

RESEARCH ARTICLE



V.S. NAIPAUL: A BEACON HOPE FOR THE CARIBBEAN ISLES

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ABSTRACT

This article studies the uniqueness of V.S. Naipaul, as an expatriate writer, a beacon hope for the Caribbean Isles. He could be a prophet, soothsayer and doom watcher and tell unpalatable truths. He sees through the creeds, cultures and countries their colonial societies and strips them of their pretences and defense mechanisms by means of irony and prophecy. Newsweek has called him "The Master of the Novel" and Patrick Swinden has called him, "One of the finest living novelists writing in English."

Key words: Commonwealth, colonialism, restlessness

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INTRODUCTION

Commonwealth literature is a Literature of ex-colonies, being the result of various types of migrations and cross-cultural accidents. The very existence and the meanings of the ex-colonial literature are rooted in history and the colonial aftermath. With its multi-dimensional subject of study, Commonwealth literature includes the whole complex fate of man in time, space, history and ecology. It records the process that changed the life and status of the natives, and bought slaves under centuries of domination. It pin points the existential reality of inhabiting a multi-cultural, polycentric society, full of question marks.

What indeed constitutes the triumph of Commonwealth literature is its having enabled continents, cultures and traditions to come

together, interact and move towards a new creative vitality. In the hands of White and non-White writers, it has emerged as a very powerful and promising response the human situation in a world of change, pulls and pressures. The writers and poets have portrayed a world which can no longer be denied or evaded. The old historic-political, socio-economic and geo-physical equations have now become obsolete, their place, having been taken by new concepts of freedom, choice and human identity. With the collapse of old power structures, their place has been taken by a new logic of existence in a bi-cultural, multi-cultural or a pluralistic world. There is surely a kind of new cosmopolitan transcendental visible in the concerns of Commonwealth writers like V.S.Naipaul, Chinua Achebe, Wilson Harris, Raja

Rao, George Lamming, Patrick White, and Margaret Atwood to name only a few. It is, as William Walsh termed it, "a manifold voice" with one metaphor of experience and language.

Though English has enriched its meaning, context and area of communication, it is only a historic-political identity, extending to other areas of co-operation. Commonwealth literature does not surrender to the centrality of the British literary tradition. At its best, the latter serves as a catalytic agent that has brought together the White and non-White world, free and subject peoples, colonial and non-colonial nations. At its back is the undeniable common experience of geographical alienation, slavery, racial discrimination and forced migration which has accounted for the viability of its artistic and aesthetic approach. It has shown new trends in sensibility, new blends of structure and style while admitting failure and short comings. Never before have such historical experiences shaped the imagination of the writers; Commonwealth literature, thus, portrays the imponderables of human possibilities in a wide context.

COLONIALISM

Literature is perhaps the only medium to vindicate and illuminate the collective consciousness and psyche of a person in universal enduring patterns. Colonialism and exploitation are interrelated has been recognized for a considerable time. The sociology of slavery constituted the extreme poverty and illiteracy of the Blacks on the one hand, and the vast power of the Whites on the other. The dependence of the colonized on their masters resulted in the slave's loss of vision, power and identity. Indeed, the greatest loss in the colonial system was of one's spiritual and emotional urges. Individualism was the first to disappear.

The colonial system ultimately acquired the shape of a Manichean world. The slave was not only delimited physically, but was also the quintessence of evil for the White settler. To quote Frantz Fanon on the character of colonial exploitation:

"Native society is not simply described as a society lacking in values. It is not enough for the colonialist to affirm that those values have disappeared from, or still

better, never existed in the colonial world. The native is declared insensible to ethics; he represents not only the absence of values, but also the negation of values." (Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* 31)

Together with this the western world, and what now has come to be termed the Third World, were tied in a strange, uncomfortable knot of relationships bred on hatred and mistrust. It formed the dubious link between the oppressor and the oppressed. The worst aspect of the colonial oppression was the sabotage of the subject people from within. It was a sort of psychological invasion from within to undermine faith in their own values and patterns of life. For the colonizer, the native traditions and myths were the very symbol of their poverty of spirit and moral depravity. They were caught in the fast political and economic strategy of the European powers. This ultimately resulted in the loss of their cultural, religious and physical identity, and the virtual surrender to the White value-system. With the gradual movement towards de-colonization in the first-half of the twentieth century, the situation became more complex. The colonial legacy left the former colonies in a state of moral and spiritual inertia. On the one hand, the newly-freed people looked desperately at their homeland, on the other; they had to make imaginative adjustments to exist in the New World with its own ecology and other necessities. In short, they had to reject the historical past in favour of the geographical present.

Geographically, as is well-known, Commonwealth literature is divided into two hemispheres, one comprising the countries in Asia, Africa and the Caribbean, the other comprising Canada and nations in the South Pacific represented in Australia and New Zealand. This is significant because the two groups have a different history of colonialism. This is not to deny common strands of experience in terms of culture, society and ecology. Together, they pose colossal problems of adjustments in a wide context, carving out authentic cultural and literacy patterns out of anonymity and the wilderness has been a common issue. So has been the reality of existing in a hostile, broken and culturally fragmented

environment. As is obvious, the politico-historical contexts of Australia, India, Nigeria and the West Indies to name a few, have been diverse. The newly-freed colonial peoples in African countries, India and the West Indies were urgently in search of an enduring pattern which would enable them to live authentically within the framework of new values and attitudes fostered by the European colonizers. Here and there, there were some throwbacks to the bush culture or the fundamentalist revival of certain religious communities, but on the whole, the effort was to seek accommodations and adjustments for their obviously restless state.

The urge in all Commonwealth writing has been to highlight the metaphysics of existence in a displaced, uprooted and dehumanised context thrust upon men by forces beyond their control. The increasing consciousness of geographical, racial and colour barriers the Commonwealth and Negro literature and situation of the slaves recalls their physical, economic, cultural and sexual exploitation, not to speak of the immeasurable psychic damage at the hands of a ravaging capitalism. The 'nigger' or the slave from elsewhere was formally incorporated in Kipling's "White man's burden". This was accompanied by the belief that the Whites were naturally superior to the Blacks. David Hume, the well known philosopher and historian wrote as early as 1753 in his essay, "I am apt to suspect the Negroes to be naturally inferior to the Whites. There scarcely ever was a civilized nation of that complexion, nor ever any individual, eminent either in action or speculation. No ingenious manufacturers, among them, no arts, no sciences."

One of the results of this type of racism was that even after slavery was formally abolished in 1834, there was little difference in the ingrained social thinking in British society. The basic attitudes were left unaltered. Consequently, the Negro's or a Black's attempt to make himself educated or civilized was looked at with contempt and mockery. This is one of the standard themes in Lamming and Naipaul, where either the protagonists migrate to London, or they fancifully follow the White values manners. Spiritual, cultural and individual alienation and the feeling of being a deracinated recluse were the direct results, particularly in Africa

and Caribbean. The plight of the indentured labourers from India to the Caribbean was no less acute. It was another facet of the economic exploitation under the colonial system, as pioneered by Hugh Tinker in his, *A New system of slavery*. The theme forms the major fictional impulse in Naipaul, and to a lesser extent, in Samuel Selvon and Edger Mittelholzer.

Writing about Commonwealth literature, Ravenscroft opined that it implied "a monolithic the implication that is hardly justified by fact, that being written in English is only the superficial similarity shared by a number of national literatures in English, many of which, as in India and partly of Africa, are sub-divisions of multi-lingual literatures" This view presents the typical British thinking about Commonwealth literature. It must be emphasized that Commonwealth literature is now a reality which cannot be ignored. Despite the tremendous diversity and divergence, this literature is characterized by a certain "colonial consciousness" and is the product of a well-known fact of history, that is English education, English literature, and English institutions, which caused an intellectual ferment in the Commonwealth countries enabling their writers to assert their national identity and to give befitting expressions of their distinct creative urges and aspirations. As Patrick White observes in Voss, "common forms are continually breaking into brilliant shapes if we will explore them".

The "colonial consciousness" finds a powerful expression in the writings of V.S. Naipaul. There were writers before him who contributed to the range and variety of the West Indian literature, but very few of them enjoyed Naipaul's reputation outside the West Indies. His powerful mastery over the language and vision helped him add new dimensions to the "astonishing achievement" of the West Indian novel. An important feature of his fictional world is his delineation of the Indian immigrant's dilemma, his problems and plights, in the fast changing Caribbean world.

Coulthard has specified the following common characteristics, which shaped the creative sensibility of writers like Naipaul and was responsible for their grappling of the national ethos:

“The historical background in all the islands has followed the same pattern: discovery and conquest by the Spaniards, extermination of the native Indian populations and their replacement by slave-labour from Africa, the introduction of sugar and the world of the sugar estate, both during and after slavery, and independence at varying dates (Haiti first in 1804, with Jamaica and Trinidad gaining their independence as late as 1962). All the islands have known the common experience of colonialism exploitation, poverty and economic frustration. In all the islands racial discrimination has been a problem, and racial resentments and complexes continue to be an important factor. The last twenty-five years have seen the growth of the middle class in all the islands, living largely on borrowed values (American, British, or French) and an intelligentsia seeking urgently a spiritual and cultural orientation of its own”.

The unpredictable nature of Naipaul as a man makes it difficult to place him or identify him with any one particular tradition. He was born and to some extent brought up in Trinidad. His grandfather had come from Bihar to Trinidad as an indentured labourer and had settled in Trinidad. Naipaul was educated in England. His belated visit to India created a cultural shock. The skeptical notions that he entertained about Trinidad made it impossible for him to call it his own. Trinidad to him is an unimportant, uncreative and cynical society devoid of achievement and history. About Trinidad he says:

“A peasant-minded, money-minded community, spiritually static because cut off from its roots, its religion reduced to rites without philosophy, set in a materialist colonial society. A combination of historical accidents and national temperament has turned the Trinidad Indian into the complete colonial, even more Philistine than the White.”(The Middle Passage 89)

Everyone including an Indian is bound to exist there as an oddity as it encouraged only eccentricity. And being a society without traditions, everyone finds it easier to be an oddity. He has also admitted that the Americans do not accept him because he was too British and the English do not want him because he was too foreign. Further, as

Anthony Boxill points out, “One cannot place Naipaul in the tradition of European culture because he lacks the optimism of writers who come from rooted societies.”

His first three books are comic portraits of Trinidadian society. The *Mystic Masseur* (1957) won The Mail on Sunday, John Llewellyn Rhys Prize in 1958 and was adapted as a film with a screen play by Caryl Phillips in 2001. *Miguel Street* (1959), a collection of short stories won a Somerset Maugham Award. His acclaimed novel *A House for Mr. Biswas* (1961) is based on his father’s life in Trinidad. His first novel is set in England, *Mr. Stone and the Knights Companion* (1963) won the Hawthornden prize.

Subsequent novels developed more political themes and he began to write about colonial and post-colonial societies in the process of decolonization. These novels include *The Mimic Men* (1967), winner of the 1968 W H Smith Literary Award, *In a Free State* (1971), which won the Booker Prize for fiction, *Guerrillas* (1975) and *A Bend in the River* (1979), set in Africa. *The Enigma of Arrival* (1987) is a personal account of his life in England. *A Way of the World* (1994) is a formally experimental narrative that combines fiction and non-fiction in a historical portrait of the Caribbean. *Half a Life* published in 2001 and followed the adventures of Indian Willie Chandran in post-war Britain, a new life initiated by a chance encounter between his father and the novelist W. Somerset Maugham. *Magic Seeds* (2004) continue his story.

V.S.Naipaul is also the author of a number of works of non-fiction including three books about India, *An Area of Darkness* (1964), *India: A Wounded Civilization* (1977), *India: A Million Mutinies Now* (1990), and two books about Islamic societies, *Among the Believers: An Islamic Journey* (1981) and *Beyond Belief: Islamic Excursions* (1998). He has written about the Caribbean in *The Middle Passage: Impressions of five societies British, French and Dutch in the West Indies and South America* (1962). *The Loss of El Dorado: A history* (1969), and has published two collections of essays. *The overcrowded Barracoon and other Articles* (1972) and *The Return of Eva Peron* (1980). *The Writer and the World: Essays*, was published in

2002, and his latest book, *Literary Occasions* (2004) is a further collection of essays.

V.S.Naipaul was Knighted in 1989. He was awarded the David Cohen British Literature Prize by the Arts Councils of England in 1993 and the Nobel Prize for Literature on 7th December 2001. He holds honorary doctorates from Cambridge University and Columbia University in New York, and honorary degrees from the Universities of Cambridge, London and Oxford. He lives in Wiltshire, England.

In his Nobel lecture delivered on the award of one of the world's most prestigious prizes for a life's work as a writer, V.S.Naipaul made a characteristic observation. "Everything" he said, "of value about me is in my books... I am the sum of my books ... I feel that at any stage of my literary career it could have been said that the last book contained all the others." Naipaul's award of the prize at the end of 2001 was long-awaited, yet it was the culmination of a career dedicated solely to the world of letters which has not been without its difficulties. This journey and the enigma of its many arrivals have been expressed over a period of nearly 50 years and through a variety of narrative forms ranging from fiction to travelogue, to autobiography and history.

Life was a journey in which it becomes clear, as one of his characters points out in his novel *A Bend in the River*, "home was hardly a place I could return to. Home was something in my head. It was something I had lost." Naipaul's fictional and non-fictional writings trace a self-conscious symptomatic response to the need to discover an appropriate literary form to frame a psychic and symbolic sense of homelessness. A need, as many have observed to write constantly about "unhousing" while still remaining unhoused, to find a way of inhabiting an inherited language and "tradition" which because of his 'colonial' education and childhood as a twice-removed descendant of a Brahmin indentured family in Trinidad, simultaneously alienated him. From an early age and even before his departure from Trinidad in 1950 to study English at Oxford as the 'Scholarship' boy, Naipaul nurtured the romantic notion of becoming a writer. But as he admits in a revealing 1964 essay *Jasmine* it was not easy,

whatever the blinkered power of colonial fantasy, to extricate oneself from the predetermined plot of an Imperial history, to 'let his memory, rather than his pretension, speak.'

In addition, he had to find a voice to unmake the walls of the canonical house of English literature, a theme which culminates in the much loved fictional universe of *A House for Mr. Biswas*, a novel focusing on his father's life and his childhood amongst the East Indian Community in Trinidad. It was a novel he could not read again for twenty years, but it was the one which made him famous and ended his so-called 'apprenticeship' as a writer in London.

Naipaul had to return to the significance of his father and his East Indian childhood in his later novels. Moreover, the significance of this relationship was intimately expressed in his recently published *Letters Between a Father and Son* (1999), letters which not only expose the anxiety of Naipaul's early life in Britain, but also reveal the extent to which his father, an unsuccessful writer who composed stories about ordinary lives in Trinidad, was to provide him with his first, significant literary model.

The desire to find authentic voice and a form, to discover a new architecture for the imagination which could move beyond a sense of recurrent 'shipwreck' and give expression to what he calls in *The Mimic Men*, a 'restlessness' and disorder resulting from a history Empire dominates the Naipaulian world. It is a preoccupation that surfaces implicitly in many of his characters whether in figures such as Ganesh in *The Mystic Masseur* whose history, he tells that, it is the "history of our times" or, in his later narratives such as *In a Free State* or *A Bend in the River* which extend the fictional and non-fictional lens to Africa, South America, India, the US and Britain. In fact, it was his experimentation, in one of his first historical narratives, *The Loss of El Dorado* that led him to the belief (often expressed in his controversial travelogues of the 1980's and 1990's) that the novel was no longer an adequate vehicle for the expression of a world which requires what he has called 'a larger comprehension.' The method Naipaul explores in *The Loss of El Dorado*, a technique of excavating individual life stories from

the notes of his travels which are later worked into their fictional narratives, documentaries or semi-autobiographical pieces, becomes characteristic of his style in many of his publications of the 1980's amongst others, *Among the Believers* (1981), *A Turn in the South* (1989) and *India* (1990). For as in his semi-fictional, *The Enigma of Arrival* (1987), Naipaul returns obsessively to review earlier preoccupations, circumnavigating both himself and his material with the hope of getting 'closer to the truth', however uncomfortable that truth may be.

Naipaul's novels especially the novels of the first two phases – explore the failures, futility, isolation, dispossession, rootlessness and valuelessness of this unanchored community. Though the cultural crisis of the West Indian immigrant has also been treated by writers like Samuel Selvon, Wilson Harris and Shiva Naipaul, and poets like Derek Walcott, Hendricks and Mervyn Morris, V.S. Naipaul's is probably the most detailed and illuminating analysis of it. Most of his works aim at defining "the setting, the historical time, the racial and social complexities of the people concerned."

Naipaul regards the novel as "a form of social inquiry" rather than "an opportunity for autobiography and boasting." His own fiction is both a creative interpretation of past and a criticism of the contemporary life. It emerges as an authentic account of the agony and the pride, the trials and tribulations of his people. Both the Negro and the Indian suffered dislocation, but the fate of the latter is pathetically tragic, his experiences were far more bewildering and his problems of adjustment far more acute.

One may not accept Naipaul's neat distinction, but the problems of Indian immigrants are no myth but reality. The task of giving a really faithful picture of them was not easy. It was further complicated by the fact the Caribbean Society underwent uprooting more than once. As Naipaul reminds in his *Autobiography*:

"So there was a migration from India to be considered a migration from within the British Empire. There was my Hindu family, with its fading memories of India, there was India herself. And there was Trinidad, with its past of slavery, its mixed population, its racial antagonisms and its

changing political life, one part of Venezuela and Spanish empire, now English-speaking, with the American base and an open-air cinema at the end of Bogart's Street." (*Autobiography* 45)

Naipaul assumed the responsibility of delineating as honestly as possible the dilemma of the Indian immigrant's is fractured consciousness, resulting from factors like transplantation, exploitation, rootlessness and so on. George Steiner is of the view, that "the Modernist Movement can be seen as a strategy of permanent exile." He places Nabokov, Burgess and Beckett at the centre of this Movement. Meenakshi Mukherjee, however, feels that some Commonwealth writers like Naipaul should also be taken to belong to the same category, for "their apprehension of reality has been affected by the experience of more than one country and conditioned by exposure to more than one culture." It would be worthwhile to analyse Naipaul's delineation of the predicament of Indian immigrants and their descendents in the Caribbean islands.

The *Mystic Masseur* presents the picture of the West Indian society, its crisis and challenges, in a more systematic way. As M.K. Naik points out, "Naipaul's main aim in *The Mystic Masseur* seems to be to exploit the comic absurdity in the lives of the transplanted Indians in the West Indians." The novel charts the progress of Ganesh Ramsumair, the central character in the novel, and his relationships with the others with clarity and irony. To W. Dissanayaka, Carmen and Wikramagamage, Naipaul's ideological stance is unambiguous. They claim that "from his very young days, V.S. Naipaul decided to adopt the colonial gaze as a matter of conscious choice, to distinguish himself from the rest of society....A consequence of the adoption of the colonial gaze is to perceive everything indigenous as inferior, cheap and substandard."

CONCLUSION

Finally, Naipaul's eminence as a writer of world status is really in no need of further attestation. Naipaul's life and vision form a seamless whole. Naipaul as a writer enjoys literary kinship with Conrad. He shares with Conrad a literary form and his many concerns, his feeling for lost souls, lost countries, and "a vision of the

world's half-made societies as places which continuously made and unmade themselves, where there was no goal" It is this Conradian vision which becomes central to Naipaul as he begins to comment on various post-colonial societies. His books on India reveal this as he directs his cold, critical gaze on the country, its mores and customs, besides its culture.

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