V.S. NAIPaul: an introduction to his early works

with selective bibliography

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V.S. Naipaul. A brief biography

The West Indies has been a most curious society, which produced the same defamation of characters of the races drawn from different quarters of the world - against the Amerindians in 1512, the Africans in 1791, the Indians in 1869.

The Amerindians were exterminated for their unwillingness to work the plantations, the Africans into slavery to replace the Amerindians, the Indians by indentured labour, a form of labour which just fell short of slavery.

An indentured labourer, as the Commission of Enquiry sent out by the Government of India found, was riddled with hookworms, debilitated by malaria, and often lived in swampy and insanitary conditions. All this, and more, a lot more, for a paltry wage. It seemed that the British had abolished one form of slavery, only to replace it with another - indentured labour.

It was against this background that Naipaul's great grandfather migrated from the dust bowl of central India, to Trinidad, at the instigation of a recruiter, who promised him a pundits' job, to cater to the spiritual needs of the Hindu labourers. But that was not to be the case, instead he joined the ranks of indentured labour on the sugar plantations.

Naipaul's father, Seepersad, was luckier than his father, in the sense that he received an elementary school education, going on to work for The Trinidad Guardian.

Vidiadhar Surajprasead Naipaul was born at Chaguanas in central Trinidad on 17th August 1932, the son of the local correspondent of The Guardian. He was born in Lions House, the house of a rich and powerful relative (reproduced in 'A House for Mr Biswas). During this time, as Naipaul recalls, the family lived in about seven or eight different houses, giving his life a disorder, which he finds difficult to shake down to this day. He was particularly attached to his father, calling it "the big relationship of my life." His father taught him to read before he joined school. He hated school, though he was a bright pupil, for it brought him in contact with a larger number of people which he felt that he could not cope with, as one was thereby obliged to surrender a part of one's freedom.

Seepersad, like Mr Biswas, was a defeated man, and this led to contempt, which Naipaul thinks contaminated him too.

He left the local school after two years in 1938 to attend Tranquility Boys
School in Port of Spain, following the transfer of his father there. In 1943, he gained a free place at Queens Royal College, where he specialised in Spanish and French. In 1950 he returned to the college as a student teacher, but left after six months to take up the scholarship he had won to attend University College in Oxford, England - the escape that he had been waiting for had come. Such was his relief that he would wake up in the middle of the night in his bed sit, shivering, having dreamt that he was back in Trinidad.

At Oxford he read English Literature, which he thinks was a mistake. In 1955 he married a fellow student, Patricia Hale, the 'companion' in 'An Area of Darkness.' He worked as the editor of the BBC programme Caribbean Voices, and also as a reviewer on the New Statesman.

With the publication of the 'Mystic Masseur' in 1957, and 'Miguel Street' in 1959, he was awarded the John Llewelyn Rys Memorial Prize, and the Somerset Maugham Prize for his books respectively, the Hawthornden Prize for 'Mr Stone and Knights' Companion' in 1961, the W.H. Smith Prize for 'The Mimic Men' in 1964, and the Booker Prize for 'In a Free State.'

Critics of Naipaul's, foremost amongst them George Lamming's famous denouncement as Naipaul's satire being 'castrated,' have called him a cold and sneering prophet, especially for his attack on the third world. Prof. Edward W. Said calls him a scavenger, who, "prefers to render the ruins and derelictions of post-colonial history without tenderness or sympathy."

Naipaul himself sees himself as an outsider, one without a country - an exile. A West Indian of Indian descent, living in England, writing of things not European, for an European audience.

His works, or part of them, is an account of this homelessness, amply demonstrated by his trip to India in 1960, the land of his ancestors; his visit to the family's ancestral village; the problems with language, food, and his impoverished relatives. On his return, he writes in 'An Area of Darkness' he found that the trip had broken his life in two.

Such shocks are not new to those emigre families living abroad, yet regard India as their home, but, as one Indian critic puts it, "his attitude was blind and imperialistic. The refusal to 'switch' cultural gears'
He can be critical of England, calling it a land of crooked aristocrats, and bum politicians, not to mention his questionable solving of the race problem in England, when he suggested that the only way to keep out the West Indian (why just the West Indian, one wonders) was to boost their economy.

While teaching fictional writing at Wesleyan University in the States in 1978, the students found him demanding and difficult, but rewarding.

Admired by the American writer, John Updike, but who now wonders whether Naipaul is not becoming too dark as he matures.

Perhaps he is after all, writing only for a European audience.
The Mystic Masseur (1957)

The 'Mystic Masseur' was Naipaul's first published book, though the first to be written was 'Miguel Street.' It won him the John Llewellyn Rhys Memorial Prize in 1958. The story is ironic, and sets the tone for the early novels.

Ganesh Ramsumair, the masseur, and the central character in the book, assumes mystic powers, and is swept into the Legislative Council by political intrigue. Ganesh, as critics have pointed out, provides the human centre, lacking in his later novels, which led George Lamming, a fellow West Indian writer and critic, to attack Naipaul's work as "castrated satire."

However, on its publication, Percy Wood said of Naipaul's first novel, "The deft touch is what all novelists strive for, and here we find a young fellow in his 20's who displays it completely in his first book." It led another critic, Robert Payne, to remark further, "I rather suspect the mantle of Chekov has fallen on Mr Naipaul's shoulders." A reviewer in the Times Literary Supplement, called the book a work of exactness of word and phrase, which is delightful and made the works of many contemporary humorists seem ponderous and crude.

A reviewer in the Library Journal, argues that the end is abrupt, and as such weak, but, in the words of another critic, Naipaul has skillfully avoided sensationalism.

The Suffrage of Elvira (1958)

Naipaul returns to the subject of politics in 'The Suffrage of Elvira,' as his central plot. Now it is the turn of Surujpat "Pat" Harbans to stand for election from Elvira. There is no central character in the novel, as all the main characters jostle for the lime light, in one form or the other. Though the election of Harbans is assured, as Elvira has a predominantly Hindu majority, it does not prevent the shrewd 'leaders' of the various communities to indulge in intrigue for personal gain. Harbans finds that the way to the Legislative Council is costly, as he finds out, when he is manipulated in paying for a costly funeral of Mr Cuffy, a negro, in order to impress the Negro voter, and so as to get the Negro vote; a bribe to Mr Baksh, to withdraw his candidacy so as to assure himself of the Muslim vote. Once the election is over however, Harbans drives around in a Jaguar automobile, and dresses in three piece suits. In short, it is not
the Harbans that they are used to, and they react in rage by setting fire to his car.

The ending is more complete, as unlike 'The Mystic Masseur,' the characters in 'The Suffrage of Elvira,' are disposed off in turn.

**Miguel Street (1959)**

Though the first to be written, but the third to be published, 'Miguel Steert' reflects the lower strata of Trinidadian life. The narrator, who not unlike Naipaul, and Nelly in 'The Suffrage of Elvira,' 'escapes' to study abroad, after recounting the colourful characters living on Miguel Street.

There is George, who abuses his wife until she dies, his daughter until she marries. Man Man, who acts out a crucifixion on a nearby hill, and while on the cross, calls on the spectators, who have collected to see the show, to stone him. The spectators comply, slowly at first, but later with relish, making Man Man shout in anger and surprise, when a really large stone strikes him, "...look get me down from this thing quick, and I go settle with this son of a bitch who pelt a stone at me."

And there is Wordsworth, who suddenly turns up one day at the narrator's back­yard with a request that he be allowed to watch the bees, who uninvited have built a hive in one of the trees there.

Wordsworth, like his namesake, is a poet at heart, who, "can watch a small flower like the morning glory, and cry." On his death bed, he confesses that all his romantic schemes were lies, but not before he has interested the boy in the depth of nature.

George likes to make fun of himself, but is crushed when others make fun of him.

Then there is Bhakcu, the narrator's uncle, who, though disliked by the others as a nuisance, is liked by the boy. Bhakcus' passion was cars which he liked to dismantle, though he had difficulty putting back the parts.

At the end of the book we are re-introduced to Ganesh the mystic masseur, whose palms have to be greased to get the scholarship to study abroad.

The episodes in Miguel Street are not closely bound together, but loosely linked. Each part can be read separately, yet forming a whole.
A House for Mr Biswas (1961)

Naipaul called his first three books, "an apprenticeship," and was now ready for his masterpiece.

Mr Biswas' life, who is incidently born with an extra finger, is a series of one misfortune after another. The death of his father, caused accidently by Mr Biswas, leads to the break up of the family, and moves from the house of one stranger to another. He is seized in marriage by the Tulsi family, for his Brahmin caste lends prestige to the prestige hungry Tulsi clan. The clannishness and narrowness in Hanuman House, (the house of the Tulsis'), creates the need in Mr Biswas, to own a house of his own. His quest is a quest for independence, and a place to which he can imbue with meaning. It further shows the inherent loneliness of man himself.

Critical moments in Mr Biswas's life, points up the growth in his personality from the passivity of youth and early manhood, to a more active participation in the shaping of events. He may not control, but he does become more assertive in his limited way. In the culmination of the book, Mr Biswas loses his job, and is reduced to living on his daughters salary. But he discovers, as he writes in a letter to his son, who refuses to correspond with him, the delight in simple things, like the ride in the car, flowers etc.

The end, as in 'The Mystic Masseur,' is revealed in the beginning of the book, which reduces the suspense in the reader, and the calculated simplicity, as A.C. Derrick points out, gives the novel's imagery and symbolism a consistency and immediacy, which otherwise may have been a rambling narrative.
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I inledningen till specialarbetet ges en kort introduktion till V.S. Naipauls tidiga författarskap t.o.m. A house for Mr. Bivas (1961). Därefter följer en bibliografi som förutser om Naipauls egna verk också förtecknar ett antal arbeten om honom samt recensioner av hans böcker t.o.m. A bend in the river (1979). I denna sista avdelning har även medtagits recensioner från publikationer utgivna i Sverige.

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