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A Search for Home in Naipaul's "One out of Many"

V.S Naipaul's short story "One out of Many," is one of three stories told in his award winning 1971 novella, *In a Free State*. In his story, Naipaul follows Indian servant, Santosh, as he tries to make a home in Washington after emigrating from Bombay. Like many postcolonial subjects, Santosh struggles to establish an identity that allows him to feel content in his new surroundings. Santosh's dual identity, comprised of his Indian heritage and the American values he assimilates, leaves him in a state of limbo: too far removed from Bombay to return, while also unable to fully integrate into American society. Through this postcolonial homelessness, Naipaul establishes home as having little to do with a physical location, but instead simply being a place where one can find a sense of freedom, safety, and belonging. These feelings serve as an anchor for postcolonial subjects; without them, Santosh struggles to find comfort in his identity and cannot call a residence a home, regardless of its location.

"One out of Many" begins with Santosh quickly establishing Bombay as a setting that contrasts both of his residences in Washington: "Many people, both here [in America] and in India, will feel that I have done well. But. I was so happy in Bombay" (Naipaul 25). The happiness Santosh experiences in Bombay exists in spite of modest means. Santosh resides in a "cupboard below the staircase" of his employer (25). While he enters his residence to "relieve himself" and sleep during "the monsoon," Santosh prefers to spend his nights on the pavement outside with his friends (25). Each evening, the group congregates to "read newspapers, [play]

cards, [tell] stories, and [smoke]" (25). Once drowsy, the group sleeps on the pavement until Santosh's friends engage "in silent competition to secluded lanes... to relieve themselves" (25). This routine shows the strong social bonds Santosh maintains in Bombay, despite living away from his wife and children. Through inexpensive means of amusement, Santosh finds a sense of belonging and community necessary in a home. These feelings are strong enough that Santosh remains outside with his friends instead of in the comfort of his indoor cupboard living space. Furthermore, the images of the group sleeping and relieving themselves outside establish their status as impoverished. Santosh, however, is perfectly content as his description of the area injects it with a sense of warmth and safety: "The pavement was swept and sprinkled, bedding brought out from daytime hiding-places, little oil-lamps lit" (25). As these "cool" and "healthy" nights turn to morning, feelings of freedom follow Santosh as he begins his days with a stroll along the Arabian Sea, where "the city and ocean [gleam] like gold" (26). Santosh showers Bombay with praise as it allows him to feel happiness in his own identity. Unlike Washington, where Santosh is significantly more well-off financially, Bombay consistently feels like home while he resides there.

As Santosh's emigrates to Washington with his employer, he is forced to leave a homely residence in exchange for one that he compares to a prison. The sense of familiarity he feels in Bombay is almost entirely absent here, as minute details such as the traffic immediately alienate Santosh: "I remember green fields, wide roads, many motor cars traveling fast, making a steady hiss, hiss, which wasn't at all like our Bombay traffic noise" (30). This early experience in Washington quickly indicates discomfort in the postcolonial subject. This discomfort evolves into fear during Santosh's first morning in his new residence. Unable to find his apartment room, Santosh spends the night sleeping in the corridor. Upon waking, Santosh decides to take a walk

outside, but quickly becomes more lost as a result of the elevator. Santosh explains, “The noise of [the elevator] was very loud. I knew I was in the basement and the main floor was not far above me. But I no longer wanted to try... My courage flowed out of me” (31). While Santosh freely walks in Bombay, Washington does not provide him the security and freedom to do so. His new residence lacks these important characteristics so integral to the home. Furthermore, Santosh’s unsuccessful attempt to mimic his routine from Bombay shows a sense of longing for his old home, while establishing that he cannot return to those simple joys. Another one of the numerous examples of Santosh’s freedom being stripped away in this new residence comes in the form of monetary expenses. While Santosh makes more money than he did in Bombay, he easily spends “more than half the advance” his employer gives him on a cinema ticket, coffee and cake (35). Santosh enjoys activities such as the cinema in Bombay, but Washington’s expensive nature prevents him from seeking out leisure, regardless of an increased wage. Additionally, Santosh’s status as an outsider is made apparent through these tasks. At one café, a woman denies him access because he is barefoot: ‘Can’t you read? We don’t serve hippies or bare feet here’ (33). Santosh’s comfort in his identity dissipates as judgmental eyes watch him. As a result, he spends these early days in Washington “quietly in [his] cupboard” without a sense of belonging or companionship. A prisoner in this new residence, Santosh is unable to call Washington a home without adjusting to the environment and regaining the freedom, safety and belonging that Naipaul establishes as integral.

As Santosh’s time in Washington progresses, he begins to gain confidence and assimilate. He discovers his own attractiveness and becomes “more careful of [his] appearance” (39). He spends his days watching television and improves his English while entering the “homes of [Americans] and watching them [clean] those homes” (37). It is with this renewed sense of self

that Santosh leaves his old employer to work for Priya, who offers him a much larger room and paycheck. In Priya, Santosh is able to find friendship and safety. He explains, “I loved his talk. I hadn’t heard anything so sweet and philosophical since the Bombay days... For the first time since I had come to Washington, I felt safe” (47, 49). For Santosh, who now finds belonging and security, this residence is the closest thing in Washington to a home. A sense of guilt tied to his old employer and the “hubshi” woman, however, keep him tied to postcolonial homelessness. When leaving his old residence, Santosh abruptly ends his relationships with these people and begins to fear their judgment. Furthermore, this decision makes Santosh an illegal immigrant as he does not have a green card. Santosh explains, “I felt burdened by my secrets. Once I had none; now I had so many” (50). These secrets imprison Santosh as they threaten the security, freedom and belonging that he finally stumbles upon. Santosh escapes this imprisonment by marrying the “hubshi” woman and becoming a citizen, but as a result is unable to find a home in Washington at the end of the story. The act causes him to feel like a “stranger” and he decides to close his “mind and heart to the English language” (61). He also distances himself from Priya, and with little sense of belonging, Santosh is left as an outsider with simply the knowledge that his existence will “be over” after a “certain number of years” (61).

“One out of Many” shows readers three separate places of residence through the eyes of a single protagonist. In contrasting them, V.S. Naipaul establishes home as not necessarily a single location, but instead a place where a person may find freedom, safety and belonging. Without these values, a place cannot be a home, regardless of material objects such as a paycheck or the luxury of a living space. As Santosh changes his quarters, he often has to assimilate or alter his identity to try and attain them. Naipaul ultimately illustrates a struggle that leaves many postcolonial subjects in a state of emotional homelessness, constantly in search of comfort.

Works Cited

Naipaul, V. S. *In a Free State*. Picador, 2019.