



**Alas, Sir Vidia: V.S. Naipaul, 1932-
2018**

John Thieme

University of East Anglia, Norwich, UK

SARE: Southeast Asian Review of English, Vol. 55, Issue 2, 2018

I see these islands and I feel to bawl,
“area of darkness” with V. S. Nightfall.

(Walcott 1982, 54)

V.S. Naipaul seldom elicited lukewarm responses, but for both his devotees and his detractors, his passing is a watershed moment in the history of postcolonial writing, the loss of a pathfinder who scrutinized postcolonial societies with a uniquely acerbic eye. Naipaul’s characterization of himself as a colonial, his repudiation of his Caribbean origins, and his dismissive remarks about non-Western societies all make him an unlikely pioneer for engaged writing about the global South and East. Nevertheless, he is, not unreasonably, widely seen in this light. So, one wants to ask, what is it about Naipaul’s work that has made him such a compelling figure for successive generations of readers?

During the latter part of his career, Naipaul’s reputation declined in academe, and it was also dented by revelations about his private life in Patrick French’s “authorized” 2008 biography, parts of which read more like an *unauthorized* account, the kind of life-story many subjects would have wanted to see suppressed! However, even this gained Naipaul some new admirers, as a consequence of the frankness with which he revealed unsavoury aspects of his character to French. The biography’s title, *The World Is What It Is*, taken from the first sentence of Naipaul’s novel, *A Bend in the River* (1979), set the tone for a warts-and-all portrait, which, like many of Naipaul’s interviews, promoted a view of him as a pragmatic, albeit difficult and contrary, author who appeared to enjoy cultivating a controversial persona. An unkind estimate of his achievement might argue that his success came about from persuading a significant body of readers that the world was what *he* saw it as being and, worse still, that his non-fiction accounts of developing societies, legitimized by his ethnic origins, ministered to the prejudices of the conservative establishment in Europe and North America, appealing to readers who vicariously relished his expression of sentiments that they would have felt unable to voice themselves.

Comments Naipaul made for his disaffected reports on non-Western societies, such as “Africa has no future” (Naipaul 1979b, 36), “It was on Mauritius that the dodo forgot how to fly” (Naipaul 1972, 256), and “Muslim fundamentalism has no intellectual substance to it, and therefore it must collapse” (Naipaul 1980b, 38) stirred up widespread animosity towards him in many of the countries he visited. His notorious comment that “nothing was created in the West Indies” (Naipaul 1962, 29) and his calling the Anglophone Caribbean “the Third World’s third world” (Naipaul 1972, 250) elicited a similar response in the region, while his first two books about his ancestral homeland of India, *An Area of Darkness* (1964) and *India: A Wounded Civilization* (1977), which dwelt on the outdoor defecating habits of Indians and the way in which the Hindu

doctrine of *karma* enmeshed Indians in a quietism tantamount to psychic paralysis, alienated many readers on the subcontinent. True, the later Naipaul was often more mellow in his responses and his third Indian book, *India: A Million Mutinies Now* (1990), which reconstructed the nation as a mosaic of communal pieces, each asserting its distinctive capacity for creativity through “mutiny,” represented an almost total about-face from the previous two. Similarly, in *A Way in the World* (1994) he unearthed traces of the Amerindian cultures that underlay the Spanish foundations of Trinidad (8 and 41), and in so doing effectively overturned the view he had expressed in *The Loss of El Dorado* (1969), where his account of the island’s history was centred on two moments when it had been touched by Europe, and problematized issues of ancestral origins with a greater degree of humility than hitherto: “We cannot understand all the traits we have inherited. Sometimes we can be strangers to ourselves” (Naipaul, 1994, 9). But with this softening of attitudes came a dissipation of the incisiveness that had characterized his analyses, both in his early comic novels, his finest middle-period fiction, and his polemical travel writing, and by the time he published his last two novels, *Half a Life* (2001) and its sequel, *Magic Seeds* (2004), although his customary themes were still very much in evidence, the inertia surrounding the protagonist Willie Chandran was complemented by a more lacklustre style.

From early on in his career, Naipaul was showered with accolades and by the time he received the Booker Prize for *In a Free State* in 1971, he had won virtually all of Britain’s major literary awards. A knighthood followed in 1990, and the Nobel Prize for Literature was conferred on him in 2001. Again, this recognition suggested that his appeal in the West could, at least partly, be attributed to his skill in persuading armchair travellers that the world was as he represented it. When he won the Nobel Prize, the press release of the Swedish Academy referred to him as “a literary circumnavigator, only ever really at home in himself, in his inimitable voice” and as a writer “[s]ingularly unaffected by literary fashion and models,” seemingly taking him at his own estimate and in so doing succumbing to his self-created myth of himself as a lone genius who transcended his Caribbean origins.¹ Moreover, the presentation speech that the Permanent Secretary of the Swedish Academy gave at the Nobel ceremony referred to Naipaul’s having praised the West for recognizing “the right to individual endeavour” and for being devoted to European civilization as “the only one of the alternative cultures available to him that made it possible for him to become a writer” (Engdahl). As I put it at the time (Thieme 4-5), this suggests that personal endeavour is the particular prerogative of the West and not really possible elsewhere – or at least not possible as far as Naipaul was concerned – and the Academy appears to have been pleased to endorse such a view. And, again significantly, the press release for the Prize put its primary emphasis on *The Enigma of Arrival* (1987), a novel that Derek Walcott located in the very English tradition of the elegiac pastoral (Walcott 1998, 122), and not his Caribbean masterpiece *A House for Mr Biswas* (1961), further suggesting the Eurocentricity of its acclamation of Naipaul. All of this said, Naipaul, *pace* his own disavowal of his Caribbean origins and his jaundiced view of the South and the East, remains a

groundbreaking figure among postcolonial writers and at his best, particularly in his early work, he demonstrated an outstanding capacity for dissecting colonial and postcolonial societies, coming at his subjects from unconventional angles and frequently touching raw nerves.

Naipaul's early work is centrally concerned with displacement and from his first novel, *The Mystic Masseur* (1957), onwards there is a focus on the disempowerment of individuals in colonial society and, implicitly or explicitly, the struggle of the writer to create a sense of order from chaotic personal and social history. It underlies Mr Biswas's mock-heroic quest to achieve a sense of wholeness through possessing his own house and when, at the end of the Prologue to the novel, Naipaul speaks of how terrible it would have been for Biswas to "have lived without even attempting to lay claim to one's portion of the earth; to have lived and died as one had been born unnecessary and "unaccommodated" (Naipaul 1961, 13), the word "unaccommodated" evokes King Lear's use of it to express his sense of existential anomie on the heath (III: iv, 103-12).

The same quest for order is also at the heart of Naipaul's second early masterpiece, *The Mimic Men* (1967), where the protagonist Ralph Singh (né Kirpalsingh) talks about a period of his life when he dreamt of writing as a way of combating his incapacity to feel "intensity of emotion":

It was my hope to give expression to the restlessness, the deep disorder, which the great explorations, the overthrow in three continents of established social organizations, the unnatural bringing together of peoples who could achieve fulfilment only within the security of their own societies and the landscapes hymned by their ancestors, it was my hope to give partial expression to the restlessness which this great upheaval has brought about. (Naipaul 1967, 38)

Singh's history has remained unwritten, but its subject resonates with his personal life-story and more broadly it can be read as a metonym for the project that lies at the heart of Naipaul's work: the task of charting the consequences of colonialism, a task which is mainly conducted through minutely realized representations of the lives of individuals in a spare and economical prose.

In an essay on Joseph Conrad, Naipaul spoke of him as a writer who "had been everywhere before me. Not as a man with a cause, but a man offering, as in *Nostromo*, a vision of the world's half-made societies, as places which continually made and unmade themselves" (Naipaul 1980a, 216), and this vision of Caribbean and African societies is central to *The Mimic Men*, *In a Free State* (1971), and *A Bend in the River*. It is a vision that stands somewhere between Conrad's interrogatory late colonial view of "other" places and, at a seemingly opposite extreme, the perspectives of novelists such as Salman Rushdie and Amitav Ghosh and

theorists such as Homi Bhabha. While each of these writers takes issue with Naipaul's view of the world, he has arguably been as much of a precursor for them as Conrad was for him. At a time when essentialist ideologies dominated cultural commentary, his focus on heterogeneous "half-made societies" stood out from the perspectives of most, though certainly not all, of his contemporaries. Naipaul only differed in his flair for dramatizing the negative personal consequences of being a product of such societies and his ability to represent himself as both unique and yet somehow typical of the world into which he was born.

Ultimately his genius can be attributed to his capacity for persuasive meticulous detail. *A House for Mr Biswas* remains unrivalled as a comic-realist saga of a colonial individual's struggle for psychic integration. It is a novel that takes its departure-point from the Dickens-Wells tradition of the English novel, and yet subverts this by showing how the reaffirmation of the social order, enshrined in the comic providence that underlies the plots of English novels written in this mode, is simply not possible in Trinidad. Mr Biswas attains his house, but it is jerry-built and he dies shortly afterwards. The only alternative to such a struggle against the odds, it seems, is to follow the road taken by the narrator of Naipaul's first published book, *Miguel Street* (1959), and Biswas's son Anand, and emigrate.

The Enigma of Arrival, which blurs the boundaries between fact and fiction, while sub-titling itself "a novel," is perhaps Naipaul's most personal work in that it documents a very subjective sense of loss, but here too he manages to make the narrator-protagonist's present situation, as a tenant on a decaying Victorian-Edwardian estate in Wiltshire, a case-study of what, earlier in *In a Free State*, he had referred to as the "casualties of [...] freedom" (Naipaul 1971, 10). In short, then, Naipaul's achievement lies in his pithy prose's capacity for making his seemingly private world-view strikingly relevant to many of the most compelling issues of the late twentieth century – among them migration, hybridity and diversity. That said, his apparent adherence to Ralph Singh's view that people can "achieve fulfilment only within the security of their own societies and the landscapes hymned by their ancestors" expresses a nostalgia for an unattainable purity, which seems quaintly anachronistic in the pluralist climate of the twenty-first century.

Notes

¹ In "The Garden Path: V.S. Naipaul," Derek Walcott discountenances this, in referring to Naipaul's numerous predecessors and contemporaries who negate "The myth of Naipaul as a phenomenon, as a singular, contradictory genius who survived the cane fields and the bush at great cost [...]" (Walcott 1998, 128).

Works Cited

- Engdahl, Horace (2001) Presentation Speech: The 2001 Nobel Prize for Literature. Official Website of the Nobel Foundation.
www.nobel.se/literature/laureates/2001/presentation-speech.html. Accessed 6 February 2002.
- French, Patrick (2008) *The World Is What It Is: The Authorized Biography of V.S. Naipaul*. London: Picador.
- Naipaul, V.S. (1957) *The Mystic Masseur*. London André Deutsch.
- (1959) *Miguel Street*. London André Deutsch.
- (1961) *A House for Mr Biswas*. London André Deutsch.
- (1962). *The Middle Passage: The Caribbean Revisited*. London André Deutsch.
- (1964) *An Area of Darkness: An Experience of India*. London André Deutsch.
- (1967) *The Mimic Men*. London André Deutsch.
- (1969) *The Loss of El Dorado: A History*. London André Deutsch.
- (1971) *In a Free State*. London André Deutsch.
- (1972) *The Overcrowded Barracoon and other articles*. London André Deutsch.
- (1977) *India: A Wounded Civilization*. London André Deutsch.
- (1979a) *A Bend in the River*. London André Deutsch.
- (1979b) "Meeting V.S. Naipaul": Naipaul interviewed by Elizabeth Hardwick. *New York Times Book Review*: 13 May: 1, 36.
- (1980a) "Conrad's Darkness". In *The Return of Eva Perón with the Killings in Trinidad*. London André Deutsch, pp. 225-8.
- (1980b) Naipaul interviewed by Edward Behr. *Newsweek*. 18 August: 38.
- (1987) *The Enigma of Arrival: A Novel in Five Sections*. London: Viking.
- (1990) *India: A Million Mutinies Now*. London: Heinemann.
- (1994) *A Way in the World: A Sequence*. London: Heinemann.

--- (2001) *Half A Life*. London: Picador.

--- (2004) *Magic Seeds*. London: Picador.

Press Release of the Swedish Academy (2001). 11 October.

www.nobel.se/literature/laureates/2001/press.html . Accessed 6 February 2002.

Shakespeare, William (1966) *King Lear*. London: Methuen / Arden paperback ed.

Thieme, John (2002) "Naipaul's Nobel." *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 37,1: 1-7.

Walcott, Derek (1982) *The Fortunate Traveller*. London: Faber.

--- (1998) *What the Twilight Says: Essays*. London: Faber.