

V.S. Naipaul: From Gadfly to Obsessive

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All the examples Naipaul gives, all the people he speaks to tend to align themselves under the Islam versus the West opposition he is determined to find everywhere. It is all tiresome and repetitious.

Edward W.Said

The Man and the Prize :

The announcement of the 2001 Nobel Laureate for Literature in October that year elicited the kind of reaction that was predictable, given the reputation and the choice, that of Sir Vidhiadar Surajparasad Naipaul. Of Indian ancestry, V.S. Naipaul is a grandchild of Hindu Brahmins who found their way to the Caribbean island of Trinidad as indentured labourers to escape the grinding poverty of Uttarpradesh. Naipaul's was just one of a stream of families that were encouraged to migrate to the West Indies from the former British colonies of India and Chinese enclaves in Mainland China. Slavery had been abolished in the British Empire in 1832 and the former African slaves were no longer available to the sugarcane plantations and labour had to be sought from somewhere. In their natural ingenuity the British devised the new institution of indentured labour, which was really a new euphemism for a new form of servitude. Whereas the slaves were forcibly repatriated against their will, the new indentured labourers had the carrot of landownership dangled in front of them, to lure them to places they had no idea of. The new immigrants added a new dimension to an already complex racial situation, by adding the Asian layer to the Carib, European and African admixtures created by

waves of migration. The confluence of races, cultures and world views created a new identity that has been at once claimed and disclaimed by its principal components. Within the context and the psychology of slavery, racism and colonialism, it was easy for everyone to look for an external identity to validate ones' humanity or superiority over the others. Within the racialized West Indian pyramid, the Whites occupied the top notch, the Africans the bottom and everyone else somewhere between these two racial extremes.

Naipaul as a Colonial:

V.S.Naipaul, as a descendant of relatively recent immigrants from India of course had a notion, re-enforced by the exclusivity of the Indian community of farm labourers, with their rituals of Hinduism, of distinctiveness as Brahmins whom circumstances had forced to do unbrahminic jobs below their dignity. This complex situation provides V.S. Naipaul, and provided his equally gifted late brother Shiva Naipaul, and his nephew Bisoodath, the setting for their creative energies, as it earlier provided Naipaul's father. Because of the racial compartmentalization of the Caribbean required by the logic of both slavery and colonization, earlier West Indian writers tended to write basically about their communities, and the outsiders only as caricatures or figures of fun. Naipaul admits that his contacts with members of other races were minimal and that he met people who were outside his ethnic group only in official contexts where necessity dictated so, like in schools. Thus, although Naipaul mentions his mulatto teacher of English literature in one of his recent long essays entitled Reading and Writing where he discusses seminal influences in his early writing career, there appears to have been minimum contacts with people of other races. Familiarity with other groups is only at a distance. Among the immigrant Indians were some of Islamic background, of both Sunni and Shia persuasion .At the age of eighteen Naipaul won a scholarship to University College, Oxford, to study English. In a characteristic acerbic style he described his period there as a complete waste of time, spent reading texts that did not contribute anything

to his desire to become a writer, an ambition that was assiduously encouraged by his father. Earning a scholarship was for Naipaul an escape route from the constraining limitations of an island life. Apart from the father's improvidence, unhelpful relatives, the constant anxiety of living in unstable homes, and ultimately the consciousness of having a talent were to provide the backdrop to Naipaul's neurosis about what he described as 'half-made societies'.

V.S.Naipaul's oeuvre consists of essays, travel writing and his work of fiction. These genres have each attracted a particular audience, although those who read his essays are likely to also to have read his travel writing. His essays have eminently appeared mostly in The New York Review of Books. His readers can be classified into three broad categories, his aficionados who read all his writing , both fiction and non- fiction, mostly Westerners with a strong reading culture whose views about non- Western societies find validation in his works; Third world intellectuals, forced by their vocation to follow the writings of this important writer, and general readers whose reading is rather selective and who might have a vested interest in what Naipaul has to say either about their societies or beliefs. In the past two decades he has found notoriety among Muslims, both those who read his works and those who know him only by reputation, as a writer of biased books against Muslims and Muslim societies. Because he suffers no fools, he has managed to alienate everyone at one time or another in the course of his productive career. He has antagonised Indians and Pakistanis, Africans, West Indians, and the British, not to mention fellow writers and his editors. He does not appear to be an easy person to live with. The most damaging indictment of his character and hubris remains the unkindly book by an ex-friend of his and fellow writer, the American novelist and travel writer Paul Theroux, in his In Sir Vidia's Shadow. The book, written in serious vein, is both entertaining and revealing. Naipaul also makes an unwanted appearance in Diana Athill's publishing memoir, Stet , published by Granta Books, when she was his

editor. It is an unflattering portrait of Naipaul as a snob, an insufferable bore and a tiresome Albatross on her neck.

Virtually each of Naipaul's books is unique in the sense of developing a distinct style for each one of them. This alone makes him stand out as a master stylist and literary technician. He has assiduously sought to maintain a distinctive style for each of his books in each of the sub genres that he has worked in. Like all writers who have produced books with any consistency, Naipaul's works reflect his personal emotional and intellectual development, from the impassioned and youthful observations of his ancestral home, India, in An Area of Darkness, to the recent fiction, Half A Life. His oeuvre can be periodized into the works of the mid-sixties, the seventies, the eighties and the nineties.

The mid-sixties: A personal Neurosis

Upon graduating from Oxford Naipaul set himself the task of self-discovery by trying to understand his own identity as an East Indian West Indian. This period coincided with the politics of identity spurred on by the anticolonial movements of the fifties and sixties spearheaded by philosophers of violence like Martinique's Frantz Fanon and African nationalists like Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana and Jomo Kenyatta of Kenya, Jawaharlal Nehru of India and Ho Chi Min of Vietnam, among others. It appears that during this period Naipaul was obsessed with the personal quest of self-discovery while his contemporaries were relatively sure who they were by pitting their own identities with those of their colonizers. Having spent his formative years within the confines of Indian insularity in Trinidad and the nether world of Oxford, he seemed to have been troubled by an identity crisis of some sort. In a rare moment of self-revelation during his acceptance lecture for his Nobel Prize in Stockholm, Naipaul notes:

I said earlier that everything about me is in my books. I will go further now. I will say I am the sum of my books. Each book intuitively sensed and, in the case of fiction, intuitively worked out. Stands on what has gone before, and grows out of

it. I feel that at any stage of my literary career it could have been said that the last book contained all the others.

It's been like this because of my background. My background is at once exceedingly simple and exceedingly confused. I was born in Trinidad. It is a small island in the mouth of the great Orinoco river of Venezuela. So Trinidad is not strictly of South America, and not strictly of the Caribbean. It was developed as a New World plantation colony, and when I was born in 1932 it had a population of about 400,000. Of this, about 150,000 were Indians, Hindus and Muslims, nearly all of peasant origin, and nearly all from the Gangetic plain.”¹

Typical of virtually all immigrant Indian communities in not only the Caribbean but also in those areas where they were encouraged to emigrate by the British colonial regime, such as South Africa, and East Africa, they tended to inflict themselves with the fire-walls of self-segregation where isolation was the norm. This segregation was unconsciously a carry-over of the normative values of Hinduism and general Indian culture that inscribed and prescribed caste distance between the various social groups. This enforced insularity can be considered the root causes of Naipaul's, and for many Indians for their inability to peacefully coexist with the “other”. It is paradoxical that Naipaul, on the death of his English wife, should choose for a new wife, a Pakistani of Muslim background. The desire to marry an English wife and, later, a Muslim wife, in Freudian parlance, could be a reflection of the repressed unconscious desire on his part to dominate the colonial oppressor and the symbolic “other”, the British and the Muslim. Although married to a Muslim, Naipaul has been consistent in his attack on Muslims since the Iranian Revolution of 1979. In fact, that was the first time he woke up to the reality of Muslims as a force to contend with. In trying to understand Muslims he embarked on his journey of discovery that culminated in his contentious An Islamic Journey which unsurprisingly won the Jerusalem Prize awarded by sympathisers of Israel, and glowing tributes from the Western media and literary fora. The book also coincided with the holding as hostages American Embassy staff in Teheran. But before setting off on the journey Naipaul gave himself an Islamic education by reading the then major ideologues of Islam like Maulana Abul ‘Ala Maududi, the Pakistani nemesis of

Muslim modernists and apologists, Muslim theoreticians of Islamic economics like Umar Chapra, among others. He of course could find nothing of worth in all those intellectual labours. He was determined to stick to his preconceived *idée fixe* about Islam and Muslims. It is also interesting that the writings of Naipaul together with those of Bernard Lewis have contributed substantially over the years towards the perception of Islam in the minds of many in the West, in both the United States of America and Europe. Both Naipaul and Lewis are defenders of right wing ideologies that leave no room for racial, ethnic or religious tolerance or mutual recognition. These ideologies are Hinduism and Zionism. In other writings, and especially India: A Wounded Civilization, and A Thousand Mutinies Naipaul traces all the contemporary problems of India to its encounter with Islamic civilization. So, the whole of the Mughal period Naipaul considers a negative and unfortunate, not to say shameful, episode in Indian history. As a Brahmin he feels duty bound to be in the forefront, as a historic and religious duty, to defend Indian culture and Hinduism. It is ironic that so cultured and articulate a person as V.S.Naipaul should be completely oblivious of the self-evident truth that civilizations are always and foremost hybridities, enlarged and enriched by encounters with the “others”. Naipaul’s perceptions and views are reminiscent of nineteenth century European intellectuals who believed in the putative uniqueness of European culture, and ultimately, civilization. Like these European scholar-supremacists, his views are tinged with elements of racism. He forgets that Indian Muslims are racially and ethnically of the same stock as his Brahmins and other castes, and that Urdu, the language of the Muslims of both India and Pakistan, is, like Hindi, the flipside of Sanskrit, the one enriched by Sanskrit borrowings and the other by the rich assortments from Arabic, Persian and Turkish. In his defence of what he perceives to be Indian, Naipaul is just playing revisionism. As a deracinated Indian, Naipaul has every reason to go back to his roots, either by maintaining strict vegetarianism or indulging in dilettantism by acquiring a collection of Indian Art.

By his own admission, he has had very little interaction with Muslims to be able to understand them. This goes back to his earliest experiences. His community and family in turn built a cordon sanitaire around his life to keep off unwelcome influences in his life. They seem to have well succeeded in this project. In his own words in the Nobel lecture alluded to before Naipaul told his audience:

What was past was past. I suppose that was the general attitude. And we Indians, immigrants from India, had that attitude to the island. We lived for the most part ritualised lives, and were not yet capable of self-assessment, which is where learning begins. Half of us on this island of the Chaguanes were pretending-perhaps not pretending, perhaps feeling, not formulating it as an idea- that we had brought a kind of India with us, which we could , as it were, unroll like a carpet on the flat land.

My grandmother's house in Chaguanas was in two parts. The front part, of brick and plaster, was painted white. It was like a kind of Indian house, with a grand balustraded terrace on the upper floor. And a prayer room on the floor above that. It was ambiguous in its decorative detail, with lotus capitals on pillars, and sculptures of Hindu deities, all done by people working only from a memory of things in India. In Trinidad it was an architectural oddity .At the back of the house of this house , and joined to it by an upper bridge room, was a timber building in the French Caribbean style .The entrance gate was at the side, between the two houses. It was a tall gate of corrugated iron on a wooden frame. It made for a fierce kind of privacy.

So, as a child I had this sense of two worlds. The world outside that tall corrugated –iron gate, and the world at home- or, at any rate, the world of my grandmother's house. It was a remnant of our caste sense, that thing that excluded and shut out. In Trinidad, where as new arrivals we were a disadvantaged community, that excluding idea was a kind of protection; it enabled us – for the time being , and only for the time being- to live in our own way and according to our own rules, to live in our own fading India. It made for an extraordinary self-centredness. We looked inwards; we lived out our days; the world outside existed in a kind of darkness; we inquired about nothing.

There was a Muslim shop next door. The little loggia of my grandmother's shop ended against his blank wall. The man's name was Mian. That was all that we knew of him and his family. I suppose we must have seen him , but I have no mental picture of him now. We knew nothing of Muslims. This idea of strangeness, of the thing to be kept outside, extended even to other Hindus. For example, we ate rice in the middle of the day and wheat in the evenings. There were extraordinary people who reversed this natural order and ate rice in the evenings. I thought of these people as strangers- you must imagine me at this time as under seven , because when I was seven all this life of my grandmother's house in Chiguanas came to an end for me. We moved to the capital , and then to the hills to the northwest.

But the habits of mind engendered by this shut-in and shutting out life lingered for quite a while .If it were not for the short stories my father wrote I would have known almost nothing about the general life of our Indian community. Those

stories gave me more than knowledge. They gave me a kind of solidity. They gave me something to stand on in the world. I cannot imagine what my mental picture would have been without those stories.

For all his flaunting of his affinity and love for Western civilization, which he calls “Our Universal Civilization”, V.S. Naipaul remains a Hindu nationalist to the core. In fact virtually all his art is informed by his dislike of Muslims and Black people in general. In this regard, Muslims have found natural allies in other Third World peoples, whether Africans or African-Caribbeans or African- Americans in looking at him with suspicion. Like all ideologies that have been put at the service of racism, Hinduism is exclusionary and allows no room for those from other ethnic or racial groups. It is watertight. One does not convert to Hinduism but is born into it because of the hierarchical nature of its social structure. The underpinnings of Hinduism are its revered scriptures. Although Naipaul was alienated from mainstream Hinduism, as someone who “crossed the water”, meaning someone whose Hinduism is tainted by emigrating to non-Hindu environment, he tried to make up this apparent deficiency by an intellectual engagement. As the late great Indian writer R.K. Narayan has observed, although Naipaul wrote funny stories about funny people with funny skin colours, the underpinnings of his writings remain Hindu mythology and weltanschauung. This is the least remarked aspect of Naipaul’s writing, whether fiction or non-fiction. In his important study, The Language of Postcolonial Literature Ismail S. Talib of the University of Singapore quotes N. Wong in showing the Hindu genesis of V.S. Naipaul’s writings:

...the text that reverberates most influentially at the heart of V.S. Naipaul’s *A House for Mr. Biswas* is not from the Western tradition. It is, instead, the Ramayana, one of the two sacred Hindu texts, the Mahabharat being the other. According to R.K.Narayan, all imaginative writing in India has its origins in these books”². (Wong 1996:199)

Talib adds that “With reference to Naipaul’s earlier works, it can be seen that his ‘original comic vision.... owes much to his story-telling Hindu forebears and creole street talk of his native Port-of- Spain.’

Although Naipaul has been described as “the grand old man of British literature”³ by Carter and McRay (1997:488-9,526-30), his is really an extension of Indian Diaspora literature. No wonder that when he won the Nobel Prize in 2001, his victory was hailed back home in India. The Caribbean was muted. The prodigal adopted son had denigrated it too much to be celebrated. The only voice of celebration, in The Trinidad Guardian was that of Professor Kenneth Ramchand , one of the world’s foremost authorities on Caribbean literature. Naipaul was especially critical of the entire Caribbean, whether Anglophone or Francophone. In the sixties, in his eyes the Caribbean was a land without history, or at best a history of futility. This of course provoked a reponse from none other than the Barbadian writer George Lamming in his celebrated book of essays The Pleasures of Exile⁴ where he takes Naipaul to task for rubbishing West Indian society and culture.

The Seventies through the eighties and nineties and the search for the Muslim and the black ‘others’:

The most remarkable event of the seventies was undoubtedly the Iranian Revolution of 1979. Ayatollah Ruhullah Khomeini became the new bogymen. The flight of the Shah of Iran to the United States and later to Egypt where he later died, and the taking of hostage the American diplomats, against all diplomatic norms and conventions and of course the loss of Iran as an important ally and source of oil created an unprecedented anti-Islamic hysteria in the West. Suddenly Islam became the new object of curiosity, fascination and ultimately fear. Naipaul, as an experienced third worlder felt compelled to try and understand the new ‘menace’ and off he set off to the predominantly Muslim countries of Iran, Pakistan, Malaysia

and Indonesia to try and unravel the mystery of Islam to the West. The five month journey culminated in the An Islamic Journey , which was instantly hailed as an important book on Islam. As noted earlier, the distinguishing style of Naipaul in his travel books is his ability to create new stylistic forms for each of them. Naipaul has admitted in his Nobel lecture that he deals in words, emotions and ideas. This, I believe, is an important key to understanding his work. In the seventies he wrote both fiction and non fiction. He uses words for his fiction to create characters that are believable, while in his travel books and essays he reserves his emotions for those he despises. No wonder that there is a happy balance of emotions and ideas in his travel works and essays. Most of what he says in these two genres are visceral. Characteristically he does not mince words. In their emotional content and hyperbole, An Islamic Journey is curiously close to The Middle Passage. In both he pours scorn on the Muslims and blacks alike. Akash Kapur captures Naipaul's islamophobia and tries to find its causes. Kapur notes:

....Naipaul's excoriation of everything Islamic in his new book firmly fixes his location on the map of contemporary Asian politics. The book's thesis , stated in crystal clear prose at the outset and hammered home in subsequent chapters, is that ' Islam is not simply a matter of conscience or private belief. It makes imperial demands. A convert's world view alters...His idea of history alters...The disturbance for societies is immense, and even after a thousand years can remain unresolved.' It is isn't hard to read between the lines: what Islam did in India, it has done throughout Asia. Indeed, Naipaul's dislike for the Islam he encounters in the "converted" countries is on several occasions contrasted with his enthusiasm for an elemental India. His most scathing criticisms, for example , are reserved for Pakistan – alternately a state in "ruin," a " criminal enterprise," and a " cultural desert." Likewise, in Indonesia , his hostility toward the Islamic present often reads like an elegy for that nation's lost Hindu past. " Islam has moved on here," he writes, " to this part of greater India, after its devastation of India proper, turning the religious-cultural light of the subcontinent, so far as this region was concerned , into the light of a dead star." Significantly, in Iran, where Naipaul has no Hindu axe to grind, he can sound a softer note, comparing the atmosphere in the University town of Qum to the colleges of Oxford.(In *Among the Believers*, his earlier book on Islam, Naipaul found evidence in Qum of the " medieval Muslim world , the great universal civilization of the time.")....⁵

All ideologies, whether social, political, economic or religious , are in essence totalizing in their demands from their adherents. They are essentially exclusionist as much as they are inflexible in what they demand of their followers. This is certainly not unique to Islam. It is equally true of fascism, capitalism , and socialism, Hinduism or Zionism. It will also come as news to V.S Naipaul that the earliest followers of Muhammad , though Arabs, were also considered as converts, converts to a new weltanschauung.

Perhaps no one has put Naipaul's obsession with Islam and Muslims in a better context than Edward W. Said. In an earlier review of An Islamic Journey , Said observed that:

“Unrestrained by genuine learning or self-education, this persona – Naipaul the novelist – tours the vulnerable parts of his natal provenance , the colonial world he has been telling us about via his acquired British identity. But the places he visits are carefully chosen , they are absolutely safe, places that no one in the liberal culture that has made him its darling will speak up for. Everyone knows Islam is a “place” you must criticize. *Time* did it, *Newsweek* did it, the *Guardian* and the *New York Times* did it .Naipaul wouldn't make a trip to Israel, for example, which is not to say that he wouldn't find rabbinical laws governing daily behaviour any less repressive than Khomeini's. No: *his* audience knows Israel is OK, “Islam” not. And one more thing. If it is criticism that the West stands for, good – we want Naipaul to criticise those mad mullahs, vacant Islamic students, cliché-ridden revolutionaries. But does he write *for* and *to* them? Does he live among them, risk their direct retaliation? Not at all. No dialogue. He snipes at them from the *Atlantic Monthly* where none of them can ever get back at him.”⁶

This obsession with Muslims , given the current hysteria in the West, puts Naipaul in the same league as those who are increasingly seen to have throw objectivity out the window when writing on or about Islam and Muslims. He now reads more like a literary Daniel Pipes than a celebrated novelist and travel writer. This is disturbing for a writer who has often been described as one of the finest writers in the English language.

Naipaul's own imperial demands:

One of the most revealing portraits of V.S. Naipaul to have appeared recently is the one by Diana Athill alluded to earlier. It appears that it is not only Islam that makes imperial demands on people. Naipaul himself does. Apart from his snobbish pretensions, like his attack

on Indian feminist writers recently, he has also attacked others writers of stature on failing to measure up to his standards. He considers them as phoney and undeserving, unlike him, of occupying high literary pedestals. The most celebrated of these attacks is the one that appeared in an interview he granted Farrukh Dhondy that appeared in the *Literary Review* of August, 2001. Here is Naipaul going over the top on E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India* :

Forster wrote so many prefaces to that book, he couldn't decide. It has only one real scene, and that is the foolish little tea party at the beginning. I don't think there is another real scene. Forster of course has his own purposes in India. He is a homosexual and he has his time in India, exploiting poor people, which his friend Keynes also did. Keynes didn't exploit poor people, he exploited people in the university; he sodomized them, and they were too frightened to do anything about it. Forster belonged to that kind of nastiness really. I know it might be liberally wonderful to say it's OK, but I think it is awful. That is the background to all the mystery and the lies.... He encouraged people to lie. He was somebody who didn't know Indian people. He just knew the court and a few middle-class Indians and the garden boys whom he wished to seduce.

This acerbic discourse appeared, in August, 2001, just two months before he was nominated and awarded the Nobel Prize in October, 2001. His name had been mentioned for so long over the years that he was as pessimistic as ever that he was going to be nominated. No wonder that in the same interview, out of the blue, mentioned the Nigerian and African laureate, Wole Soyinka, as "a marvellously Establishment figure actually." He is reputed to ascribe his Nobel frustrations to people in the academia who have consistently opposed his views on the Third World and Islam and Muslims.

Naipaul, like an overbearing emperor, always made imperial demands on those he was associated with. Diana Athill, commenting on his difficult character tells us that:

...after a year or so of meetings in the pubs or restaurants where I usually lunched, I began to notice that Vidia was sometimes miffed at being taken to a cheap restaurant or being offered a cheap bottle of wine- and the only consequence of my seeing this (apart from my secretly finding it funny) was that I became careful to let him choose both restaurant and wine. And this carefulness not to offend him, which was, I think, shared by all, or almost all, his English friends, came from an assumption that the reason why he was so anxious to command respect was fear that it was, or might be, denied him because of his race; which led to squeamish dismay in oneself at the idea of being seen as racist. The shape of an attitude which someone detests, and has worked at extirpating, can often be discerned from its absence, and during the first years of Vidia's career in England he was often coddled for precisely the reason the coddler was determined to disregard.

Later, of course, the situation changed. His friends became too used to see him as anything but himself, and those who didn't know him saw him simply as a famous writer – on top of which he could frighten people. Then it was the weight and edge of his personality which made people defer to him, rather than consideration for his sensitivity. Which makes it easy to underestimate the pain and strain endured by that sensitivity when he had first pulled himself up out of the thin, sour soil in which he was reared, and was striving to find purchase in England where, however warmly he was welcomed, he could never feel that he wholly belonged.

For a man with such sensitivities one is hard put to see how Naipaul would expect a warm reception for his subjective, and often prejudiced views, of the Others. It was no surprise that his award of the Nobel, although well deserved for his true dedication to the republic of letters, was derided by his detractors.

V.S. Naipaul returns to these twin subjects, blacks and Islam, in later books, A Turn in the South⁵, his memorable journey through the Southern States of the United States of America, the famed bible belt and the proverbial land of white supremacists and the book alluded to by Kapur, above, Beyond Belief: A Journey Among Converted Peoples⁷. In the former he praises the work of Booker T. Washington's efforts to tie down fellow blacks to menial labour, a point sure to provoke black anger. And by the same breath, through the art of dialogue, he glorifies the culture associated with the white trash, the rednecks. He tells us

that one of their hallmarks is their dislike of blacks, a trait that he obviously shares with them.

In his travels in the Deep South Naipaul went to find out for himself what a redneck was :

I had the vaguest idea of what a redneck was. Someone intolerant and uneducated—that was what the word suggested. And it fitted in with what I had been told in New York: that some motoring organizations gave their members maps of safe routes through the South , to steer them away from areas infested with rednecks. Then I also became aware that the word had been turned by some middle class people into a romantic word; and that in this extension it stood for the unintellectual, physical, virile man, someone who (for instance) wouldn't mind saying “shit” in company.

It wasn't until I met Campbell that I was given a full and beautiful and lyrical account , an account that ran it all together, by a man who half looked down on and half loved the redneck, and who , when he began to speak of redneck pleasures, was moved to confess that he was half a redneck himself.

It wasn't for his redneck side , strictly speaking, that I had been introduced to Campbell. I had been told that he was the new kind of young conservative, with strong views on race and welfare.... Campbell was also the man who represented the other side of the religious South: the authoritarian side. And it was of family and values and authority that we spoke, all quite predictably, until it occurred to me to ask, “ Campbell, what do you understand by the word ‘redneck’ ?”

And- as though it had been prepared- a great Theophrastan “ character,” something almost in the style of the seventeenth century character-writers, poured out of Campbell...”⁸

Because Naipaul has a good ear for conversation, he always gets his characters, whether fictional or real life to say what he likes to hear. Through this technique he gets racists to say nasty things about those they do not like, or Muslims to give him the fundamentalist touch.

Here is Campbell again:

It is important in North Jackson to, as we call it, to be well liked, to be well thought of. But I wasn't relating to the church. I'd go with my mama at Christmastime, but I was bored to death. But the values of the church- do good, do right, don't drink, don't kill anybody, no stealing, the Ten Commandments, don't covet your neighbour's wife- I don't believe in some parts of this culture those values are being instilled. Those kids running up and down- I used to work in mobile- home parks, and we've got some unsavoury characters there- they need their butts worn out.

I think the reason for that is the breakdown of the family. Where the father and mother are not both there doing their job. I bring up my children to respect me, and I think that is good, because he knows I'm not going to put up with everything. I hug him and kiss him every day. Some people say I am right ; some people say I'm wrong. I was afraid of my father. I was afraid I was going to get my behind worn out. I don't like it any other way....

I think it all goes back to being brought up right. Get some values back in the homes. We are talking about blacks now. Get them to stay in the school, keep their damn butts quiet. I'd be a dictator and have this place shaped up. I'm just a law-and-order, blood- and- guts guy.

.....I wasn't sure what was "character" and what was real. And then I said, "Campbell, what do you understand by the word "redneck"?"

And then the man was transformed.

He said:" A redneck is a lower blue-collar construction worker who definitely doesn't like blacks. He likes to drink beer. He is going to wear cowboy boots; he is not necessarily going to have a cowboy hat. He is going to live in a trailer someplace out in Rankin County, and he is going to smoke two packets of cigarettes a day and drink about ten cans of beer at night, and he is going to be mad as hell if he doesn't have some corn bread and peas and fried okra and some fried pork chops to eat- I've never seen one of those bitches yet who doesn't like fried pork chops. And he'll be late on his trailer payment.

He has been raised that way. His father was just like him. And the son of a bitch loves country music.....

They are Scotch-Irish in origin. A lot of them intermarried, interbred. I'm talking about the good old rednecks now. He is going to have an old eight -to- five job. But there is an upscale redneck, and he is going to want it cleaned up. Yard mowed, a little garden in the back. Old Mama, she's gonna wear designer jeans and they're gonna go to Shoney's to eat once every three weeks."

I had seen any number of those restaurants beside the highways, but had never gone into one. Were they like McDonalds?

Campbell said, "At Shoney's you will get the gravy all over it. That's going to be a great deal. They'll love it. I know those sons of bitches.

If he or she moves to North Jackson, he'd be upscale. He wouldn't be having that twang so much. But the good old fellow, he's just going to work six or eight months a year. He is going to tell his old lady, 'I'm going to work.' And he ain't going. If it rains, he ain't going to work-shit, no. He's going to the crummiest dump he can find , and he is going to start drinking beer and shooting pool. When he gets home there'll be a little quarrel with his wife, and he will be half drunk and eat a little cornbread and pass out, and that's the damned truth. And she'll understand, because she's so used to it.

She doesn't drink. It's normally the redneck guys who drink-whisky or beer. She's got some piddling job. She's probably the basis of the income.⁹

These descriptions are at once amusing and disturbing. Amusing in the sense that they are describing a way of life that is increasingly seen as anachronistic ; and at the same time disturbing in the sense that this way of looking at the world that is at variance with the current attempts in the West to stall the incubus of hate and racism , in a society that sociologists are already predicting will be more racially mixed than we can imagine.

The future is now: the future of Naipauliana

Given the current polarisation of the West and the Rest, it is hard to see how the works of V.S. Naipaul will survive him. They are likely to be consigned to the dustbin of literary history, as much as the works of, say, Rudyard Kipling, a fellow laureate with virtually identical views as his, have been, only to be invoked when bigots or racists are looking for the legitimising quotation. For all their literary merit Naipaul's works no longer attract the kind of devotion they did among the literary scholars of the previous generation. They are no longer considered as essential reading in the postcolonial literature courses. As a Nobel laureate his publishers have reissued most of the works; they have been repackaged with new introductions where these are essays. But on rereading them they appear rather banal in their bigotry and inverted racism. They are tiresome to read now and give one a sense of *deja vu*, as if they were works of a bygone age. They are in stark contrast to the vibrant works of younger writers like Caryl Phillips, Zadie Smith, Hanif Kureishi, David Dabydeen, and many talented others who celebrate hybridity and the confluence of cultures and who rather mock the chimera of racial and cultural purity. After all, we are all now multiculturalists, reluctant or not. The only redeeming aspect for the award of the Nobel to Naipaul is the celebration of the writer as an iconoclast and as a recluse dedicated to his metier and who has contributed in no small measure to the perception of English as a global language, not tied to a particular ethnicity but a fit idiom to carry a significant portion of a contemporary universal civilization that Western civilization has been claimed for it. His works at one time helped to extend the boundaries of the English canon as then understood.

Conclusion

In the course of his relatively long writing career V.S. Naipaul has undergone transformation from a novelist of great talent and an essayist of acute observation, in such fiction as A House for Mr. Biswas, A Bend in the River, A Way in the World, to the

memorable essays in The Return of Eva Peron and Finding the Centre , to the bete noir of postcolonial writers and intellectuals. But more poignant is his espousal of the fascism of BJP in India, whose politics and ideology are unacceptable even to a lot of Indian intellectuals themselves, most prominent among these being Arundhati Roy, whose see their politics as antithetical to the secular spirit of the Indian nation. He has metamorphosised from a gadfly to an obsessive.

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Notes

¹<http://www.nobel.se/literature/laureates/2001/naipaul-lecture-e.html>

² Quoted in Talib, Ismail S: 2002: *The Language of Postcolonial Literature: An Introduction*. Routledge. London.

³ Carter, R, and Mc Rae, J.1997: *The Routledge History of Literature in English: Britain and Ireland*. London, Routledge.

⁴ Lamming, G.: 1992. *The Pleasures of Exile* Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press.

⁵ . Kapur, Akash: *One Little Indian: V.S.Naipaul and the new South Asian politics*. In *Transition* issue 78.pg. 55-56.

⁶ Said, Edward W.: *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*. Harvard University Press. Cambridge, Massachusetts.2000.page 116.

⁷ Naipaul, V.S. *A Turn in the South*.Penguin.London.

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Ibid