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VS Naipaul: A literary giant in the field of fiction

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Abstract
Vidiadhur Surajprasad Naipaul's narratives of arrival in En land return repeatedly to his father Seepersad's nurturin of his artistic ambition in Trinidad, and his early prescience that the 'idea of the writin vocation' iven him by a colonial acculturation could be realised and practised in En land. In makin himself a writer, he has abjured bein cate orised as West Indian, most famously in withdrawin the manuscript of uerillas (1975) from publisher Secker and Warbur after bein described in a catalo ue as 'the West Indian novelist'. His career as a determinedly 'extrare ional' writer of fiction, travel books and memoir4 has been both stellar and controversial. In 1990 he was awarded Trinidad's Trinity Cross and kni hted by British monarch Elizabeth II. The bio raphical note in his latest novel Half a Life (2001) rather acerbically states that '[h]e has won every major literary award bar the Nobel'. Cited by the Swedish Academy as a 'British writer, born in Trinidad', he finally did win the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2001 'for havin united perceptive narrative and incorruptible scrutiny in works that compel us to see the presence of suppressed histories. Naipaul is Conrad's heir as the annalist of the destinies of empires in the moral sense: what they do to human bein s.

Keywords: V.S. Naipaul, fiction, racism, culture, history, politics, imperialism colonialism, postcolonialism, morality, truth

Introduction

His authority as a narrator is grounded in the memory of what others have forgotten, the history of the vanquished'. Naipaul's work is praised here as being faithful to history and a historical constituency of the oppressed, his interpretation of them being motivated by moral rigour and truth, rather than by cultural and artistic values which have ideological and political groundings. Given the controversies generated by his writing and his public persona the claim is extraordinary. His stances on and representations of the politics of decolonisation are frequently denounced as reactionary. Edward Said, for instance, has decried Naipaul as 'immoral', a pedlar of 'the tritest, the cheapest and the easiest of colonial mythologies about wogs and darkies' and comforting imperialist theses concerning the 'self-inflicted wounds' of the colonised. The relation of Naipaul and his work to the post-imperial encounter in Britain is, however, more complicated than such denunciations suggest. Exacting anxieties have haunted his witness of his journey from the 'exotic' periphery to the centre of English culture through the practice of a vocation he idealises and conceptualises with such rigid conservatism.

In 1958, on the eve of the Notting Hill riots, Naipaul saw himself as an 'exotic writer', 'liv[ing] in England and depend[ing] on an English audience'.8 Born in Chaguanas in 1932, Naipaul had arrived in England in 1950 to study English at Oxford University, after a long period in Port of Spain 'spent in a blind, driven kind of colonial studying' to win his scholarship. Explaining his decision not to return to Trinidad to his mother Droapati in 1954, he writes: 'the place is too small, the values are all wrong, and the people are petty. This country [England] is hot with racial prejudices, and I certainly don't wish to stay here.' He was then in the process of identifying his early subject matter: social comedies set in Trinidad, focusing on local 'characters', 'easy material for the writer'. This would be the metier of his first four books of fiction, including his highly acclaimed *A House for Mr Biswas* (1961), the protagonist of which is based loosely on his beloved father. Coming from the 'enclosed life' of an extended rural Indo-Trinidadian family, 'the disintegrating world of a remembered India', Naipaul 'never ceased to feel a stranger' in Port of Spain after his family's move there. His sense of living on the periphery of a dominant black colonial culture in Port of Spain and later of a dominant white English culture is figured as inhabiting a 'kind of limbo', as an existential homelessness in relation to elusive community. In this English 'limbo' 'he suffered periods of deep depression and anxiety, even once attempting to gas himself'. 'I saw people of other groups from the outside; school friendships were left behind at school or in the street. I had no proper understanding of where I was, and really never had the time to find out', he writes of Port of Spain. Black characters, for instance, Man-man or B. Wordsworth in *Miguel Street* (1959) [8], are part of the theatricality of communal street life.

To achieve mass appeal with an English audience as a regional West Indian writer, Naipaul suggests in 1958, he would need to supplement writing skill with a few thematic and structural 'devices': 'Sex'; writing a narrative around 'an English or American character' in a Caribbean setting; and 'Race'. His horror at being categorised as the 'West Indian' author of Guerillas might be related to the fact that it does have these stock narrative motors of the popular fiction he so despises, including a 'quick-to-strip' female protagonist. While anathematising all of these mechanisms, Naipaul deals with 'Race' in most detail. He finds 'the race issue is too complicated to be dealt with at best-seller, black-and-white level', especially after his time in England. He worries that such 'stories of oppression and humiliation' with their mandatory 'clear oppressors and clear oppressed'

may pander to an audience's 'sadistic pleasure', its 'vicarious sense of power'. He usefully raises the question whether a British tabloid audience of the 1950s would necessarily identify with the victim rather than the perpetrator of racial discrimination. His own point of identification is problematic, he states, because of his Indian heritage, his origins in 'an easy-going multi-racial society', and his awareness that racialised conflict can also take the form of black-on black violence as in the persecution of Tamil people in the then Ceylon. In *The Enigma of Arrival* (1987), the narrator of which Naipaul acknowledges to be an autobiographical figure, he points to a more primal character formation which has shaped his handling of conflict: 'The fear of extinction which I had developed as a child had partly to do with this: the fear of being swallowed up or extinguished by the simplicity of one side or the other, my side or the side that wasn't mine'. Naipaul's use of evolutionary discourse, here, is telling: it implies a belief that he can make himself fitter in relation to this threat by transcending clear-cut loyalties and causes. Naipaul's unwillingness to hone his sense of imperialism as an analytic category is related, he suggests in 1998, to his resistance to simplifications: he 'grew up with this idea that it was important to look inwards and not always define an external enemy. We must examine ourselves, examine our own weaknesses'.

Discussion

In the early stages of his career Naipaul is resistant to his sense of how the 'West Indian writer' is recognised in Britain and restrictive expectations of his or her work and approaches to sex, the exotic, and race relations. He refuses to commodify his writing to meet these expectations, grounded as they are in porno-tropic fantasies of the colonial and ex-colonial world as a site on which 'forbidden sexual desires and fears' might be projected, and, as he strives to demonstrate, in reductive understandings of the complexity of race relations and of the humanity of the victims of racism.

In *Reading & Writing* (2000) Naipaul acknowledges that in his early years he had not found the 'imaginative key', what he calls elsewhere the 'human experience, the literary experience' to comprehend fully 'English and European fiction'. In 'London' he writes that he knew 'little about England', the intricacies of life there being kept 'behind closed doors'. 'I have met many people but I know them only in official attitudes – the drink, the interview, the meal. I have a few friends. But this gives me only a superficial knowledge of the country and in order to write fiction it is necessary to know so much: we are not all brothers under the skin.' The public/private dichotomy in English culture, and in London specifically, operates as a barrier to 'communal pleasures' and interaction, a 'barrier of self-consciousness'. This threatens 'sterility' for him. His sense of vulnerability is perhaps heightened by his growing sense that he could not 'make a living' as a writer 'by being regional'. In The Enigma of Arrival the narrator notes with some chagrin that he had in the 1950s passed up an important theme, the 'flotsam of Europe' in London boarding houses after the war, 'the beginning of that great movement of peoples that was to take place in the second half of the twentieth century. These people's principal possessions were their stories, and their stories spilled easily out of them. But I noted nothing down. I asked no questions. I took them all for granted, looked beyond them'.

'Fiction works best in a confined moral and cultural area, where the rules are generally known; and in that confined area it deals best with things – emotions, impulses, moral anxieties – that would be unseizable or incomplete in other literary forms', Naipaul insists. He would return in his fiction set in England or containing sojourns in England on the parts of his protagonists to such confined areas: the communal intimacies and shifting loyalties of boarding houses; England in the late 1940s and 1950s; little Englandism; the making of the black prophet in the 1960s and 1970s; the constrained lives of male immigrants whose search for community, acceptance and masculine reassurance resolves itself illusively and elusively into sex; the country manor and cottage; and the vocation of writing.

The first of Naipaul's novels with an English setting and English characters is Mr Stone and the Knights Companion (1964), usually regarded as his 'attempt to escape from being regarded as a regional writer'. Naipaul develops a searching critique of little Englandism. The librarian protagonist Mr Stone is the epitome of a little Englandism nearing the end of its working life, and reflecting anxiously on its achievements. His anxieties are shaped by pressures on his everyday white masculinity. Alison Light argues that inter-war little Englandism was a 'conservative modernity', characterised by 'a move away from formerly heroic and officially masculine public rhetorics of national destiny and from a dynamic and missionary view of the Victorian and Edwardian middle classes in "Great Britain" to an Englishness at once less imperial and more inward-looking, more domestic and more private'. It valued 'the quiet life', the 'known and the familiar', the 'nice, decent'. At the opening of the novel Mr Stone's domestic territorialism, and his familiar comfort with 'slow decay' and 'bulky nineteen-thirty furniture', is affronted by the presence of a black tomcat in his garden and home. Mr Stone is fixated on traces of its 'obscene scuttlings and dredgings and buryings'. Business involving the cat, associated with newcomers to the neighbourhood, may be read as a sign of bachelor Mr Stone's sexual anxiety as he approaches retirement age. It might also, however, be read as a sign of his anxiety about the permissive encroachment of the foreign in his corner of England.

He seeks to manage his sexual anxiety through a prospect of white regeneration, which is, however, short-lived. He marries Margaret Springer, when, symbolically, a tree in view of his back window has 'swollen' buds and 'in sunshine were like points of white'. Margaret introduces a 'new and alien mustiness' into his home and a tiger skin, seemingly a family heirloom, which exacerbate his sense of masculine inadequacy. 'The "odor di femina" becomes odious, nauseous', Michèle Montrelay argues, 'because it threatens to undo the achievements of repression and sublimation, threatens to return the subject to the powerlessness, intensity and anxiety of an immediate, unmediated connection with the body of the mother.' The tigerskin is a trophy of imperial masculinity, signalled in the photograph of an 'English cavalry officer', with 'one hand caressing a rifle laid neatly across his thighs', and a 'highly polished boot' on the chest of a dead tiger. In the background are 'three sorrowful, top-heavily turbanned Indians, beaters or bearers or whatever they were'

Naipaul also points out in 1968 that he was not part of a community of West Indian writers in London: 'We don't

have anything in common, you see'. 'I used to read a lot of West Indian novels until 1956. Since then I have stopped really. This is because they have stopped feeding me. It is really hard to read books that don't feed me. This, of course, feeds his fantasy of being a self-made writer; again, as in double-edged comments like 'I have grown out of Trinidad', his acerbic relation to the West Indies is represented as a sign of maturity. Naipaul tends to praise in West Indian novels what confirms his world-view and to interpret them through it. For instance, his assessment of Jean Rhys in 1971, important for placing her as West Indian, emphasises the senses of exile and the psychological shipwreck of 'dependence and defeat', the 'woman's half-world' of her protagonists. He commends Rhys for being 'above causes'.

He responds appreciatively in her work to what is a major thematic in his own writing – the displaced colonial subject in England – handled by him in both deeply empathetic and satirical ways. The fear of shipwreck and a sense of being adrift had been leitmotifs of *The Mimic Men* (1967). Ralph Singh's journeys from the fictive West Indian island of Isabella to London, energised at first by colonial myths of place, are journeys to two-dimensionality – the parts of 'the dandy, the extravagant colonial, indifferent to scholarship' and of the sexualised child to Lady Stella – which like his sexual adventures with 'anonymous flesh' take him 'deeper into emptiness'. In England he finds himself injured into feeling 'spectral, disintegrating, pointless, fluid'. Naipaul reinflects aspects of this topos in Half a Life. Willie Chandran's journey from India to London to an unnamed African colony (recognisably Mozambique) is also a progressive movement to dependence and defeat. His anxieties centre on emasculation and inauthenticity. His 'half' life is one characterised by hiding. For example, as a child he revises European stories movingly, yet obliquely, to accuse his parents of emotional neglect and violence. Pursuing a writing career in England he manufactures fiction from European sources, and because of his skin colour and Indian name, his work is assumed to be authentically Indian. Naipaul's decision in the 1960s to embrace an extraregional identity as a writer was produced by economic considerations, a determination in the face of interpretative difficulties to broaden his range to include stringent treatments of England and the English, and a pointed dissociation of himself from forms of racist address and racial and PanCaribbean solidarity. As a writer of fiction and criticism he is, though, appreciative of the personal and psychological costs of displacement and exile from community for colonial subjects in England.

Naipaul writes of Conrad that rather than 'discover' himself and his 'world' through writing, his 'character had been formed' before he 'settled down to write'. He implicitly associates this with Conrad's propensity to cite 'portable truths, as it were, that can sometimes be rendered as aphorisms – and work through to their demonstration'. Giving Conrad's story 'The return' as an example of the method, he notes that 'the people remain abstractions'.96 Naipaul's discourse of civilisation is replete with 'portable truths', a vocabulary of the '"barbarous", "primitive", "tribal", "static", and "simple" societies, "world civilization", "bush", "philistine", the "colonial", the "whole man", "security", "sentimentality", "parasitic", "borrowed culture", and "mimicry". Reiteratively, and in combination', as Nixon notes, 'these terms of reference become a compressed expression of Naipaul's Weltanschauung'.97 These 'truths' profoundly reduce the humanity of the people and characters about whom Naipaul writes, producing them as abstractions, bearers of cultural and often racialised essences. The method is one that justifies Akeel Bilgrami's observation that Naipaul's 'cultural commentary' on the nonWest 'typically combined an effortless contempt with a cultivated ignorance of the historical and the institutional sources of a culture's surface presentation'. The meticulousness of Naipaul's detailing of that presentation – 'the sketches of fellow travellers, of the daily routines, the vessels, living quarters and facilities, food, drink, recreations, chance and deliberate encounters, conversations engaged in or, just as often, overheard' – nonetheless, as Mustafa suggests, 'establishes an aura of verisimilitude'. The specificity of local detail belies the grounding of his broader cultural observations in formulaic, portable truths.

Conclusion

Naipaul has modelled himself as writer in a conservative mould: dedicated to mastery over craft, close moral examination, ambition and nature; affecting political disinterest in creative prose; and wilfully transcending the vulgarities of popular cultures (including their perceived racisms), and the anxieties that have beset his journey to the centre of English culture. Arguably, and I pointedly echo here Naipaul's representation of Lebrun in 'On the run', his artistic resolution is an effort to submerge his racial feelings in the perceived universality of his transcendent and scrupulous vision of the Olympian writer. Naipaul's accounts of being formatively placed on peripheries of community in Port of Spain and England are permeated by a sense of loss: loss of material as a writer; and, more faintly, of a sense of civic identity that might confer substance outside vocation. The sense of civic displacement that has haunted his journey movingly informs an important and finely nuanced thread in his fiction: the sense of unease and exile the colonial subject may experience in England. This is a pervasive preoccupation of West Indian writers who treat Caribbean immigrant and expatriate experience in Britain. Naipaul has pointedly dissociated himself from West Indian social and political communities and their late modern histories both in the Caribbean and in Europe, preferring instead to claim an extraregional identity and scope and more recently to champion the ideals of a prized 'universal civilization'. His reputation as a reactionary in relation to the politics of decolonisation and race is certainly merited, but Said's and Nixon's condemnations of that politics, which are typical of those of his detractors, are too sweeping. Naipaul's representations of England and the English do not uniformly indulge a patriotic racism and imperial nostalgia or play to persistent racial stereotypes of non-white peoples in England. His conservatism, too, is characterised by deeply conflicted attitudes to liberal principles with respect to racial issues and histories.

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