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Abstract

On receiving the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2001, V.S. Naipaul responded by paying tribute to England, '(his) home', and India, 'the home of (his) ancestors' {The Guardian 2001}. Oddly enough, Trinidad does not merit a mention in Naipaul's tribute — though he was born and grew up in Trinidad, and though it is the home of his most admired early work such as *The Mystic Masseur* (1957), *Miguel Street* (1959) and *A House for Mr Biswas* (1961). Or perhaps it is not so odd, considering Naipaul has written, 'I knew Trinidad to be unimportant, uncreative, cynical', with 'an indifference to virtue as well as vice' (1962 43, 58). Yet this is especially poignant, considering that in the same essay, Naipaul notes; 'Living in a borrowed culture, the West Indian, more than most, needs writers to tell him who he is and where he stands' (1962 73).

GITHA HARIHARAN

The Ignoble Politics of Naipaul's Nobel¹

On receiving the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2001, V.S. Naipaul responded by paying tribute to England, '(his) home', and India, 'the home of (his) ancestors' (*The Guardian* 2001). Oddly enough, Trinidad does not merit a mention in Naipaul's tribute — though he was born and grew up in Trinidad, and though it is the home of his most admired early work such as *The Mystic Masseur* (1957), *Miguel Street* (1959) and *A House for Mr Biswas* (1961). Or perhaps it is not so odd, considering Naipaul has written, 'I knew Trinidad to be unimportant, uncreative, cynical', with 'an indifference to virtue as well as vice' (1962 43, 58). Yet this is especially poignant, considering that in the same essay, Naipaul notes; 'Living in a borrowed culture, the West Indian, more than most, needs writers to tell him who he is and where he stands' (1962 73).

Naipaul has travelled quite a distance from his origins. He has also moved away from the penetrating, humorous, rooted world of his early work. His earlier novels and stories indicated to an entire generation of non-Western writers a way to use the English language while dealing with non-English material; and more importantly, a way to view themselves as post-colonials. The Indian writer Amitav Ghosh, for instance, describes 'the magic of reading Naipaul' in his teens: it meant a

sudden awareness of the anomalousness of my own place in the world ... he [Naipaul] was writing of matters that no one else thought worth noticing; he had found words to excavate new dimensions of experience.... It was Naipaul who first made it possible for me to think of myself as a writer, working in English.... I read him with that intimate, appalled attention which one reserves for one's most skilful interlocutors. (online)

The Indian critic Alok Rai speaks for many post-colonial readers and writers when he recalls the early Naipaul who discovered 'the post-colonial as a subject for artistic reflection': 'At first, he was a truth-teller for our generation. We felt emboldened by what he said. We could look at ourselves squarely, and not remain cowed down by nationalist bullying' (Chaudhury online). Naipaul's early novels did not shy away from either the oddities or the painful contradictions of such societies — and people — struggling to create a coherent, viable narrative of their new lives, often in a hit or miss fashion. He understood the confusion of the postcolonial, and wrote about it in meticulous detail.

However, Naipaul did not stay long with his 'natural' audience. His later 'novels', and particularly his considerable body of non-fiction, took his acute eye, and his undoubted mastery over the graceful sentence and the telling detail,

elsewhere. This 'elsewhere' is a bleak, unhappy place. Darkness rules. If there is light, it only exposes wounds. Mutinies abound (mutinies, revolts, insurgencies; not dissent or movement or struggle). In short, there is chaos; no spark, no ember of hope. Where are these chaotic 'half-made' societies Naipaul travels in with so much writerly pain and fear? All of them, without exception, are in non-Western countries. Many of them are yet to recover from their hefty colonial legacies; many are in the midst of grappling with either chauvinist or opportunist rulers, appropriate successors to their colonial masters. Whether in the West Indies, the Indian subcontinent or Africa, the 'heritage' of contemporary society is the collective memory of slavery, indentured labour, displacement of many sorts; of thoroughgoing plunder of resources, including labour; of the creation of a new ruling class in the coloniser's image, so that 'independent' countries could continue to be divided and ruled; and most of all, of a sense of dispossession — a sense of not knowing oneself.

Naipaul places himself outside these struggling, developing worlds. Indeed, he is impatient with postcolonial attempts to understand how the present has grown out of the past.² Instead, he dissects them with his (now legendary) fastidiousness, and his diagnosis is as uncompromising as it is strongly worded. Of Trinidad: 'a society which denied itself heroes ... a place where the stories were never stories of success but of failure' (1962 43–44). Of India: 'a decaying civilisation, where the only hope lies in further, swift decay' (1976 191). Of Africa: 'Africa has no future'. This last in response to an interview question from Elizabeth Hardwick, 'What is the future in Africa?'. So: uncreative, heroless Trinidad. Wounded India. Dark, future-less Africa. And, almost inevitably, 'calamitous' Islam; '(the) abolition of the self demanded by Muslims was worse than the similar colonial abolition of identity. It is much, much worse in fact' (Gibbons).

These caricatured societies, so dirty, so anarchic, so full of people lost as soon as they step out of their societies into one 'with more complex criteria' (Naipaul 1962 21), do serve one purpose. These areas of darkness serve as a perennial foil to the refined, cultivated European ethos. In an earlier time, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1902) which went on to become a modern classic, firmly established this tradition of postulating 'the other world', a world antithetical to the European one. Chinua Achebe defines Conrad's view of Africa as 'the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilisation, a place where man's vaunted intelligence and refinement are finally mocked by triumphant bestiality' (1989 3). In this antithetical heart of darkness that Conrad creates, Africans inhabit 'an earth that wore the aspect of an unknown planet'. It is a place where the representatives of Europe, 'wanderers on a prehistoric earth,' struggle down a bend to suddenly encounter the other — dark, prehistoric men and women. 'They howled and leaped, and spun, and made horrid faces; but what thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity — like yours — the thought of your

remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar. Ugly' (Conrad 1902 105–106). Achebe comments tersely:

Herein lies the meaning of *Heart of Darkness* and the fascination it holds over the Western mind: 'What thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity — like yours ... Ugly' ... The black man lays a claim on the white man which is well-nigh intolerable. It is the laying of this claim which frightens and at the same time fascinates Conrad. (1989 6,11).

Conrad's vision is complex enough to accommodate self-awareness about creating a paradigm necessary for the imperialist enterprise. His imaginative representation of the West's encounter with the other world is coloured, to put it crudely, by conscience; but a twentieth- or twenty-first-century heir to Conrad's legacy, a brown heir, seems an especially cruel anachronism. Just as Conrad's European travellers 'glide like phantoms' in Africa, 'cut off from the comprehension of (their) surroundings' (Conrad 1902 105), Naipaul too glides like a nervous, unhappy phantom across the prehistoric world from the Congo to Bombay, all generally places where 'the moist heat saps energy and will' (Ezekiel 1965 74). In the West Indies of 1960, Naipaul discovers that 'the history of the islands can never be satisfactorily told. Brutality is not the only difficulty. History is built around achievement and creation; and nothing was created in the West Indies' (1962 29). In the Congo of 1965, Naipaul is accosted by 'native people camping in the ruins of civilisation' (Achebe 1989 29). In Naipaul's Africa, the bush creeps back as he stands there.

India is equally threatening. It reduces him to facelessness in the crowd. Indeed part of his discomfort is that everyone in the crowd looks like him, in which case how is he to be distinctive from them? (Conrad echoes from the past: 'What thrilled you was the thought of their humanity — like yours') Though the individuals Naipaul meets and writes about so sharply may or may not be the 'types' they stand for, Naipaul has judgments to hand out to every spectrum of Indian society. The clerk: in India 'the clerk will not bring you a glass of water even if you faint' (Ezekiel 1965 77). The inferior colonial: speaks English and may even appreciate art, but hangs a Jamini Roy beside a Picasso. The population at large: full of 'smugness ... imperviousness to criticism, refusal to see ... double-talk and double-think' (Ezekiel 1965 73). Whether it is India's perverse tendency not to 'need' pavements or the 'background of swarming Bombay slum', it is clear there is nothing left in India of the dream-world Naipaul had constructed as 'the home of his ancestors'. In modern India, 'Shiva has ceased to dance' (Ezekiel 1965 90).

What Naipaul apparently finds lacking in India is a pure, well-lit place. Both purity and homogeneity are, thank goodness, in reasonably short supply in India, despite the efforts of our own puritymongers; but by the time he wrote *India: A Million Mutinies Now* (1990), Naipaul had found some redeeming signs of change. Earlier, in *A Wounded Civilization* (1976), Naipaul had written, 'An enquiry

about India — even an inquiry about the Emergency — has quickly to go beyond the political. It has to be an inquiry about Indian attitudes; it has to be an inquiry about the civilisation itself, as it is' (1976 ix-x). The verdict on this 'civilisation beyond the political': 'No civilisation was so little equipped to cope with the outside world; no country was so easily raided and plundered, and learned so little from its disasters' (1976 viii). Later, travelling in India to write *A Million Mutinies*, Naipaul is able to see that

what (he) hadn't understood in 1962, or had taken too much for granted, was the extent to which the country had been remade; and even the extent to which India had been restored to itself, after its own equivalent of the Dark Ages — after the Muslim invasions and the detailed, repeated vandalising of the North, the shifting empires, the wars, the eighteenth-century anarchy (Naipaul 1990 517).

The million mutinies are 'part of India's growth, part of its restoration' (518). Shiva, it seems, has almost begun to dance again: the country is 'full of the signs of growth', all the signs of 'the Indian, and more specifically, Hindu awakening' (161). Where India's hope lies, where it must go (so Shiva can dance uninterrupted), is a place where Hindu civilisation can be restored.

India did travel to such a place on December 6, 1992. The fifteenth-century Babri Masjid in Ayodhya — a monument part of every Indian's heritage — had become, over the years, a 'disputed structure' because Hindu fanatics claimed it was built on the birthplace of the god Rama. This claim, in a country where every nook and corner offers a palimpsest of traditions, became symbolic of 'Hindutva': India should be for Hindus (preferably the upper castes). The rest — Muslims, Christians, anyone else at all — can at best be second-class citizens. To many Indians, the demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992 by a 'Hindu' mob is a tragic milestone — a point at which Indian turned on Indian officially, India on India. What happened in Ayodhya that day, and what has happened in other parts of the country since — the state-sponsored killing of Muslims in Gujarat in 2002 for instance, what can only be described as a pogrom — have not seemed like any sort of civilisation to most of us; but, in a November 15, 1999 interview with *Outlook*, Naipaul saw the destruction of the Babri Masjid as part of a 'mighty creative process'. He saw it as a welcome sign that 'Hindu pride' was at last reasserting itself. In an interview with *The Times of India*, July 18, 1993, Naipaul informs us about the Mughal builder of the Babri Masjid: 'Babar, you must understand, had contempt for the country he had conquered. And his building of that mosque was an act of contempt for the country. It was meant as an insult to an ancient idea, the idea of Ram which was two to three thousand years old'. Of the same mob who have gone on from bringing down the mosque to killing Muslims, burning Churches, and for comic relief, trashing shops that sell Valentine cards, this is what Naipaul has to say, in a further interview with *The Times of India* on December 5, 1993: '[Hindu militancy] is a creative force and

will be so'. Not surprisingly, all these profundities are centre-stage on every Hindutva-laced mouth and publication and website.

It is logical then — and it should not have embarrassed and pained so many of Naipaul's admirers — that in 2001, after the terrorists struck in New York and Washington, Naipaul should describe Islam (and not terrorists of any or no religious persuasion), as 'calamitous' and comparable with colonialism. He does not, of course, say a word about 'civilisations' that have systematically piled up weapons of mass destruction. Perhaps these are less calamitous than the scary footage on CNN of bearded foreigners shouting on the streets of foreign (half-made?) places.

The Nobel Prize citation praises Naipaul for 'having united perceptive narrative and incorruptible scrutiny in works that compel us to see the presence of suppressed histories'.³ Naipaul, with his talent and eminence, is perceived by reputation-making critics and prize-givers as the writer of 'suppressed histories'. As far as we know, Naipaul has made no such claim; but surely he cannot be unaware that with each book, he has received confirmation that he is practically a semi-official guide to the societies he finds so repulsively brutal or strangely empty? American critic Elizabeth Hardwick writes of *A Bend in the River* (1979), 'Naipaul's work is a creative reflection upon a devastating lack of historical preparation, upon the anguish of whole countries and peoples unable to cope' (1979). Joseph Lelyveld, in his review of *A Million Mutinies* in *The New York Times Book Review*, writes: 'The most notable commitment of intelligence that post-colonial India has evoked.... He [Naipaul] is indispensable for anyone who wants seriously to come to grips with the experience of India'. Geoffrey Wheatcroft sums it up: 'decolonisation over the past 40 years has been a tragic failure in many lands ... the first step away from the wreckage, and toward true liberation, is to abandon evasion and denial. Naipaul is a good place to start'⁴ (Wheatcroft 2002)

In short, Naipaul is considered an expert, not only on the craft of writing, but on India, on Islam, on Africa, on the Hindu way of life, on whole countries and peoples, their dilemmas and 'suppressed histories'. Writers and readers, as well as regular non-writing, non-reading people in the places Naipaul writes of, may struggle to move beyond easy dichotomies — black and white, Hindu and Muslim, Western and non-Western — but Naipaul, with his formidable talent and scorn, and his formidable reputation as interpreter for the power-centres, pushes all such exercises back to square one.

There have, of course, been other voices that have responded to Naipaul's worldview: the one that bursts into full-blown glory in his statements on civilisations, is fellow Caribbean Ivan Van Sertima who writes, 'His brilliancy of wit I do not deny but, in my opinion, he has been overrated by English critics whose sensibilities he insidiously flatters by his stock-in-trade: self-contempt' (Achebe 1989 82). Caribbean poet Derek Walcott qualified his praise of Naipaul

as 'our finest writer of an English sentence' with the comment that his prose is 'scarred by scrofula and a repulsion towards Negroes'. Derek Walcott, incidentally, also parodied Naipaul in a poem as 'V.S. Nightfall' (Jaggi 2001). Edward Said is just as cutting in his contrast of how Naipaul's work is viewed in different parts of the world. While the West regards Naipaul as 'a master novelist and an important witness to the disintegration and hypocrisy of the third world ... in the post-colonial world, he's a marked man as a purveyor of stereotypes and disgust for the world that produced him' (Jaggi 2001). Closer to home, Nissim Ezekiel wrote a fine essay that should be attached as an afterword to Naipaul's books on India. In 'Naipaul's India and Mine', Ezekiel writes: '[Criticism] must attack, even denounce, but it must not deny human beings their humanity.... In *An Area of Darkness* Mr Naipaul comes dangerously close to doing that' (Ezekiel 1965 89).

Why pull out these quotations now, like so much evidence of 'the other side'? Why be so churlish when a writer — who everyone agrees can write brilliantly — has been awarded a prize for literature? One: Naipaul was given the Nobel in 2001 of all years. He was given the Nobel in the midst of hawkish cacophony on the 'clash of civilisations' and growing prejudice against Muslims, indeed anyone of 'Middle Eastern appearance'. Naipaul was given the Nobel soon after his reaction to the September 11 tragedy, in which he commented, in myth-affirming terms, on Islam's calamitous effect on civilisation. Two: there is a theme that recurs in the reaction to Naipaul's Nobel, a theme that needs a closer look. Some admirers of Naipaul have acknowledged that he has made embarrassing, unpleasant, contentious, wrong-headed — and even ignorant — statements on a range of subjects from Africa to Islam. They have acknowledged that his writing has made liberals in both Western and non-Western countries 'deeply uneasy', but the conclusion — the recurring theme — is that writers must be judged by their 'writing alone.'⁵

How exactly this is to be done is not clear. Is one, for instance, to read the sentence 'Generosity — the admiration of equal for equal — was therefore unknown; it was a quality I knew only from books and found only in England' (Naipaul 1962 44), and admire the neat definition of generosity, the well-placed dashes and semicolon, without paying attention to what the sentence says? Without taking note of the negative vision, the sense of elegant prose enclosed in breakable glass? An artificial separation of what the writer says (that a country, his country of origin, does not have the concept of generosity in its dictionary of human experience), and how he says it, only serves to sanitise the writing and make it toothless. It is difficult to believe that this is what the writer himself intends.

It would make better sense to acknowledge that the writer intends criticism, and hopefully delivers criticism via good sentences. It is best to admit that this criticism, whether expressed through fiction or non-fiction, is part of the business of a writer. No one wants an official writer, except perhaps the group that is

using him as a mouthpiece. No one wants a timorous writer either, constantly worrying about being in fashion, or being politically correct, or in demand in the marketplace. No one would be absurd enough to insist that a writer's politics should ooze out of every written word, or scream the rhetorical or banal. It is a different thing altogether to ask for writers to transcend politics as so much petty baggage. To believe that good writing overrides bad politics to create Literature is just as romantic as viewing the writer as a precocious child with a knack. Both beliefs want to keep literature and politics safely apart. The implication is *But what does literature have to do with it?* In which case, Naipaul's politics can be dismissed (indulgently) as 'famously bad-tempered' especially since famous bad tempers make good media copy, in which case, Arundhati Roy can be called to attention by any of the 'real' intellectuals equipped to take on politics. They can suggest she go back to writing novels — small things — rather than meddle with big things like bombs and dams and globalisation.

A writer's vision, or worldview — safe classroom words for a writer's politics — is inseparable from the writing. A writer offers the reader (and his/herself) a second grip on the reality being written about. 'I do not write for Indians,' Naipaul has said, 'who in any case do not read. My work is only possible in a liberal, civilised Western country. It is not possible in primitive societies' (Hardwick 1979). Many of us who live in what Naipaul calls the bush continue to think, read, write, question, despite the various imminent collapses around us. Though Naipaul has unkindly cast aspersions on our intellectual life, we can at least recall a few simple axioms about the writer's work, and its relationship with the contemporary world, when debating Naipaul's Nobel and the politics of rewarding literature.

NOTES

- ¹ An earlier version of this essay was published in *Frontline*, November 2001.
- ² In an Indian literary festival in Neemrana, Rajasthan (February 2002), Naipaul cut off novelist Nayantara Sahgal mid-speech, complaining of 'banality'. She was talking of the postcolonial baggage we carry. It took all of us present a few minutes to realise that Naipaul was not just being rude. His real objection was that she had not gone back far enough in identifying the colonisers of India. 'When did colonialism begin?' Naipaul asked — the implication being that it began with 'the Muslims'.
- ³ See the official website of The Nobel Foundation, www.nobel.se/nobel/nobel-foundation.
- ⁴ Wheatcroft also says in the same essay: 'If you had read nothing written since September 11 and only Naipaul's books, you would surely be the wiser' (2002).
- ⁵ The Indian writer Amit Chaudhuri, for example, writes: 'The awarding of this year's prize becomes an unlikely occasion on which to confirm what is an increasingly endangered and debated point of view: that a writer must be judged and assessed by his writing alone — and writing is Naipaul's great subject, as it is his great achievement' (2001).

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