Chapter IV

The ‘Rational’ and ‘Irrational’ in the African Discourse

_The Masque of Africa_, the most recent book of Naipaul written in 2008, records his experiences in the six African countries he visited beginning with Uganda, followed by Nigeria, Ghana, Ivory Coast, Gabon and finally South Africa. He sets off to these countries alone with an intellectual agenda, meets people, quizzes them and transcribes the answer to his questions as an authority to give an authentic picture of these people, their culture and beliefs. He visits shrines, tombs and sacred places as he moves from one country to another. He attends rituals and ceremonies, meets and interrogates fetish priests, diviners, sooth-sayers and witchdoctors. He demonstrates how the old pagan beliefs of Africa are still playing a part in their modern life. But all this is done with his usual tone-exasperation and weary derision.

Naipaul’s portrayal of Africa has received both adulation and severe criticism from across the world. Most critics believe that his new book portrays a continent still caught with its one foot in primitive past and obsessed with eating domestic pets. His views on postcolonial societies have drawn ire for his unpolished portraits of his subjects. He observes that
as the continent approaches modernity, it remains a ‘land of bush’. In an interview that appears in the *New York Times Book Review*, Naipaul harshly declares that “Africa has no future” (36). He has earlier depicted the continent in two of his novels: *In a Free State* and *A Bend in the River*. In the opening line of his masterpiece novel *A Bend in the River* he sums up his world view in the following words: “The world is what it is; men who are nothing, who allow themselves to become nothing, have no place in it” (1).

Naipaul starts his journey in Uganda, the centre of the continent, hoping to know more about the nature of African belief. He says in the preface that the aim of a travel is a theme and the theme of *The Masque of Africa* is a belief, the African belief. His first visit to Uganda was in 1966 as a writer in residence at Makerere University in Kampala, then an intellectual hub. He claims that it is his quest for the spirit of African belief, the belief system that preceded the arrival of Christianity and Islam, that makes him travel through the continent. He tries to examine the effect of this belief system on the population of the continent. He interviews Ugandans from all walks of life in the Agakhan-owned Serena Hotel. While travelling along the country sides, he visits tombs at Kasubi and other sacred places and writes about the superstitions of the Ugandan
people. He meets witchdoctors and seeks out old beliefs and practices from witchcraft to fiendish sorcery. The source and veracity of his information are often disputed and some of his descriptions seem to be awfully incredible and exaggerated. For example, he writes about witchcraft in Uganda:

> When it came to witchcraft, violence was never far away. In Easter week, in a Village in the south-West, four brothers strangled their forty-two-year-old aunt. They removed her jaw and her tongue, no doubt for some private magical purpose, and dumped the body in a nearby banana field. Not long after, dogs began to gather in the banana field. (54)

He talks of rituals performed using human body parts. Even Naipaul is not sure whether any of this is true. He is giving a report of what he has been informed by various people he encounters. He fails to verify much of his information and relies on the not-so-reliable Ugandan newspapers. Naipaul has adopted a similar way of exaggerating things in one of his best known travel works titled “The Crocodiles of Yamoussoukro” which is a literary hybrid that contains elements of various genres. In Africa, rituals, religions, art and magic seem to go hand in hand. He narrates an experience during his voyage in the Ivory Coast:
At certain ceremonies of welcome a chief or an important man had to have his feet washed in blood. Usually it was the blood of a chicken or an animal. But to do a chief the highest honour, his feet should be washed in human blood, the blood of a sacrificed person, a child. And the child could be eaten afterwards. (166)

Another story Naipaul writes about is more appalling and implausible. He writes that when a chief or an important local man died, the man’s servants and his wives were buried with him. The source of this information is a middle-aged European who has been living in the Ivory Coast for many years. Naipaul never questions any of these reports and simply states: “I believed what this man said” (166). He never takes pain to check whether these descriptions of human sacrifices and cannibalism which aim at debasing the African natives are cooked up and shaped by their teller’s prejudices. Naipaul’s blind acceptance of what he hears as true is, however, highly dubious.

Naipaul claims that Africa, with no early recorded history, has no intellectual foundations to build on. He holds the view that: “The British colonial period, with law and without local wars, has to be seen as an interlude. But how do Africans live their African history? Perhaps the
absence of a script and written records blurs the past; perhaps the oral story gives them only myths” (28). He comments that Africa is a land without history, with an implication that before the advent of colonialism, the history of the natives was nothing but civil war and bloodshed. It was the British colonial rule that established a period of law and order. This concept of Naipaul endorses the theory of Frantz Fanon as suggested in *The Wretched of the Earth* that: “the settler makes history and is conscious of making it” (40). Fanon adds further: “Colonialism has made the same effort in these regions to plant deep in the minds of the native population the idea that before the advent of colonialism their history was one which was dominated by barbarism” (171). An examination of Naipaul’s novels *In a Free State*, set in an unnamed African country and *Guerillas*, dealing with the politics of Black Power Movement in Trinidad, reveals the author’s implication that civil war and bloodshed epitomize the African societies and typify the irremediable features of the black people as a whole. This kind of generalization as in his earlier travel writings, grossly distorts a broader perspective on these communities.

There is a preposterous generalization in the text that all Africans are either pet eaters or relishers of bush meat. His prejudices roam freely
throughout the book in the guise of compassionate concern. In the chapter on Ivory coast he writes that: “Africans eat everything that Nature provides” (213), and further analyses the best way in the Ivory Coast of killing a cat or kitten: “It was only on the last morning of my stay, on my way to the airport that I found out what was the best way in the Ivory Coast of killing a cat or kitten. You put them in a sack of some sort, and then you dropped the sack in a pot of boiling water” (214). Again in the chapter on the West African State of Ghana, his description of the people’s food habit is acerbic. He says that the people of Ghana eat cats and dogs and “the bush was almost barren of wildlife, but these people were managing to squeeze out the last remnants, while their fertile land remained largely unused” (174). To him, Nigerians are not animal lovers. In the fifth chapter on Gabon also he has resorted to this kind of depiction. He puts it as follows:

Africans like the French and the Chinese and the Vietnamese, ate everything, not only elephants and dogs and cats, but everything else with life. Everything with life was, you might say, fair game. The eating of bush meat had become a cultural matter; it was not to be questioned. The forest, with its apparently endless supply of bush meat, was like a free market, open to everyone. (255)
The veracity of his statements is questioned by many critics. Whether it be true or false, what makes it a matter of controversy is the way in which he looks at a community in the margin. Naipaul presents the whole African community as savage, brutal, and uncivilized with a colonial perspective. Fanon has rightly put it thus:

Colonialism, which has not bothered to put too fine a point on its efforts, has never ceased to maintain that the Negro is a savage, and for the colonist, the Negro was neither an Angolan nor a Nigerian, for he simply spoke of ‘the Negro’. For colonialism, this vast continent was the haunt of savages, a country riddled with superstitions and fanaticism, destined for contempt, weighed down by the curse of God, a country of cannibals – in short, the Negro’s country. (170)

Homi K. Bhabha elucidates this theory of Fanon and explains how colonialism has used the word ‘negro’ in a derogatory sense. He cites from Fanon’s *Black Skin White Masks* to explain that colonialism finds negro synonymous with all kinds of violation, crime and irregularities. Bhabha refers to Fanon’s essay “The Fact of Blackness’ in *Black Skin, White Masks* that opens with ‘Dirty Nigger! Or simply, Look, a Negro!’ and writes thus:
whether they are quasi-officially spoken in South Africa or officially prohibited in London or New York, but inscribed nevertheless in the severe staging of the statistics of educational performance and crime, visa violations, immigration irregularities; whenever 'Dirty nigger!' or 'Look, a Negro!' is not said at all, but you can see it in a gaze, or hear it in the solecism of a still silence, whenever and wherever I am when I hear a racist, or catch his look, I am reminded of Fanon's evocatory essay. 'The Fact of Blackness' and its unforgettable opening lines. (338-339)

Naipaul is again found disgusted with the animal body parts on display in a witchdoctors' market. His heart cries out for the suffering of the dumb animals and he relates it to the great strife and struggle of a people and their rationality. He writes:

I thought it all awful, a great disappointment.

The people of South Africa had had a big struggle. I expected that a big struggle would have created bigger people, people whose magical practices might point the way ahead to something profounder. It was impossible for any
rational person to feel that any virtue could come from the remains of these poor animals! (284)

Throughout the book, there is a passionate description of his encounters with kittens that make him dew-eyed and sentimental. He has concerns about the kittens apparently maltreated and eaten by ‘barbaric’ Africans. He feels the absence of dogs and cats on the streets as a sign of a country’s moral depravity. In the chapter on Ivory Coast, Naipaul gives the picture of a lorry full of cattle being taken to slaughter house in a windily verbose paragraph:

The land is full of cruelty which is hard for the visitor to bear. From the desert countries to the north long-horned cattle are sent for slaughter here in big ramshackle trucks, cargoes of misery, that bump along the patched and at times defective autoroute to Abidjan, to the extensive abattoir area near the docks. And there in trampled and vile black earth these noble creatures, still with dignity, await their destiny in the smell of death, with sometimes a calf, all alone, without a mother, finding comfort of a sort in sleep, a little brown circle on the dirty ground, together with the beautiful goats and sheep assembled for killing. The ground around
the abattoir goes on and on. When sights like this meet the eyes of simple people every day there can be no idea of humanity, no idea of grandeur. (213)

His love and concern for animals do not end there. He describes the people of Gabon as highly superstitious and relates their life to the mystic nature of forest. He says that he has read in a government magazine that a million animals are killed in Gabon every year. One cannot be blamed if one finds it an exaggeration.

In the last part of the chapter on Uganda, Naipaul sees children walking home at the end of a school day and comments with typical Naipaulian pessimism that: “Education and school uniforms, giving an illusion of possibility, was easy; much harder was the creation of a proper economy” (79). He further adds that: “there would be no jobs for most of the children we could see- some dawdling on the way home now, killing time in spite of the heat” (75). Naipaul could have addressed such social issues well and found the genuine reasons for the deplorable social conditions of these people. But he never makes an honest inquiry into why prosperity eluded much of Africa since independence. Instead, he seems to be a chap on safari to see the pagan people of these countries as the best
wild life on the continent. Nobody questions his sympathy with the dumb animals. But what is questioned is his indifference to addressing the socio-political reasons and colonial and neocolonial influence that lead people of the continent to such a state of darkness. Where does his sympathy lie with? With the dumb animals portrayed in his texts, or with the people who are made worse than animals by their colonial masters?

Naipaul is always controversial for his outlandish statement about the garbage, dirt and squalor of the places he has visited. As examined in the second chapter on India, he seems to be very serious and aggressive in the depiction of garbage and squalor in African countries in an exasperated tone. Possibly, the most overused word in the book is ‘garbage’ and Naipaul looks obsessed with the word. There is a repeated reference to the word in page 140 and 141. He sees garbage everywhere in the African countries and is enraged by the devastated and littered landscapes. He blames the people and condemns them for their utter indifference to filth and dirt. Thus he expresses his contempt: “Hidden from the cathedral and its gardens were moraines of garbage that lay in all the streets of the town. Africa reclaiming its own”. (206). It is with a westerner’s mind, that he depicts the backwardness of a community. He is rude, irked and quite dry in his observations.
Naipaul moves onto Nigeria to explore the land and study the history of Lagos which had been Portuguese before it was British. He admires the spirit of adventure the Portuguese had shown when they voyaged to this far-off land in spite of extreme heat of the desolate shore and hostile wave. He spends time getting to the bottom of Mumbo Jumbo, the fictitious character that dreadfully inspires and influences the Nigerian society. He sees sorcery everywhere in the country. To him, the Nigerians do not deserve a diplomatic passport which is ‘almost a fetish’. He writes thus:

Nigerians have their own idea of status. They make sport with things that other people might take seriously; and a diplomatic passport with its many immunities, was one of the toys that had come to them with independence and statehood. To possess a toy like that, almost a fetish, sorted the men from the boys, and important people jostled with one another for the ennoblement. (81-82)

He feels his hotel room quite unsatisfactory and the people intolerable. He feels tired and tetchy, whining about being overcharged and exploited by the guides and bad hotels. He digs at the people of Nigeria, commenting on the “Nigerian mindset, the side that fell down a deep well into ancient beliefs
and magic, the side that resisted rationality” (92). So he feels the Nigerian society irrational. This argument of Naipaul seems to be in sharp contrast to the views of the native writers of Africa, especially the Nigerian writers Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka who take to a resistant writing in favour of the native people. Naipaul and Achebe are poles apart in their treatment of their land and its people. Naipaul is seen standing two generations away from his home soil while Achebe is strongly and deeply rooted in his homeland. Naipaul shows allegiance only to his vision but Achebe is fiercely African to the core. While Naipaul sees ‘half – made’ societies in Africa and Caribbean, Achebe seeks to show his readers that Africa has a glorious past they should be proud of and that is very much retrievable.

Achebe’s famous novel *Things Fall Apart* explores meticulously the cultural and social patterns of the Igbo society of Nigeria. He portrays this society with all its myths, legends, beliefs, customs and superstitions deeply rooted in the consciousness of the people. Achebe says that the Igbos of Nigeria, though a tribal society, are bound by centuries- old laws of right and wrong, good and evil. They are a people who lived in harmony with nature. They have their social and cultural systems bound by their beliefs and superstitions. Their daily life was controlled and influenced by the belief in gods and goddesses. But the colonists have disdained this
culture and popularised a myth that the native people are devoid of values and have no ethics in life. Fanon has elaborated it as follows:

As if to show the totalitarian character or colonial exploitation the settler pains the native as a sort of quintessence of evil. Native society is not simply described as a society lacking in values. It is not enough for the colonist to affirm that those values have disappeared from, or still better never existed in, the colonial world. The native is declared insensible to ethics; he represents not only the absence of values but also the negation of values. He is let us dare to admit, the enemy of values and he is in this sense absolute evil. (32)

Achebe deconstructs this myth popularized by the colonists by proving that a society and culture did exist in Africa even before the arrival of the colonial masters. The West always claimed the onus of transforming and humanizing the so called “animals” of Africa and bringing enlightenment to their world. They justified their actions on the grounds of transforming brutes, subhuman creatures into man, though it was an act of violence. They uprooted the traditions, religion and language of these
people who, according to Achebe, had a society with their own values, traditions, customs, beliefs and superstitions. There was a denial of their history through which they undermined the voice and identity of these people. The denial, deception and disruption of history paved the way for the colonised people’s vulnerability to be racially branded, labelled, and stereotyped. Colonialist literature acted as a key tool to achieve the colonizer’s object of essentialising the colonized and reducing them to a state of inferiority. Achebe realised that colonial texts had to be read in a ‘different’ light because they had the tendency to dehumanise the Africans.

A number of rich and ancient societies flourished in Africa even before the arrival of the Europeans in the African coast. Though non-literate, they had great confidence, coherence, moral and artistic vigor. Basil Davidson, in *Black Mother: Africa and Atlantic Trade* has given the impressions of the early Portuguese travellers to the Congo where they felt things quite strange and surprising rather than inviting contempt or mystery. Davidson writes:

> They ran into many surprising beliefs and superstitions, but few or none that seemed more disconcerting than others they could find at home. Victorious Congolese armies tended to see signs and ghostly symbols in the sky, yet there was
nothing out of the way in that. The Portuguese themselves regularly saw angels, and so of course did other Europeans. More often than not they found it easy to accept the peoples of the Congo as natural equals and allies. (137)

Davidson adds more about the art and sculpture of West African city of Benin and the cultural richness of the place. He continues writing that: “the west African city of Benin, whose name belongs to some of the finest surviving sculptural artifacts in the world, was regarded by the Dutch visitor in 1602 as a great city, its dwellings, court and environment quite fairly compared with those of Amsterdam” (137). Walder corroborates the argument of Davidson by upholding the view that the Third World nations surpass Europe in many ways. He writes:

Viewing the early colonial past through the lens of later, predominantly Western, writings obscures the existence in those civilizations and empires in south America, Asia, Africa and in the Arab world which flourished and often surpassed Europe in various ways until at least the 16th C and sometimes later. (27)

Though Naipaul is eloquent about the intellectual depletion of Africans in general, he finds exemptions in some cases. In the chapter on
the West African state of Ghana, he approves of Kojo, an Ashanti aristocrat whose boys go to Eton. Richmond, who is working as his guide in Ghana, is presented as rational and analytical, the traits Naipaul assumes had to “come down to him from the Danish ancestor, who might have been an engineer or a military man or an administrator, a man living by logic, full of internal resources” (178). Naipaul uses Richmond as his mouth piece to express his colonial visions. He refers to the enlightening exercise of the Christian church in a dark nation immersed in ignorance. He quotes Richmond's words endorsing his colonial perspectives: “It is a Passionate statement. Being born in Africa is like being born in ignorance”, and “That is why I say the white man bad as he was, brought enlightenment” (179). This is a fine example of the colonial attitude of the writers from the West and how they represent the Third world. Fanon puts it rightly:

    The settler makes history; his life is an epoch, an Odyssey. He is the absolute beginning. This land was created by us; he is the unceasing cause; ‘If we leave, all is lost, and the country will go back to the Middle Ages. (39-40)

The oppressor starts a process of cultural colonisation which leads to cultural domination, exploitation and pillage. Wole Soyinka, the Nigerian
novelist, also addresses the issues of the Africans from a native writer’s perspectives and observes that the situation in the African countries needs a double retrieval “first from the colonial deniers of their past but also from the black neocolonial deniers of their immediate Past and Present” (114). While the native writers of Africa attempt to retrieve their race and recover what has been denigrated by the colonial domination and coloured by Eurocentric biases, Naipaul takes a very contradictory stance. Though a Third World intellectual, he represents the first world.

Naipaul makes reference to the cultural conflict between South Nigeria and North Nigeria on the basis of religion. The south is Christian and north is Muslim. He says that all the intellectual life of the country has been split into Christian and Muslim and there is an intellectual conflict between the north and the south. In the Muslim north, there is the story of “the children that are now unceasingly produced by wives and concubines, boom or no boom, have no future, except buying or hiring or leasing motorcycles, to add to city’s okada force” (141). They are the products of multiple marriages and many concubines. The picture of the Muslim North Africa is presented as a land of polygamy, concubines, prostitution, slaves, eunuchs and illiterate children destined to ‘shine shoes’. But the South is refined and cultured, thanks to the influence of the West bestowed with its
Christian missionaries and universal civilization. Fanon has very obviously made reference to this division of Africa into Black and White – Africa south of the Sahara and Africa north of the Sahara. The South is antipodes to the north in cultural and intellectual matters on the basis of colour and the colonial influence. Of course, a cleavage has been created between the Africa of white and black. Fanon writes thus:

Black Africa is looked on as a region that is inert, brutal, uncivilized, in a word, savage. There, all day long you may hear unpleasant remarks about veiled women, polygamy and the supposed disdain the Arabs have for the feminine sex.

(130)

Selwyn Cudjoe in his book *V.S. Naipaul: A Materialist Reading* analyses Naipaul’s inclination to approach the social problems of the marginalized society in an entirely European view of history. He argues that Naipaul is not politically neutral and writes from the ideological position of the West. He relies chiefly on European accounts of the world events and presents Europeans as the only authentic agent of history. Cudjoe says that Naipaul’s depiction of Africa and the Blacks is unsympathetic and unconvincing. His Western vision of history handicaps his ability to write the history of the continent otherwise. Cudjoe writes:
He was unable to penetrate deeply into the Negro culture and psyche and for that reason the African remained unreal, residing only within Naipaul’s imagination. Because Naipaul was unable to locate the African in his real social world, he was unable to reveal him as a fully constituted colonial subject. As a consequence, his work, particularly as it relates to the African person, is of limited value. (119)

Naipaul finds in Africa no signs of progress or enlightenment. Instead, he finds only more evidence of barbarism and human rapacity. The land is full of superstitions and “cruelty which is hard for the visitor to bear” (212). He finds Africa a struggle. The people are rendered less than human and their history is presented as a matter of war, disease or bad magic. He travels with a particular mindset, the mind of a misanthrope. He skims the surface in his investigation of traditional African religion. He seems to have conducted no scholarly research and interviewed no experts, relying instead on anecdotal evidence taken from literary and political operatives and a few reputed and urbanized holy men, tribal chiefs and witchdoctors. The literary world has acknowledged him as a consummate author and lofty intellectual with great craft. But his depiction of the Third World is quite unsympathetic and so unacceptable to the readers of these
nations. The readers cannot be blamed if they see Naipaul as a tool of the West in his depiction of the Third World nations with corrosive disdain and derision. Ngugi wa Thiong, the veteran novelist of Kenya writes in the introduction to his book *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Languages in African Literature*: “The effect of a cultural bomb is to annihilate a people’s belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage and struggle, in their unity and ultimately in themselves” (xi).

Naipaul makes several references to Joseph Conrad and invokes the ‘heart of darkness’ mythology especially in the chapter on South Africa where he writes about Rian Milan and Winnie Mandela. Conrad is the only writer Naipaul acknowledges as his precursor and he mentions about the influence of Conrad and his *Heart of Darkness* on him. Critics draw many parallels between Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* and Naipaul’s early fictions on Africa, *In a Free State* (1971) and *A Bend in the River* (1979). Africa appears again in his latest novel *Half a Life* (2001). It is pointed out that Naipaul is influenced by Conrad in the depiction of Africa in the present text also. Like Conrad, he presents the continent as a ‘threatening place’ of darkness that resists rationality. He refers to Conrad’s special place in the
making of him as a writer in the essay *Conrad’s Darkness*. He sees Conrad as a writer who foresaw this world sixty years ago. Naipaul writes:

“Conrad’s value to me is that he is some one who sixty to seventy years ago meditated on my world, a world I recognize today. I feel this about no other writer of the century” (60). J.M. Coetzee supports this argument and states: “Joseph Conrad is one of Naipaul’s masters. For good or ill, Naipaul’s Africa comes out of *Heart of Darkness*” (10). But Achebe is seen attacking Conrad in an essay published in 1975. He believes that: “a very highly praised book like *Heart of Darkness* dehumanizes Africans and it is racist” (20). *Heart of Darkness* established the tradition of postulating ‘the other world’ antithetical to Europe. Naipaul acts as the present day heir to Conrad’s legacy, a brown heir who is seen taking such a position. He also presents Africa as the ‘other world’, the antithesis of the European one and therefore of civilization.

*The Middle Passage* is Naipaul’s travel book on the Caribbean for which the government of Trinidad officially commissioned him. He was offered a grant to return to Trinidad and write a book about the Caribbean by Eric Williams, the head of the government. It is Naipaul’s first travel book in which he adopts the manner of a Victorian travel writer and creates the
portrait of Trinidad and the Caribbean societies of four adjacent countries, British Guyana, Surinam, Martinique and Jamaica. He focuses on the racial prejudices and conflicts of the societies, offers dismissive summaries of the region’s history and criticises the existing culture. He comes down heavily on the country of his origin. The Caribbean, more than any other region, has suffered in a devastating manner from colonial exploitation, oppression and cultural marginalisation. Bill Ashcroft et al. argue in *The Empire Writes Back* that: “in the Caribbean, the European imperial enterprise ensured that the worst features of colonialism throughout the globe would all be combined in one region” (145). The Caribbean had a history of nearly six hundred years of displacement and dislocation from the time of Columbus’ discovery of Hispaniola in 1492 to the 1960s.

Naipaul expresses his fear and apprehension that Trinidad is disintegrating and he wants to escape from such a country. As the ship Francisco Bobadilla carrying him from England to Trinidad docks in Port of Spain, he begins to feel “the old fear of Trinidad” (35) together with the resentment of the steel bands that “used to be regarded as the high manifestation of West Indian Culture, and it was a sound I detested” (34).
He expresses his anguish and asks: “How can the history of the West Indian futility be written? What tone shall the historian adopt?” (20). His need to escape is further demonstrated when he describes the West Indian brutality in the following words:

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. (20)

Naipaul’s argument serves the interest of the Western intelligentsia who want to make a chasm between the ‘self’ and the ‘other’ and who want to adopt the Western values as the panacea for all the maladies the ‘wretched of the earth’ confronts. He seems to believe that to stay with his community is to be taken with them to destruction. He is disgusted with a society like Trinidad which denies heroes like him. He adds:

I knew Trinidad to be unimportant, uncreative, cynical. The only professions were those of law and medicine, because there was no need for any other, and the most successful people were commission agents, bank managers and members of the distributive trades. Power was recognized but dignity was allowed to no one. Every person of eminence
was held to be crooked and contemptible. We lived in a society which denied itself heroes. (35)

Many critics have commented on Naipaul’s negative tone and cynical approach to the land of his origin. One among is Phil Langran who makes reference to Naipaul’s comments on the intellectual inferiority of the Caribbean island and the unimportance of a people who are pictured as ‘uncreative’ and ‘cynical’. Langran in an article in The Literary Criterion writes:

These comments begin to establish a persona that will become increasingly familiar in his non-fiction. This is distinguished by the expression of unpalatable ‘truths’, the appeals to Eurocentric notions of history, the discussion of circumstances in which the narrator (in Trinidad and India) has been implicated, and an overwhelmingly negative tone. The key phrase in the context is ‘the need to escape’, to acquire and maintain a sense of detachment in the face of Trinidad’s ‘threat of failure’. (48-49)

Naipaul’s ‘unbelongingness’ differentiates him from his contemporary postcolonial writers like George Lamming, Derek Walcott,
Achebe etc. Unlike his contemporaries, Naipaul chooses to focus on the intellectual poverty and the socio-cultural inferiority of the ex-colonies to the Western World. He asserts that the West Indian lives “in a borrowed culture” (64), and feels Trinidad to be too unimportant and a land without a history. He writes that: “the England of 1914 was the England of yesterday, the Trinidad of 1914 belonged to the dark ages” (36). He is ashamed of his birth in Trinidad which, he considers is a barbaric and backward place. He opens his mind in this regard in an interview to Hamilton in 1971: “I was eighteen when I came (to London) and in a way I have grown up here. I’ve had my second childhood, a second becoming aware of the world” (14). He has provoked the readers and writers of the world with more stinging words about Trinidad. He tells James Atlas: “If you are from Trinidad, you want to get away. You can’t write if you are from bush” (37-8). But the irony is that Naipaul draws themes for his later works from the very country he has escaped in a ‘threat of failure’. *The Mimic Men* (1967), *The Loss of ElDorado* (1969) *Finding the centre* (1984), *The Enigma of Arrival* (1987) and *A way in the World* (1994) are all fictional and non-fictional accounts of Trinidad. He finds London the best place to live in and write in, but not the place to write about. In an article in *The Times Literary Supplement*, 15 August 1958, he writes:
And yet I like London. For all the reasons I have given, it is the best place to write in. The problem for me is that it is not a place I can write about. Not yet. Unless I am able to refresh myself by travel- I fear that living here will eventually lead to my own sterility; and I may have to look for another job. (24)

Patrick French’s authorized biography of Naipaul, *The World Is What It Is* (the title taken from Naipaul’s masterpiece novel *A Bend in the River*) gives an interesting account of the latter’s cynical attitude to Trinidad and other Caribbean. The book presents Naipaul as a cold-blooded egomaniacal genius who ended up emotionally killing the people who loved him. There are many references in the book about the great writer’s reluctance to be known in the name of a country that gave him birth. Naipaul’s very being is clearly exposed in French’s astonishing and extraordinary biography with embarrassing candour. When Naipaul heard about the Nobel committee’s decision to award him the prize, he put out a statement that surprised all. To quote the words of French in the introduction of his biography:

Naipaul accepted and put out a statement that the Nobel was ‘a great tribute to both England, my home and India, the home of my ancestors’. There was no mention of Trinidad. Asked
why not, he said it might ‘encumber the tribute’ which
provoked the Bombardian writer George Lamming. (XII)

French makes a reference to an interview of Naipaul with
Bernard Levin in which he again disowns his homeland. French puts it as
follows: “You were born in Trinidad? Bernad Levin asked in an interview
in 1983. ‘I was born there, yes,’ came the reply, I thought it was a great
mistake” (XV). Trinidad is not the only place he detests. The region as a
whole comes under his fierce and harsh criticism that it is a land without a
glorious past to be cherished. So he finds the journey a futile exercise and
writes thus:

For nothing was created in the British West Indies, no
civilization as in Spanish America, no great revolution as in
Haiti, or the American colonies. There were only plantations,
prosperity, decline, neglect: the size of the islands called for
nothing else. (19)

Naipaul is more blunt and critical in the description of the emigrant
Jamaica. He has employed cynicism and darker shades of irony to depict
the social backwardness of the country. He is pessimistic in the portrayal
of the country as he has done in the case of India. He is found obsessed
with the slums and dumps and sarcastically comments:
To see the Jamaica of the emigrants you have to look. And once you start looking, you can see nothing else. The slums of Kingston are beyond description. Even the camera glamorizes them, except in shots taken from the air: Hovels of board and cardboard and canvas and tin lie chocked together on damp rubbish dumps behind which the sun sets in mocking splendor. (224)

There might be elements of truth in the presentation. But what is distressing is the tone he employs.

Naipaul’s anti-Caribbean stance and his much controversial view that Caribbeans are ‘half made societies’ have been questioned by the celebrated West Indian writers George Lamming and Derek Walcott. Lamming and Naipaul - both alienated writers- have gone through similar experiences in the West Indies. Both have explored the history of the West Indies but their views are diametrically opposite. Lamming uses fiction as a tool of revenge against the vices of the colonial power and pursues the rebuilding of the native’s cultural image in which he is deeply rooted. He believes that a denial of their history will lead to the loss of identity and so it should be retrieved. Naipaul, on the other hand, does not want to be associated with his homeland and its history. In *The Overcrowded Barraccon*, a collection
of essays interpreting the failure of the former colonies, Naipaul dismisses the Caribbean as “the Third World’s third world” (250).

Walcott also dismisses Naipaul’s negative portrayal of the Caribbeans and his cynical views, that Caribbea is a barren land devoid of achievement and creation, by counteracting that: “if there was nothing, there was everything to be made. With this prodigious ambition one began” (4). He criticises Naipaul for creating a myth of himself as a self-made creature from an environment with no cultural support. Walcott has his own myth in which Caribbea is a culturally rich place for a writer. But Naipaul feels the importance of being British rather than part of an ‘uncreative’ and ‘unimportant’ world. He writes in *An Area of Darkness*:

> Trinidad was a British colony, but every child knows that we were only a dot on the map of the world, and it was therefore important to be British, that at least anchored us within a wide system. It was a system which we did not find oppressive. (128)

He makes the same argument in *The Middle Passage* also where he finds a contrast between England and Trinidad that: “Trinidad was too unimportant and we could never be convinced of the value of reading the history of a
place which was, as everyone said, only a dot on the map of the world” (36). Cudjoe’s remark that Naipaul continues writing against the Trinidadian Society which is to him a world “permeated by fear; deceit and treachery” (124) is quite relevant in this context.

In *The Middle Passage*, Naipaul gives a quotation from James Anthony Froud’s *The English in the West Indies* (1887) which claims that the West Indian society has no definite purpose to serve and has never assumed any particularly noble aspect. Naipaul seems to accept and approve of Froude’s views of the West Indies. Other critics like Fawzia Musthafa and Rob Nixon have heavily come down on Naipaul for his portrayal of the Caribbean society as a true successor of Froude, Anthony Trollope, and Charles Kingsley. He is criticised as a brown reactionary who tries to be British. Rob Nixon, a South African based at Columbia, finds Naipaul taking a repetition of his early position in all his works. Nixon points out that Naipaul has drawn an alarming, new distinction between those, who have ‘some’ claim upon ‘civilization’ like himself and those who do not have. He calls Naipaul a writer who “begrudges the passing of black servility” (128).

Homi K. Bhabha analyses Naipaul’s journey from his homeland to other Third World nations and finds that he undertakes such journeys with a
colonial mindset. All his works, whether fiction or non-fiction, are presented as representing the people in the margin and analysing the people of ex-colonial societies in a dispassionate manner. But he is a writer completely bereft of all human sympathy. Bhabha puts it rightly:

The values that such a perspective generates for his own work, and for the once colonized world it chooses to represent and evaluate, are visible in the hideous panorama that some of his titles provide: *The Loss of Eldorado*, *The Mimic Men*, *An Area of Darkness*, *A Wounded Civilization*, *The Overcrowded Barraccon*. (152)