

## V.S. NAIPAUL: EAST INDIAN–WEST INDIAN

**Kathleen Firth**

*Universidad de Barcelona*

### *ABSTRACT*

As a writer who has twice suffered displacement, from his ancestral land and his native island of Trinidad in the West Indies, V.S. Naipaul brings an extra dimension to the notion of post-colonial writing. Whether he opts for the short story or the novel form, for the travel narrative or the personal interview, it soon becomes apparent that Naipaul's biography is inseparable from his work.

This article analyzes how Naipaul's Indian heritage, inextricably linked to the memory of his father, Seepersad Naipaul, has created the tension prompting his life's work and at the same time has brought him the conviction that alienation is not merely the lot of colonized people, but a fundamental aspect of all human existence.

Although Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul claims he has decolonized himself through his writing,<sup>1</sup> the key concept underlying all his work is the concept of the dispossessed individual. Born in the Anglophone Caribbean island of Trinidad in 1932, V.S. Naipaul's life, like the lives of more than three-quarters of the people living the the world today, has been shaped by the experience of colonialism;<sup>2</sup> but what sets Naipaul apart from most writers of "post-colonial" definition is his perception that human beings everywhere share the common feeling of alienation.

While recognizing that this fundamental aspect of human experience is exacerbated by colonialism, immigration, exile and so on –indeed, he has said that he is "not just using a metaphor" whenever he refers to himself as being an exile or a refugee–,<sup>3</sup> Naipaul is not interested in attributing blame to the process of colonization *per se*, but rather in satirizing the psychological dependency it generates in the colonized and from which deplorable state too few are prepared to make the effort to release themselves. What is more, as the title and character portrayals of a novel he published five years after Trinidad achieved its independence from Great Britain reveal, Naipaul is somewhat sceptical about the political independence that comes to

former colonies. “Plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose” is the impression that this novel has on the reader, because what is required but has not come about, the author infers, is a qualitative change of mentality from colonial to independent ways of thinking to ensure the demise of the “mimic men” that remain behind after the white masters have left.<sup>4</sup>

Needless to say, the things Naipaul has said and written about the post-colonial experience have not been received without controversy. Even the elegant social satires he wrote in the fifties: *The Mystic Masseur* (1957), *The Suffrage of Elvira* (1958) and *Miguel Street* (1959),<sup>5</sup> were roundly criticized by his fellow countrymen as inappropriate responses to the colonial malaise. For it is the spirit of Ganesh Ramsumair, whose wily rise from country bumpkin to Colonial Statesman G. Ramsay Muir, M.B.E., through the comic stages of failed schoolteacher, failed religious- and then failed island political-leader, that dominates these early works. Despite their racy language and the charmingly exotic fictional creations that brought much delight to metropolitans and several metropolitan literary awards to the author, few West Indians were amused by these works. Perhaps the tragedy underlying the surface comedy was too uncomfortably real for them to ignore, as *A House for Mr Biswas* (1961), the overtly tragicomic work that culminated the early period, was to confirm; so that when Naipaul finally shed the comic mask and turned to record his impressions of five Caribbean societies in the non-fictional *The Middle Passage* in 1962, West-Indian outrage was unleashed unabated. Writers and critics such as George Lamming, Wayne Browne and John Hearne felt justified in firing back some invective at “colonial lackey” Naipaul, because, their arguments went, Naipaul was continuing to pelt abuse at the West Indies, now in a form “sadly disguised as objective analysis.”<sup>6</sup> One of the oft-quoted statements from *The Middle Passage* that served to rouse West Indian ire runs:

...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.<sup>7</sup>

Notwithstanding its harshness, the honesty of the statement should not be overlooked, since history, achievement and creation are key preoccupations, if not obsessions, where this Trinidadian-born writer is concerned: for Naipaul genuinely believes that achievement and creation will provide the antidote to the brutal history that has caused human alienation everywhere.

This is part of what Naipaul means, therefore, when he claims that he has decolonized himself through his writing for his own outstanding achievement has been to create art out of the chaos he encountered wherever his inquiring intelligence led him. Since completing *A House for Mr Biswas*, a fictional homage to the memory of his father whereby Naipaul came to a full realization of the very tenuous hold a human being has on the things of this earth, he has ranged the wider world of diaspora to produce seventeen provocative books,<sup>8</sup> and, perhaps more significantly, to discover that his own original sense of belonging nowhere has been intensified in the process. Indeed, it was not until the closing lines of *The Enigma of Arrival* (1987) that some sort of acceptance of his private dilemma became discernible. Up to this moment, the reader had had difficulties in reconciling Naipaul’s opus to the aforementioned claim, made in 1973, when, moreover, he was still suffering from the devastating effects of his first trip to India.

While no one questioned Naipaul's brilliance when he turned global, many were shocked and offended by the tone he adopted to write about the material and moral plight of the world's "unanchored souls."<sup>9</sup> Indians were incensed by the "dung-heap" image of their country Naipaul had projected *ad nauseam* in *An Area of Darkness* (1964), protesting that a gifted writer had wasted his talents on passages like the following:

Indians defecate everywhere. They defecate, mostly, beside the railway tracks. But they also defecate on the beaches; they defecate on the hills; they defecate on the river banks; they defecate on the streets; they never look for cover. Muslims, with their tradition of *purdah*, can at times be secretive. But this is a religious act of self-denial, for it is said that the peasant, Muslim or Hindu, suffers from claustrophobia if he has to use an enclosed latrine.<sup>10</sup>

Others read Naipaul's observations on the wretched of the earth as responding to preconceived notions, which no amount of travelling or reputedly intellectual detachment could ever hope to dispel; and there is no denying that his first book on India does seem to dwell too lengthily at times upon the sort of things that Gandhi had deplored before Naipaul. Another case in point is the immobile caste-system, which is repeatedly focussed upon for stark reporting but which, unlike Gandhi, precludes the observer from getting involved:

Study these four men washing down the steps of this unpalatable Bombay hotel. The first pours water from a bucket, the second scratches the tiles with a twig broom, the third uses a rag to slop the dirty water down the steps into another bucket, which is held by the fourth. After they have passed the steps are as dirty as before; but now above the blackened skirting-tiles the walls are freshly and dirtily splashed. The bathrooms and lavatories are foul; the slimy woodwork has rotted away as a result of this daily drenching; the concrete walls are green and black with slime. You cannot complain that the hotel is dirty. No Indian will agree with you. Four sweepers are in daily attendance, and it is enough in India that the sweepers attend. They are not required to *clean*. That is a subsidiary part of their function, which is to *be* sweepers, degraded beings, to go through the motions of degradation.<sup>11</sup>

The least ferocious reponse to *An Area of Darkness* came from the Indian poet and scholar Nissim Ezekiel. This critic does not doubt the veracity of Naipaul's vision of India, but questions the way he went about discovering it:

... He keeps running into obtuse, unsympathetic Indians, bland, silly and incapable of understanding his simplest problems... somehow one feels that Mr Naipaul's aloof, sullen, aggressive manner contributed to his difficulties, accentuated them.<sup>12</sup>

What further interests us here is that Ezekiel has hit upon a truth about Naipaul's own "panic" and "fear of extinction," which are the tensions that prompt him to write.<sup>13</sup> It is of course true that these fears sometimes manifest themselves through attitudes of arrogance and contempt towards weaker human beings or distressing situations (atti-

tudes by no means exclusive to Naipaul); but it is also true that Naipaul's creative genius is in turn capable of refining these same attitudes into art for his reading public for, as he once said, we approach a writer for "a particular kind of sensibility, a particular way of looking at the world, a kind of morbidity."<sup>14</sup>

Needless to say, a statement as paradoxical as the latter ought to challenge the reader. Is not "a kind of sensibility" and "a kind of morbidity" a case of *binary opposition* (according to the latest buzz words of literary theory)? And was Naipaul not anticipating the fin de siècle apathy towards other forms of imperialism such as American-influenced trash television, created to the glory of muscle and mammon? Perhaps he was not consciously speaking as a prophet of doom when he made this remark; on the other hand, it is a token of his stylistic powers of persuasion that the reader might have left this statement unchallenged, accustomed as he/she has become to the paradoxes in which the man and his works abound. What is more, although we would argue that we do not approach a writer to give us the whole truth about society, or about anything for that matter, we could easily be overwhelmed into accepting Naipaul's morbid vision as the whole truth, precisely because he is a very persuasive stylist. This is what leads Ezekiel not to disallow the objective truths about India but rather to deplore Naipaul's overwhelmingly subjective analysis, born of aloofness and contempt, that many readers of *An Area of Darkness* might very well leave unexamined.

Naipaul himself is not unaware of the contemptuous streak in his nature and admits that it is an attitude he has inherited from his father, Seepersad Naipaul, another of the world's homeless beings whose stories need to be known, if only to remind the privileged of the so-called First World that wealth and power usually obtain through the burdens and suffering borne by others.

Born to East-Indian peasants in Trinidad's sugar-cane belt, Seepersad Naipaul grew up amidst a community of have-nots that had remained invisible in the New World ever since their arrival as indentured labourers several decades earlier to replace the former African slaves. Little had those first illiterate "coolies" realized that by means of a thumb impression on a cheating contract they were committing themselves to semi-slavery and conditions no better than the African slaves had suffered before them. For the indenturing of labour responded to the same economic rationale of the 18th century whereby profit was seen as the main criterion of behaviour and morality only as a secondary consideration where this trafficking in human beings was concerned. Because of the material ethos of the times, problems about the moral wrongness of transporting millions of Africans across the Atlantic to forced labour on the West Indian sugar estates had been avoided.

Fortunately, as the Enlightenment developed in Europe, moral abhorrence of slavery spread and the Anti-Slavery Society, established in Great Britain in 1823, succeeded in freeing slaves in the British colonies a decade later. The result was that the emancipated Africans abandoned the plantations en masse, most of them unwilling to work for their former masters under any circumstances. Thus with a total collapse of the economic system imminent, plantation owners needed to find cheap labour urgently elsewhere, and, as had been the practice since the earliest chapters of British Imperialism, "coolie" labour was once again exploited as the solution.

If, as stated above, the East Indians remained invisible for many decades after arriving in the New World colonies, this fact had less to do with their numerical inferiority to the emancipated Africans (indentured labour also brought Chinese, other Asians and poor whites to the sugar islands), than with their self-imposed isolation as

a tradition-minded rural and agrarian labour force.<sup>15</sup> As Naipaul spells out for us in *The Overcrowded Barracoon* (1972), Indians from the sub-continent brought their “blinkered view” of the world to the West Indies, and it was therefore quite easy for them to recreate Uttar Pradesh or Bihar in their New World environment. Having ignored the vastness of India by narrowing their peasant world to a plot of ground and a few relationships, they merely transported this idea of India to the New World and were capable of ignoring “the strangeness in which they had been set.”<sup>16</sup>

Although the Indian government outlawed the practice of the indenturing of labour in 1917, there was no massive abandoning of the estates as had come about after the Slave Emancipation Act of 1833. Thrifty and enterprising as many of the Indian labourers were, they had acquired small plots of land, brought out their families and attracted voluntary immigrants from home, among them skilled craftsmen, traders and even professionals to service the agricultural settlements. In this way, “little Indias” were created in the New World, cultural enclaves protecting the East Indian peasant from contamination by foreigners and allowing him to retain a sense of pride in his past and his race which helped him surmount the humiliation of colonial indentureship. He was therefore unlike the African, whose consciousness of the past usually reached no farther back than slavery, that era of institutionalized cruelty during which his Africanness had always been denied:

This was the greatest damage done to the Negro by slavery [writes Naipaul]. It taught him self contempt. It set him the ideals of a white civilization and made him despise every other...<sup>17</sup>

Notwithstanding, when the East Indian peasant gradually started to emerge from invisibility, first lured by the wealth the Americans brought to the island of Trinidad during the second world war years, the process of creolization he was to undergo was as psychologically bewildering as the social and economic plight the former slave brought upon himself by refusing to work for the white master after emancipation. The East Indians fared no better than the derelict urban blacks, and after the departure of the glamorous American soldiers with their easy dollars, it was too hard to return to the sordid life of cane-cutting. The peasants who stayed behind in the rural enclaves came of course even more slowly to some sort of awareness of what their dispossession was all about: the realization that they had been stranded in the New World where there could be no sense of home redeemed, despite their immovable Indianness:

He was taboo-ridden as no other person on the island; he had complicated rules about food and about what was unclean. His religion gave him values which were not the white values of the rest of the community, and preserved him from self- contempt: he never lost pride in his origins; more important than religion was his family organisation, an enclosing, self-sufficient world, absorbed with its quarrels and jealousies, as difficult for the outsider to penetrate as for one of its members to escape. It protected and imprisoned, a static world, awaiting decay.<sup>18</sup>

It was from this “static world, awaiting decay” that Naipaul’s father sought to free himself almost as soon as he reached the age of reason, eventually finding a vehicle of escape in the writing profession. Indeed, although he was born and raised in a

Hindi-speaking peasant community where writing was not a profession, he became a successful columnist on the *Trinidad Guardian*, popular for his jaunty style and prodigious sense of irony. He also wrote short stories: comic but overwhelmingly genial portrayals of the ugly side of the lives of his fellow Trinidadian East-Indians. It was largely thanks to the help and encouragement of an editor sent out from the London *Times* in the late nineteen-twenties, who happily discovered in Seepersad Naipaul a means to obey the brief given to him in London of modernizing the “half-dead” Trinidadian newspaper, that Seepersad developed his comic talent along with an exceptional command of the English language. Both men shared the same sense of humour, sense of drama and sense of what was ailing the island’s Hindu communities, and, because everything was novel to editor MacGowan in Trinidad, he saw stories with journalistic possibilities everywhere.<sup>19</sup> These were undoubtedly the years of Seepersad Naipaul’s short life (he died in his early forties from a heart attack) that offered him brief spells of respite from personal frustrations and an overriding sense of the futility of life in a colonial backwater. In *Finding the Centre* (1984) Naipaul writes about a long nervous illness his father suffered, whose origins the son was to learn about many years later. One of the origins was the great humiliation he underwent through being obliged to offer a sacrifice to a Hindu deity, or suffer death, an affair which made the front page of the *Guardian* for several days running with an apparently undaunted Seepersad Naipaul providing the day-to-day reports of suspense for his readers;<sup>20</sup> the other cause of his illness was the sense of loss that returned so devastatingly to his life when MacGowan was dismissed from the newspaper and had to leave Trinidad.

It is doubtful whether Seepersad Naipaul ever fully recovered from those life-sapping experiences; for although he persevered with his writing and came to the attention of Henry Swanzy at the BBC, for whose *Caribbean Voices* programme he wrote short stories between 1950 and 1953, his idea of being trapped by his circumstances merely intensified. He must have been elated when Swanzy himself acclaimed one of his stories in a London review, yet his joy was transmitted to his exiled son in the following way: “I’m beginning to feel I *could* have been a writer.”<sup>21</sup>

This remark poignantly sums up the debilitating effects of colonialism. Seepersad Naipaul would die a defeated man, believing he had accomplished nothing worthwhile because existence for the colonized is the denial of human worth. Yet an affirmation of life finally prevails over any other consideration where Seepersad Naipaul’s story is concerned, for he transmitted to his children the idea of the importance of a truly creative existence. Years later, Shiva Naipaul, his second successful writing son,<sup>22</sup> would remark how moved and astonished he felt whenever he considered the “leap of ambition, of imagination, of sensibility” required by his father to achieve what he did.<sup>23</sup> And V.S. Naipaul would start to repeatedly acknowledge his indebtedness to his progenitor after he finally set himself to the task of publishing a selection of his father’s short stories in London two decades after his death. In his foreword to this volume, entitled *The Adventures of Gurudeva and Other Stories*, V.S. Naipaul reveals how the quest for achievement was nullifying in Seepersad Naipaul’s case:

My father never in his life reached that point of rest from which he could look back at his past. His last years, when he found his voice as a writer, were years of especial distress and anxiety; he was a part of the dereliction he wrote about.<sup>24</sup>

The “past” that concerns V.S. Naipaul here is the dereliction and despair that surrounded the lives of the indentured East Indian peasants among whom Seepersad had grown to adulthood, but whose physical conditions he had taken for granted when he wrote his first stories. It was only when he became a surveyor of rural conditions for the government, a better-paid post for which he left his newspaper job in the early 1940s, that a picture of the peasants’ environmental degradation surfaced. A story from this period of his life, entitled “In the Village”, describes the protagonist Mangarie’s hut in minute, wretched detail and then transcribes in dialect her cynical response to the government’s interest in her:

... T’ink dey care?’ And she gave a quiet chuckle, pregnant with doubt. ‘All the same,’ she said, still doubtful, ‘Ah ain’t have not’ing, so Ah don’ have anyt’ing to hide. Ah mean, Ah so po’ it would be stupid to mek meself look poorer. You kian see fo’ you’self.’<sup>25</sup>

Curiously, Seepersad Naipaul did not pursue this, albeit muted, line of social protest further; although his son does tell us that he had never intended this particular story for publication.<sup>26</sup> This information helps the reader, who has no doubt been wondering in the course of the reading how Seepersad is going to contrive a romantic ending, as has been his wont to date, for a story like Mangarie’s. Perhaps the piece was written the way it was in response to his emotional distress after the recent death of his mother, who had died in what V.S. Naipaul describes as “great, Trinidad poverty.”<sup>27</sup> In any event, Seepersad was obviously uneasy about exploiting his potential for social-protest fiction because with the next piece he wrote, a story entitled “They Named Him Mohun,” in which he came to an acceptance of the long years of tormented memories concerning the circumstances of his own birth and the cruelty of a tyrannical father, he once again managed to idealize peasant life and bring about a happy conclusion.

There nonetheless existed another “past” for Seepersad Naipaul. It was one that resisted rejection because it was genetically constituted: the fact that he was born to the Brahmin caste. This meant that Seepersad Naipaul had a Brahmin outlook on life, an outlook that could be defined as an enormous *sense* of the past and of one’s worth combined with a reverence for learning and the written word. The lowliness of one’s station in life cannot alter one’s caste, for whatever his social class, the Brahmin remains at the highest level of the Hindu scale of hierarchies. It was surely this Brahmin outlook, then, that impelled Seepersad Naipaul to attempt to raise himself above the dereliction that characterized his condition; it was certainly this outlook that he transmitted to his son, together with the urge to escape in order to fulfil the vocation he genuinely believed he had been denied by his circumstances.

To the western mind, a “Brahmin outlook” might convey notions of inherited superiority, self-assurance or, depending on the occasion, arrogance or contempt—which comment brings us back to the Naipaulian attitudes mentioned earlier. Before examining the father-son correspondence on this question, though, it is worth considering whether any fundamental difference exists between the quintessential colonial condition Naipaul’s father represents, that is to say: the condition of the individual defeated by an environment denying dignity to all people and in which environment the quest for achievement is perceived as futile; and the free state of the self-exiled son, that is to say: the state whereby the individual possesses the inalienable right to do what he

or she wants to do without being restricted by anything or anyone and in which environment achievement is possible.

A tentative conclusion about the foregoing dichotomy might be drawn by comparing and contrasting aspects of both writers' works. Their shared sense of comedy, for example, wherein the geniality of Seepersad Naipaul towards his subject matter would differentiate his opus from his son's after *Miguel Street* (V. S. Naipaul's first "publishable" written work, see note (5) above), when the son became Swiftian in tone in contrast; needless to say, geniality does not negate any seriousness of purpose where the father's short stories are concerned. Indeed, he once remarked to his son: "If through the comedy you can't see the central tragedy, then the comedy isn't very good."<sup>28</sup>

It also becomes evident in comparing the son's West-Indian fiction and the works of the father that he has inherited more than subject matter, for both writers give the impression of the same delight in character whenever they have their Trinidadians speak. So much so that each has a story written entirely in the Trinidadian dialect, "Obeah"<sup>29</sup> and "The Baker's Story,"<sup>30</sup> attesting to a finely attuned ear in both cases, although perhaps the display of linguistic skill is even more impressive where Seepersad is concerned, considering that English and its Trinidadian variety were for him acquired languages.

There is no space here to analyse language usage in the fiction of the two Naipauls; suffice it to say that their works bring many fine examples to the debate concerning this important aspect of post-colonial literary theory, especially where the linguistic phenomena known as "creole continuum" and "code switching" are concerned.<sup>31</sup> V.S. Naipaul's early works, particularly *The Mystic Masseur*, are frequently cited by critics tackling this aspect of post-colonial texts,<sup>32</sup> although, as far as I know, no critic has looked at his father's work in this way. Seepersad Naipaul's fictional hold-all is a wily, lovable rogue called Gurudeva, who inspired many of V.S. Naipaul's early fictional creations including several of the *Miguel Street* and *The Suffrage of Elvira* picaroons, one side of the character of his hapless hero, Mr Biswas (the other side was provided by another Seepersad creation called Gopi), and Ganesh of mystical masseur fame, whose con-man-showman flair outshines them all.

Seepersad Naipaul's village "bad john" is metamorphosed into village pundit for an ambivalent dénouement which is at the same time consistent with everything Seepersad has been preparing the reader for. As the story ends, we see Gurudeva well established on the path that leads to self-knowledge and a capacity to assess his own position in a changing world, for when the westernized East-Indian girl he has fallen in love with leaves him for good, Gurudeva is the only person in his "little India" village not to evaluate her as: "the embodiment of an evil thing leaving them at a last."<sup>33</sup>

It attests to Seepersad Naipaul's respect for the reader's common sense that he does not allow his hero to stand as his spokesman. Because his concern is to analyse the East-West antithesis in an attempt to find points of confluence in both ways, he requires more than a country bumpkin to bring his concerns to light. His spokesman is Mr Sohun, a presbyterian convert and Gurudeva's former schoolteacher, and a character who is obviously on the side of reform:

... in a country such as the West Indies, Western culture and habits are the passport to progress. You people want to build a little India of your own in Trinidad. You are trying to dance top in mud. It cannot be done. The difficulty lies in the fact that you are too much of a majority to assimilate, too much of a



minority to dominate. On every hand you are pressed by Western influences. You cannot be entirely Oriental, nor entirely Occidental; you can no more be entirely Western than you can be entirely Eastern; neither a hundred per cent European nor a hundred per cent Indian. You will be distinctly West Indian...<sup>34</sup>

Despite the tautology [V.S. Naipaul objected to this character's wordiness<sup>35</sup>], it is against this irreconcilable East-West background that Seepersad Naipaul intends the rise and fall of his hero to be read. Through Mr Sohun he poses the alternative between what he sees as progressive western culture and obscurantist Eastern culture and clearly acknowledges the superiority of the West. On the other hand, it would have been inconsistent with Gurudeva's characterization to attempt a further metamorphosis whereby he becomes "distinctly West Indian" at the end of the story, for whilst this condition is the only solution Seepersad Naipaul sees for homeless East-Indians like himself, he well knows that his fictional hero is not yet ready to assume a metamorphosis of such import. Instead, he offers his hero a taste for Western culture and has him discover that his circumstances will continue denying him full access thereto. What we see in the end therefore is not an implausible "distinctly West-Indian" Gurudeva but a believable Gurudeva, converted into a sadder but wiser figure.

It should be stressed too that, for all his loquacious defence of New World values, Mr Sohun is not portrayed as an intellectual snob, whereas V.S. Naipaul's three versions of this character: Ganesh of *The Mystic Masseur*, schoolteacher Lal in *A House for Mr Biswas* and Randolph of "A Christmas Story"<sup>36</sup> are clearly presented in that unfavourable light. Like Mr Sohun, they have rejected their Indian heritage for professional and social advancement, which is what Gurudeva means when he remarks: "Schoolmaster turned Christian for his *roti*;"<sup>37</sup> unlike Mr Sohun, however, V.S. Naipaul's converts reveal contemptuous attitudes towards Hinduism, and it is only Randolph, whose story takes the form of a long confessional journal, who apparently needs to keep reassuring himself that he has done the right thing in becoming a Christian. More significant is that by allowing Randolph to show ambivalence towards his Hindu past, V.S. Naipaul is hinting at a private dilemma concerning his own Indianness.

Thanks to his having been able to escape from the limiting world of Trinidad combined with the urge to get on with becoming a writer in the metropolis, V.S. Naipaul paid scant attention to his own problem until India herself forced him to come to terms with it. After his first visit, he complained that he should never have made the effort, that the land of his ancestors had broken his life in two;<sup>38</sup> thus if Randolph's story betrays the writer's feelings, it is against the autobiographical context of *An Area of Darkness* and remarks made in subsequent interviews that we allow ourselves to make such inferences. We need to wait for his second book on India, published a decade later with the revealing title: *India: A Wounded Civilization*, for a full confession on V.S. Naipaul's part:

India is for me a difficult country. It isn't my home and cannot be my home; and yet I cannot reject it or be indifferent to it; I cannot travel only for the sights. I am at once too close and too far.<sup>39</sup>

V.S. Naipaul's disjunctive "and yet" proclaims an ambivalence that Seepersad Naipaul shared but about which he dare not be so forthright in any of his literary creations. This is the reason Mr. Sohun is never given the supercilious overtones that

V.S. Naipaul's Christian converts use so blatantly. The nearest we get to an insight on Seepersad's deep ambivalence towards his own Indianness is in fact at the end of Gurudeva's story, written the same year he died, when his hero comes to realize that he also is "at once too close and too far" with regards to his Indian heritage.

In his work for the *Trinidad Guardian*, on the other hand, Seepersad Naipaul was harder on the victims of conservative Hinduism than he allowed himself to be in his fiction. Given the moral support of editor MacGowan from the metropolis together with the enlightenment brought by the Arya Samaj missionaries from India, Seepersad Naipaul focussed upon aspects of East Indian customs for his newspaper columns which served to incense the community leaders. The outcome was the anonymous death threat which, paradoxically, testified to the truth of his reports while condemning them by the same gesture. For Seepersad exposed as superstitious the practices of polytheistic Hinduism that had survived in Trinidad, practices that attested to the static, pre-revolutionary form of their religion that the indentured peasants had transported from India, a Hinduism as yet untouched by the great intellectual movements that had swept through India in the nineteenth century. Indeed, it was not until the second decade of the twentieth century that the reformist Arya Samaj missionaries arrived to provoke great verbal battles between themselves and their orthodox brothers in the New World. These battles, hinted at in Seepersad's fiction when Gurudeva turns pundit, exposed by V.S. Naipaul in *A House for Mr Biswas*, were never known outside the Hindu community of the day but threatened to come to light and ridicule the orthodox Trinidadians through the columns of a highly popular journalist.

Rumours had it that the death threat was instigated by members of Seepersad Naipaul's wife's family, a leading family amidst the orthodox community, who were violently opposed to his reformist leanings. Thus despite a brave stance as Reporter Naipaul, his panic was real and he finally gave in to irrational demands by making the sacrifice to the Hindu deity. In the end then, the sad reality of his existence manifested itself and was to remain with him for the rest of his life: that he was a prisoner of the very ethos he spurned.

This would account for the contempt of the son towards the irrationality he encountered not only in Trinidad and India, but in human affairs everywhere. But because of his liberated condition, V.S. Naipaul was able to court controversy and remain firm on the path of what he perceived as clear-sighted analysis, cherishing the controversy he was creating:

Unless one hears a little squeal of pain after one's done some writing, one has not really done much. That's my gauge whether I've hit something true.<sup>40</sup>

One of the truths he had hit upon was that alienation is shared by people everywhere, not only in colonies, but also in metropolitan centres of the world as both Mr Stone, the English protagonist of *Mr. Stone and the Knights Companion* (1963) and Ralph Singh, the West Indian protagonist of *The Mimic Men* (1967), reveal. So that when he came to write *In a Free State*, it was with the conviction that no place on earth offers true freedom to the individual, including the privileged minority of the world who have not been forced to suffer processes of colonialism, exile and the like.

Typical of the stories collected in the volume entitled *In a Free State* is "One Out of Many," a first-person narrative by an Indian domestic called Santosh, who tells the story of being transported from his impoverished life in Bombay to the more material

comforts of Washington D.C. where his employer, an official of the Indian government, has been posted. Not long after arriving in the capital, he leaves the safety of his employer's residence to undergo a process of acculturation which, in varying degrees, has to be faced by immigrants everywhere. Santosh is nonetheless incapable of coming to terms with the freedom offered by what is reputedly the freest state in the world, for he is bewildered by American speech and habits and feels ambivalent towards people living on the margins of American society and towards things like the social unrest engendered by black revolutionaries or the protest movements over Vietnam. In time he understands that marriage will change his illegal status, and thus, despite his ambivalence towards Black Americans in particular, he marries a *hubshi* to secure the right to American citizenship. Paradoxically, however, his new citizenship does not provide a new sense of freedom but exacerbates, rather, the sense of loss he has always felt since leaving India, where order and security had been provided through the hierarchical values of religion, caste and class:

...Once, when there were rumours of new burnings, someone scrawled in white paint on the pavement outside my house: 'Soul Brother'. I understand the words; but I feel, brother to what or whom? I was once part of the flow, never thinking of myself as a presence. Then I looked in the mirror and decided to be free. All that my freedom has brought me is the knowledge that I have a face and a body, that I must feed this body and clothe this body for a certain number of years. Then it will be over.<sup>41</sup>

As the ironic, punning title of the collection of stories about lost souls like Santosh will suggest, all human beings are stateless wayfarers, all of us very far from home. If we are therefore allowed to arrive at any sort of conclusion concerning the fundamental difference between Naipaul's own "free state" and the colonized condition for which his father is the paradigm, it can only be expressed, in typical Naipaul fashion, negatively: that the fundamental difference lies in the *illusion* of freedom granted by the former state, which makes life more bearable as long as the illusion remains intact.

Although it may appear otherwise, it is possible to end this discussion on a more optimistic note. This is because Naipaul's "decolonization" has finally become credible through his latest work, *India: A Million Mutinies Now* (1990). In this third book about India his attitude towards his ancestral homeland has become so radically different from the one adopted in the former two, that readers might ask themselves at first whether the writer is the same person. For while the brilliantly lucid style and the meticulous attention to detail tell us that this can be no other but Naipaul, we are no longer made to witness distressing scenes of degraded human beings imprisoned in their caste functions, but actually invited to listen to what a variety of intelligent human beings from all levels of Indian society, including women and devout Hindus, have to say about what India means to them. What is more, the scenes we are invited to witness portray a society able to cope, despite the Indian excesses of poverty, dirt and heat and all the other undeniable hardships of day-to-day existence:

...People went about minute tasks. Men pulled rickshaws. In 1962 this had been offensive to see, but it was said that the poor needed employment. Twenty-seven years on, the rickshaws were still there. The same thing was said about employment for the poor; but the Calcuttans, with their low ideas of human

needs and possibilities, appeared genuinely to enjoy the man-pulled rickshaw as a form of transport; and many of the rickshaws looked nice and new, not like things on the way out.<sup>42</sup>

Some years ago, a critic said that he wished someone could find a way, apart from showering him with literary awards, to cheer Naipaul up. After reading his last work we see with hindsight that he was capable not only of doing that for himself, but also of subtly preparing his readers, beginning with *Finding the Centre*, for a work that would bring them cheer in the reaffirmation of life it upholds. For if Naipaul has continued to live out the effects of his father's homeless existence, "carr[ying] in [his] bones that idea of abjectness and defeat and shame,"<sup>43</sup> he has eventually reached a philosophical acceptance of his own displacement. What is more, with this last book on India, the reader has the sensation of poetic justice for a life's dedication to creative endeavour which, in the final analysis, must be read as a plea for rationality for the sake of the dignity of human kind. Kenneth Ramchand once remarked in conversation with Selwyn Cudjoe that he thought about Naipaul's work as something that teaches humility: "When I feel strong and believe that changing the world or living in it is easy, Naipaul brings back the sense of human weakness, making one aware of the limits of one's human nature..."<sup>44</sup> It is both fitting, and moving, therefore, that the India that has wounded Naipaul for too many years has been once more his emotional testing ground and that India should now be regarded by him as a place of possibilities, of ideas and creative intelligence; the home for his imagination in the end:

The liberation of spirit that has come to India could not come as release alone. In India, with its layer below layer of distress and cruelty, it had to come as a disturbance. ...What the mutinies were also helping to define was the strength of the general intellectual life, and the wholeness and humanism of the values to which all Indians now felt they could appeal. And—strange irony—the mutinies were not to be wished away. They were part of the beginning of a new way for many millions, part of India's growth, part of its restoration.<sup>45</sup>

## Notes

1. (1973) "Portrait of an Artist: What Makes Naipaul Run," *Caribbean Contact*, May, p. 19.
2. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths & Helen Tiffin, (1989) *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*. London: Routledge, p. 1.
3. Quoted in Adrian Rowe-Evans, (1971) "V.S. Naipaul," *Transition*, 40, p. 59.
4. V.S. Naipaul, (1977) *The Mimic Men*. Middlesex: Penguin. Originally published London: André Deutsch, 1967.
5. Because of the publishers' proverbial fear of short stories, *Miguel Street*, though written before, was not published until the success of *The Mystic Masseur* and *The Suffrage of Elvira* had been firmly established.
6. Wayne Brown, (1970) "On Exile and the Dialect of the Tribe," *Sunday Guardian* (Trinidad), 23 August, p. 17.
7. V.S. Naipaul, (1962) *The Middle Passage*. 6th ed.; rpt. Middlesex: Penguin, (1985) p. 29.
8. (1962) *The Middle Passage*; (1963) *Mr. Stone and the Knights Companion*; (1964) *An Area of Darkness*; (1967) *The Mimic Men*; (1967) *A Flag on the Island*; (1969) *The Loss of El Dorado*; (1971) *In a Free State*; (1972) *The Overcrowded Barracoon*; (1975) *Guerrillas*;

- (1977) *India: A Wounded Civilization*; (1978) *A Bend in the River*; (1980) *The Return of Eva Perón*; (1981) *Among the Believers*; (1984) *Finding the Centre*; (1987) *The Enigma of Arrival*; (1988) *A Turn in the South*; (1990) *India: A Million Mutinies Now*.
9. Frank Birkbalsingh, (1988) *Passion and Exile: Essays in Caribbean Literature*. London: Hansib, p.142.
  10. V.S. Naipaul, (1964) *An Area of Darkness*, 5th ed. Middlesex: Penguin, (1977), p. 70.
  11. *Ibid.*, pp. 74-75.
  12. Nissim Ezekiel, (1984) "Naipaul's India and Mine," *New Writing in India*, ed. Adil Jussawalla. Middlesex: Penguin, p. 75. This essay was first published in 1965.
  13. Naipaul often spoke about these fears in interviews. See for example, Charles Michener, (1981) "The Dark Visions of V.S. Naipaul," *Newsweek*, 16 November, p. 108; Adrian Rowe-Evans, *op. cit.*, pp. 61-62; David Pryce-Jones, (1979) *Radio Times*, 24- 30 (March), p. 11.
  14. (1973) "V.S. Naipaul Tells How Writing Changes a Writer," *Tapia*, 2 December, p. 11.
  15. The indentured East Indian labour force is an aspect of the Caribbean heritage that is often forgotten. Derek Walcott, of mixed African-European ancestry, reminds West Indians of this heritage in "The Saddhu of Couva" from *The Star-Apple Kingdom*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1979, pp. 33-5.
  16. (1972) *The Overcrowded Barracoon and Other Articles*. London: Andre Deutsch, p. 33.
  17. *The Middle Passage*, p. 71.
  18. *Ibid.*, p. 88.
  19. For further information on Seepersad Naipaul's life, see V.S. Naipaul's "Foreword", Seepersad Naipaul, (1976) *The Adventures of Gurudeva and Other Stories*. London: André Deutsch, which collection will subsequently be referred to as AOG; and V.S. Naipaul, (1984) *Finding the Centre*. London: André Deutsch.
  20. In 1992, to commemorate its 75th anniversary, the Trinidad Guardian reprinted articles by those early writers, poets and essayists for whom the newspaper had provided the only forum available for their work in the early days. Seeperad's reports on the death threat affair were also reprinted.
  21. "Foreword", *AOG*, p. 10.
  22. Shiva Naipaul, Naipaul's younger brother and the author of several prize-winning works, died whilst V.S. was writing (1987) *The Enigma of Arrival*. The shock of his talented brother's untimely death, combined with the sorrow for the death of a sister shortly before, help to account for a philosophical acceptance of the past which the author seems to be approaching at the end of this work.
  23. Not long before his death, Shiva Naipaul had revisited the family home in Trinidad to make a film. A flash-back scene of the occasion was incorporated into the programme on V.S. Naipaul offered by Melvyn Bragg's "The South Bank Show" broadcast on ITV in March 1987.
  24. "Foreword", *AOG*, p.18.
  25. "In the Village", *AOG*, pp. 172-3.
  26. "Foreword", *AOG*, p. 8.
  27. *Ibid.*, p. 11.
  28. Quoted in Lange White, (1975) *V.S. Naipaul: A Critical Introduction*. London: Macmillan Press, p. 33.
  29. "Obeah" was one of the seven stories Seepersad Naipaul published, at his own expense, in booklet form in Trinidad in 1943. Though the booklet was not cheap for Trinidad in those days, all the copies went. A token of his son's own colonial mentality is that he never considered them as "published" works, because published in Trinidad, until he finally got around to publishing these early stories and later ones for AOG in London in 1976, and only then fully appreciated how valuable they were to the literature of the region.
  30. First written in 1962, "The Baker's Story" was published in the short-story collection: V.S. Naipaul, (1967) *A Flag on the Island*. London: André Deutsch; rpt., Middlesex: Penguin, (1969). Apart from its interest for dialecticians, the story is revealing of the racial labour

- divisions in Trinidadian society: a black baker tells how his baking skills have brought him wealth only by his passing himself off as Chinese since, time out of mind, the Chinese have been the island's bakers.
31. See K. Firth, (1992) "Towards a Standardization of Creole Languages in the Anglophone Caribbean", *Actas, XI Congreso de AEDEAN*. Alicante: Publicaciones Universidad de Alicante.
  32. See for example, "Replacing Language: Textual Strategies in Post-Colonial Writing" (Chapter 2), *The Empire Writes Back* 33. *AOG*, p. 123.
  34. *Ibid.*, p. 92.
  35. "Foreword", *AOG*, p. 21. "My father makes him talk too much."
  36. *A Flag on the Island*, pp. 24-46
  37. *AOG*, p. 99.
  38. *An Area of Darkness*, p. 265.
  39. V.S. Naipaul, (1977) *India: A Wounded Civilization*. London: André Deutsch, pp. 8-9.
  40. Quoted in Charles Wheeler, (1977) "'It's Every Man for Himself': V.S. Naipaul on India," *The Listener*, 27 October, p. 537.
  41. V.S. Naipaul, (1977) *In A Free State*. (3rd ed. 1971). Middlesex: Penguin, pp. 57-8.
  42. V.S. Naipaul, (1990) *India: A Million Mutinies Now*. London: Heinemann, p. 348.
  43. *Ibid.*, p. 517.
  44. Kenneth Ramchand, (n.d.) "V.S. Naipaul and West Indian Writers: Kenneth Ramchand speaks with Selwyn Cudjoe." *ANTILLA*, 1, St. Augustine, Trinidad: Journal of the Faculty of Arts, U.W.I., p. 20.
  45. *India: A Million Mutinies Now*, pp. 517-518.