility

Gandhian ethics

Social justice

Community-based identity

Historical agency

Aesthetics of Exile

Displacement

Fragmented identity

Narrative instability

Existential alienation

Cultural discontinuity

Methodology

A qualitative comparative approach is used, based on close readings of Bhattacharya's *So Many Hungers!*, *He Who Rides a Tiger*, *Music for Mohini*, and Naipaul's *A House for Mr Biswas*, *The Mimic Men*, and *A Bend in the River*. The focus is philosophical interpretation rather than historical description.

Comparative Analysis

History and Moral Imagination

Bhattacharya treats history as morally transformative. In *So Many Hungers!*, famine becomes a site of ethical awakening and collective solidarity. History generates moral growth. Naipaul rejects historical progress. In *A Bend in the River*, postcolonial Africa is marked by repetition, instability, and authoritarian cycles. History is discontinuous rather than developmental.

Nation and Community

Bhattacharya imagines the nation as an ethical community grounded in shared responsibility and Gandhian ideals. Nationhood is moral, not merely political. Naipaul presents nations as fragmented constructs. In *The Mimic Men*, political independence produces imitation and disorientation rather than unity.

Identity and Selfhood

Bhattacharya's characters achieve identity through community engagement. The self is relational and socially embedded. Naipaul's protagonists experience fragmented identity. In *A House for Mr Biswas*, the search for a "house" symbolizes unattainable stability. Identity remains incomplete and unstable.

Humanism versus Existential Skepticism

Bhattacharya affirms human agency and moral transformation. Suffering leads to ethical awakening. Naipaul emphasizes existential uncertainty. Human agency is constrained by fragmentation and historical rupture.

Narrative Strategies

Bhattacharya uses realist narrative with moral direction and resolution. Naipaul uses irony, fragmentation, and narrative distance to emphasize ambiguity and instability.

Women and Belonging

Bhattacharya's women often act as moral agents of transformation and social renewal. Naipaul's female characters are less central and often reflect psychological instability rather than structural change.

Conclusion

Bhattacharya and Naipaul represent two distinct philosophical models of postcolonial existence. Bhattacharya constructs an Ethics of Belonging, emphasizing community, moral agency, and historical transformation. Naipaul develops an Aesthetics of Exile, emphasizing fragmentation, displacement, and existential uncertainty. These frameworks transcend simple optimism and pessimism, offering instead two competing moral architectures of postcolonial literature. The Belonging–Exile paradigm provides a new interpretive tool for understanding postcolonial fiction beyond existing theoretical binaries.

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