3. History, Autobiography and Ethnography:

Naipaul’s Use of the Travelogue

3.1. Travelling to Translate: The Travel Writer as an Ethnographic Commentator

The applicability and extension of the label of “ethnographer” to the contemporary travel writer may no longer be relevant—given, the virtual erasure of homogeneous communities and the subsequent de-mystification of the romantic idea of the “pure native”—but the role of the travel writer as an ethnographic commentator still continues to be significant for the purpose of analysing cultures. This is especially true of the kind of travel writing that evinces a shift from the directness of geographical exploration in favour of a more introspective position. For instance, in Naipaul’s India trilogy, the geographical setting is often peripheral—particularly, when it is made to serve as a backdrop for the discursive construction of authorial subjectivity. This is also to assert—following James Clifford in a different context, though—that “location” in the India trilogy is “an itinerary rather than a bounded site—a series of encounters and translations” (Routes 11).

It must be remembered that Naipaul’s journey to India in the latter half of the twentieth century is founded on the historical facticity of the large scale labour migrations from Asia to the New World that took place in the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries. For had his forebears not emigrated to Trinidad to work on the plantation farms of the Caribbean, the unique circumstance shaping the logic of his inquiries in India would have absented itself from his travels in the subcontinent a little over half a century later. Consequently, and as the India trilogy further confirms, the “decoding” of the ancestral land (India) is undertaken in the context of
specific histories (labour migration; the establishment of the Indian Diaspora in the Caribbean) and their respective courses of development. While it is interesting to note that Naipaul’s triptych study of India is inflected by elements of travel writing, history, autobiography and anthropology, the subject of cultural translation—which is inextricably tied to the method of travel writing—seems, albeit predictably, to problematize representation. It is in relation to the challenges posed by cultural translation that this section (primarily) seeks to examine the liaison between travel writing and the anthropological discourse or, more specifically, that between travel writing and ethnographical writing. While Naipaul’s methodology in the India trilogy cannot be comprehensively equated with that of the ethnographer’s fieldwork, this section seeks to touch upon some points of convergence which underscore Naipaul’s use of ethnographic techniques within the discourse of travel writing. However, his espousal of these techniques is less obvious than, say, those evinced by white, European anthropologists whose racial difference from the (veritably non-white) “objects” of their inquiry not only legitimates their authority as the progenitors of knowledge about the (essentially non-white) Other but also reinforces the notion of anthropology’s provenance in the academe of the West.

Just like the ethnographer who, travels to the “field site” in order to study localized societies of “natives,” the travel writer—in essence—travels to and writes about sites of cultural encounters—raising, in the process, important questions about some of the commonest assumptions pertaining to social existence. Concomitantly, approaching the experience of travel from a perspective similar to that of the ethnographer’s would be to both acknowledge the complexities inherent in the experiences of “dwelling” and “displacement” as well as to critically examine the cultural effects of movement and stasis. For instance, Naipaul’s journey to the land of his forebears can, justifiably, be read in connection to the history and effects of (European)
colonialism and imperialism and the resultant socio-cultural structures of such formidable historical forces. Not only is Naipaul concerned with highlighting the cultural effects of colonialism on India and its people in his India trilogy, but also (perhaps, with a greater urgency) the synergistic experiences of displacement and attachment transforming and rearticulating postcolonial futures. On the other hand, to the modern ethnographer—a figure well-represented by Amitav Ghosh (as a young ethnographer doing his research in the Egyptian villages of Lataifa and Nashawy in the early 1980-s)—the field site comprises a space of continual cultural encounters—a space marked as much by dwelling as travelling. Such space, as the ethnographer’s study would likely yield—given, the interconnectedness of the (post)modern experience—is ambivalent, heterogeneous, just as the space that the traveller travels in and through is, in its being a complex concatenation of routes and experiences. Therefore, instead of taxonomies, theories and pronouncements (reminiscent of traditional methodologies of travel and anthropological research), the discursive practices of travel/travel writing and ethnography—in their most earnest endeavours—seem to offer what one may broadly call cultural translations. So, to consider the traveller/travel writer as an ethnographic commentator is also to emphasise his role as a cultural translator. Such a view is principally based on two primary theoretical positions: that “the culture of a people is an ensemble of texts” (Geertz 452) and that it is possible to “read” (or, decode or, decipher) forms of culture through representational/translational practices.

The convergence of travel and ethnography can be further illustrated through the example of Amitav Ghosh’s 1992 book, *In An Antique Land* which is (tellingly) subtitled, “History in the Guise of a Traveler’s Tale.” The book, which is a curious amalgam of history, travel writing, ethnography and autobiography, fuses ethnographic research (undertaken in the two Egyptian
villages mentioned above) with the imaginative reconstruction of a twelfth century Jewish trader (Ben Yiju) and his slave’s ("the slave of Ms. H.6") lives from extant documents found in the Cairo Geniza. But, what is of foremost concern in the current context is the fact that Ghosh’s book is founded on travel—Ben Yiju, a medieval Jewish merchant (he is “originally of Tunisia, who had gone to India by way of Egypt, as a trader, and had spent seventeen years there” (In An Antique Land 19)), travels to India; his slave, Bomma, to Egypt. So does Ghosh, the writer, who is from India and who travels to Egypt (via England) to conduct his research. The translation of cultures is common to both travel and ethnography—both the traveller/travel writer as well as the anthropologist/ethnographer travelling to/writing about/researching on cultures/societies other than their own. Apart from linguistic issues which, often pose a veritable challenge to the act of translation (as Ghosh obviously faces in Egypt and Naipaul, if only partially, in India—not being “native” to Egypt and India, respectively), interpreting “modes of thought” (see Lienhardt) is essentially the most formidable challenge facing the ethnographer/travel writer. Sometimes, and as Ghosh’s evocative (if somewhat hostile) conversation with the “Imam” (of the Egyptian village where he was staying at the time) clearly demonstrates, these “modes of thought” often lead to unexpected discoveries. While amidst his palpably “alien” subject, Ghosh—by way of an angry confrontation with the Imam—comes to realize that “(w)e were both travelling, he and I: we were travelling in the West” (236; emphasis added). While on the surface, this admission

---

96 This is, however, a relatively modern phenomenon. While it is no longer normative to ignore the “social context” underpinning the interactions between the itinerant writer/researcher and his “alien” subject(s), according to John Beattie (1964): “For the earlier anthropologists problems about the modes of thought of so-called “primitives” scarcely arose with any complexity. It was easy for the Victorians to assume that such thinking as they did was simple and “childish” (this was one of their favourite adjectives); a very inferior version of their own” (65). Understandably, Naipaul’s use of terms such as, “simple” or “half-made” to depict Third World societies—an aspect of his nonfiction that is memorably criticized by Robert Nixon (1992)—problematizes the issue of cultural translation. While Naipaul’s treatment of the Third World remains a contentious issue with critics, his adoption of a purportedly Victorian rhetoric—at least, in places—does seem to tilt the balance in favour of the view that his interpretation of the so-called Third World betrays strong Eurocentric affinities.
seems to speak of the impacts of colonialism and imperialism on indigenous societies, at a deeper level, it goes on to confirm the pervasiveness of Western paradigms of knowledge in the non-West. What is particularly significant in this context is the ethnographer’s realization of an “objective” truth about himself through a systematic study of the Other. This personal element to an otherwise objective study of an indigenous society is also observable in Naipaul’s use of the travelogue in the Indian context. For instance, of his Indian experience, Naipaul writes in AD:

“And in India I was to see that so many of the things which the newer and now perhaps truer side of my nature kicked against—the smugness, as it seemed to me, the imperviousness to criticism, the refusal to see, the double-talk and double-think—had an answer in that side of myself which I had thought buried and which India revived as a faint memory” (30-31).

The following section purports to locate Naipaul’s writings on India in space and time which is also to say that it attempts to attribute to Naipaul’s travel account(s) on India a historical perspective. In doing so, it intends to demonstrate how Naipaul’s representation of India can be meaningfully explicated in terms of a web of relationships and how the issues of identity, homelessness and historical consciousness have come to evolve as functions of such interrelationships.

---

97 This includes Ghosh himself as both men (Ghosh and the Imam) end up ceding their preeminence only to the West. Both men—through their spontaneous acceptance of the superiority of Western technology—seem to confirm the essentially imperialistic view noted by Michael Adas (1989): “Those involved in the colonies and intellectuals who dealt with colonial issues came to view scientific and technological achievements not only as the key attributes that set Europe off from all other civilizations, past and present, but as the most meaningful gauges by which non-Western societies might be evaluated, classified, and ranked” (144).

98 In the Introduction to his Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco (1977), anthropologist Paul Rabinow describes the objective of his book as “the comprehension of the self by the detour of the comprehension of the other” (ix). Rabinow’s insight is particularly relevant here as it can be used to emphasise the latent link between travel (writing) and ethnography.
3.2. Travel Writing and Indentured Labour: The “New Helots” of the Caribbean

The vision of a tall-masted ship, at sail on the ocean, came to Deeti on an otherwise ordinary day, but she knew instantly that the apparition was a sign of destiny, for she had never seen such a vessel before, not even in a dream: how could she have, living as she did in northern Bihar, four hundred miles from the coast? Her village was so far inland that the sea seemed as distant as the netherworld: it was the chasm of darkness where the holy Ganga disappeared into the Kala-Pani, ‘the Black Water’. (Sea of Poppies 3)

The opening lines of Amitav Ghosh’s novel Sea of Poppies (2008) describing Deeti’s vision of what is later revealed to be the Ibis (a former “blackbirder” or slave ship) are, with certain qualifications, evocative of that moment in which individuals, either poor or desperate (or both), soon to be indentured as farmhands in faraway (European) colonies in the nineteenth century, encountered the first premonitory vision of the fateful passage that awaited them. Biographical sources reveal that Naipaul’s father, Seepersad was born into a family of agricultural labourers from India and that Deeti’s vision of the Ibis may as well have, in one way or the other, been the sight confronting Naipaul’s great-grandmother when she stood at the dock of Calcutta with her infant son awaiting her passage to the Caribbean:

Family tradition suggests that his [Seepersad's] grandmother had brought his father to Trinidad in the 1870s as a baby, fleeing disgrace or abandonment in the area around Ayodhya. She said that she came from a Brahmin family with the name of Parain, Parray or Panday. The boy, known as Naipaul Maharaj, was

---

Naipaul’s maternal grandfather Capildeo Maharaj—his name recorded as Kopil in the ledger of the Protector of Immigrants—reached Trinidad (or “Chinitat” in Hindi—a linguistic transposition (probably) alluding to Trinidad’s sugar plantations, sugar in Hindi being “chini” or “cheeni”) from Calcutta in 1894. He arrived in Nelson Island off Port of Spain in the ship *Hereford*, a blackbirder, loaded with passengers—mostly Hindu—to be indentured as a plantation worker in one of the local sugar estates. The hard labour broke Kopil, twenty-one at the time, but he was lucky to have been bailed out from the indenture system by an Indian overseer who took pity on his condition. Kopil, a Brahmin, could read the scriptures and the overseer, thinking that this skill could be put to much better use given the burgeoning Hindu population in Trinidad at the time, gave Kopil a new lease of life: he got the young Brahmin married to his daughter, Soogee and entrusted the couple with the responsibility of managing a general store owned by him. Kopil or Capildeo Maharaj had hidden his background initially, acting on the advice of his recruiter in India who warned him that any disclosure of his “upper caste” origin would seriously jeopardize his acceptability as a labourer. Interestingly, Robin Cohen (1997) likewise alludes to this aspect of identity concealment among indentured workers: “A common in-group joke among contemporary Indo-Trinidadians is that while there were no Brahmins when the ships set out from Calcutta, by the time they arrived in Port of Spain (Trinidad) several gentlemen had assumed a puffed-up, priestly mien” (64).

---

100 Recruiters (of indentured labourers) in India allured the poor and the desperate seeking employment or emigration with stories about the Caribbean and how plantation workers there were rewarded generously for “sifting sugar.” For more on this, see French (2008); Winer (2009).
Slavery was officially abolished across the British Empire in 1834, but to keep the plantation economy running in the colonies, the white planters of the West Indies started importing cheap labour for the local sugarcane estates from India. These labourers—hopelessly destitute, fleeing either death from starvation, monumental debts or other exigencies at home—were shipped abroad by “recruiters” to faraway tropical plantations to be indentured as farmhands or “coolies.” The system of indentured labour was slightly better than slavery inasmuch as the labourers were indentured only for a fixed period of time after the expiry of which they could either choose to return to their own country or accept a meagre allowance of land from the government of Trinidad and Tobago and settle in the island. Naipaul’s forebears stayed back. However, for the East Indians, who chose to settle in the island after the expiry of their indenture, life was far from promising. The island’s black majority was an unflagging and formidable threat who came to regard the East Indians as the “new slave,” was hostile to them and resented their servility to the plantation owners. The East Indians, on the other hand, were fiercely protective of their faith and ethnicity; they hardly married outside their community and created in faraway Trinidad what may as well be called a “miniature India”—a poor but faithful replica of their homeland in a foreign setting. It was in such a homogeneous and “closed” community that Naipaul was born—a society where everyone was foreign and the words “native” and “indigenous” had very little relevance. Of such society, Cohen wrote: “Virtually everybody in the Caribbean came from somewhere else—the African slaves from West Africa, the white settlers, planters and administrators from Europe, the indentured workers from India and the traders from the Middle East” (124).

101 Cohen (1997) quotes Bhikhu Parekh to thus summarize the nature of indenture: “The indentured worker ‘lived on the plantation which he was forbidden to leave without a pass, worked unlimited hours, was barred from taking any other employment, and in case of misconduct subjected to financial penalty and physical punishment. In return he received a basic pay, free accommodation, food rations, and a fully or partially paid return passage to India’” (64).
There is a distinct tendency to describe the nineteenth century labour movements as being the outcome of either coercion or individual choice (stemming from the desire for the general betterment of one's life). Hugh Tinker's *A New System of Slavery* (1974) that analyses at length the Indian labour migration overseas in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, describes the substitution of Indian indentured labourers for African slaves to be a coercive (rather than voluntary) imperial project. Similarly, Jan Breman's *Taming the Coolie Beast* (1989) identifies coercion as the edifice upon which the structure of the indentured labour system was founded. On the other hand, scholars such as, Peter Emmer and Anand Yang do seem to suggest that labour migrations, put simply, could be taken to be an entirely voluntary process encouraged by the emerging labour markets across the world and the increasing opportunities for social mobility. Tran Tu Binh's *The Red Earth* (translated into English in 1985) and Multatuli's (Eduard Douwes Dekker) *Max Havelaar: Or the Coffee Auctions of the Dutch Trading Company* (translated into English in 1868) document the exploitation and the brutalities of the (Dutch) colonists in the rubber and coffee plantations (respectively) of Indonesia. Both Tran Tu Binh and Multatuli’s critiques of the colonial order in the East Indies seem to acknowledge coercion, racial violence and exploitation as the cornerstones of the plantation economy.

---

102 In the Preface to his book (1989), Brenan writes: “during an investigation held in 1926 among factory workers in the industrial city of Surabaya (Eastern Java) it was found that blows and kicks were part of the normal management style” (xv). Commenting on the general condition of plantation workers or coolies in the Dutch plantations of Indonesia at the time, Brenan states that the relationship between the planter and the coolie was essentially founded on violence and that this aspect was representative of an extreme form of the lack of freedom of colonized labour under Dutch rule” (xv).


104 For more on this, see Yang’s *The Limited Raj: Agrarian Relations in Colonial India, Saran District, 1793-1920.* New Delhi: OUP, 1989.
Gaiutra Bahadur’s *Coolie Woman: The Odyssey of Indenture* (2013) shines a light on the repressed history of indentured women who made their journey from Calcutta to the Caribbean in the nineteenth and the first two decades of the twentieth centuries to work as coolies or labourers in the local plantations. Naipaul’s (paternal) great-grandmother seems to have made the same journey in the 1870s, having crossed the *Kala-Pani* (or the “black water”)\(^\text{105}\) with her infant son—Naipaul’s (paternal) grandfather. The structures and effects of the Indian labour migration of the nineteenth century cast a long, dark shadow over Naipaul’s work and although he never quite addresses the issue either directly or at length, it is felt to inform and shape some of his deepest convictions about colonial rule and relations. It is to the Indian/Hindu diaspora of the Caribbean that he owes his earliest impressions of India. And even though that India of his childhood—a place which he physically visits only in middle age—turns out to be primarily heterotopic in import, it is nonetheless a crucial starting point of the arduous structuring of its *Other*—the ancestral land: both strange and familiar; repugnant and righteous; amorphous and palpable.

The (cultural, social or political) conceptualization and perpetuation of the *Other* is an enactment of power relations. Such formulations—as I shall now demonstrate with the help of an example from the domain of visual arts (sculpture or installation art, in this particular instance)—encapsulate complex, often ambiguous meanings and most importantly, the histories of civilizations and peoples. The reason for drawing upon visual arts is quite simple: it is intended to counterpoint the conceptualization of the *Other* as achieved by and perpetuated through language. In other words, if one agrees with Foucault that there is no common form to seeing and

\(^{105}\) Crossing the sea, according to ancient Hindu customs and religious law, was tantamount to the loss of one’s caste or *varna*. Hence, it was considered fearsome by the Hindus since it effectively entailed the dissolution of one’s identity.
speaking and that this absence of isomorphism, in reality, facilitates meaning making rather than obstruct it (The Order of Things 10). Then it makes sense to investigate how images (or forms of seeing), like language (or forms of speaking), can work—albeit less obviously—as powerful narrational device.

Kara Walker’s (b.1969) imposing sculptural installation entitled A Subtlety: Or the Marvelous Sugar Baby, an Homage to the unpaid and overworked Artisans who have refined our Sweet tastes from the cane fields to the Kitchens of the New World on the Occasion of the demolition of the Domino Sugar Refining Plant (2014) conveys how forms of seeing can be made to take on totemic significance. The “artisans” of the title are none other than the “unpaid overworked” (African) slaves who were forced to work in sugar factories that produced processed sugar for the wealthy White population. The actual installation—a colossal Mammy of refined sugar (plastered over Styrofoam blocks)—is, at once, a caricature (of slavery in the antebellum South), a grotesquerie, a memorial and a “text” alluding to the Middle Passage; the histories of indenture labour in the New World, of economic exploitation, coercion and forced migrations across the Atlantic. Walker’s Subtlety, installed towards the far end of Domino—a derelict nineteenth-century sugar factory where raw sugarcane shipped from the Caribbean was processed and packaged (into refined sugar) for the consumption of the wealthy— resembled a

106 This idea is further developed in a subsequent section of this chapter.

107 Kara Walker (1969-) is a contemporary New York-based African-American visual artist whose black paper-cut silhouettes (a form of art she specializes in) centre around the themes of race, identity, violence, sexuality and gender.

108 Kara Walker’s massive installation ran from May 10 through July 6, 2014 at the former Domino Sugar factory, 317 Kent Avenue at South 1st Street, Williamsburg, Brooklyn, New York. Photographs of the installation (copyrighted images) are available for viewing on the Internet.

109 Subtleties were molded sugar sculptures often used as edible table decorations by the wealthy at a time when sugar was considered a luxury (and a food that only the rich could afford) in America. The origin of the term “subtlety” can be traced to medieval Europe where they were served as entremets in ornate royal banquets or feasts.
mammoth sphinx-like figure the long approach to which was studded with thirteen underage blackamoors, made of cast sugar, carrying large baskets of unrefined sugar or bunch of bananas. Pools of treacle, resulting from the ambient heat, formed at their feet, resembling blood—evoking disturbing memories of slavery, coercion and exploitation. The Mammy, crouched in a sphinx-like position, apart from the complex concatenation of allusions it invoked, was also deeply ironic: the black matriarch was sculpted in white—from a substance (i.e., refined sugar) symbolizing extreme exploitation, degradation and greed. Like the liquefied limbs of the slave boys that remind one of the depravity of the sugar trade—factory workers often lost their limbs while feeding sugarcane into large mills—Walker’s Subtlety is fraught with racial and historical entailments. It is a powerful historical and cultural icon, a staged art-spectacle that conveys decay by invoking grandeur; depravity by invoking refinement and scourge by invoking delectation. The brazen sexuality of the sphinx-like figure, exaggerated through the explicit detailing of its genitalia, gives prominence—surprisingly and at the same time—to its alterity and familiarity. While its apparent inscrutability and contortion add to its strangeness as an objet d’art, Walker’s emphasis on its sexuality appears to demolish the very sense of differentness that feeds and facilitates racial cataloguing. One may recall in this context the French artist Gustave Courbet’s (1819-77) provocative painting The Origin of the World (1866). Although Courbet’s

These were also known as “illusion food” or “pretend food” as they were cleverly engineered gourmet dishes that were aimed at surprising the guests (mainly because they were “designed to look like something else”). In her book, Food in Medieval Times (US: Greenwood, 2004), Melitta Weiss Adamson writes: “What medieval Europe did was to make such dishes an integral part of lavish banquets. In England these entertaining dishes were known as “sotelties,” literally “subtleties,” and in France as entremets. . . . Initially just simple dishes sent to the hall for guests to nibble on as they waited for the next course to arrive, the sotelties or entremets soon became substantially more elaborate and more playful, as cooks began to experiment with unusual colors and color combinations, edible building structures, making cooked food look raw and vice versa, live animals look dead and vice versa, making animals look and act like humans, inventing fabulous creatures, and assembling entire allegorical scenes” (73-74).

110 The painting entitled L’Origine du monde (The Origin of the World; current location: Musée d’Orsay, Paris) is an 1866 realist oil painting by Courbet, much criticized and indicted in its time for its explicit and anatomical depiction of the female sex organ. Courbet’s painting—provocative as it is and susceptible to various interpretations—can be said to depict the primordial “origin” of man, the very source of creation.
painting was considered by many both morally and artistically repugnant and an affront to the aesthetics of fine art, it purported to tell the tale of the primordial origin of man (and if one is allowed the liberty to extend the idea, of art). Similarly, the intensified sexuality of Kara Walker’s *Subtlety* identifies with the universal, undifferentiated and ecumenical origin of our species as mirrored in the prurient desire for the forbidden and the quintessential *Other*.

Turning back from the subject of visual arts, I shall now concentrate on analysing the extent to which the literature of fiction converges with and corresponds to the “literature of fact” (H. White, *Tropics of Discourse* 121). In other words, how does the art of the imaginative writer differ (if at all) from that of the historian? Does the literature of fiction counterpoint the literature of fact so much so that they (come to) represent purely opposed and opposite sensibilities? Given the fact that conventional historiography was not so long ago considered as literary art, it is worthwhile to examine the nature of the circumstances and the social processes that led to the consolidation of the ideological difference between fiction (as in literary art) and fact (as in historiography). According to Hayden White: “In order to understand this difference in historical thinking, it must be recognized that historiography took shape as a distinct scholarly discipline in the West in the nineteenth century against a background of profound hostility to all forms of myth” (*Tropics of Discourse* 123-24). Emphasising a similar predilection for fact over fiction, Joan-Pau Rubiés in his essay, “Travel Writing and Ethnography,” has attributed the rapid

---

111 Collins and Onians contend that the earliest representational images created by man (around 30,000 B.C. during the Aurignacian Period) found in the caves of Southern France are crude images of the female sex organ—the absent object of desire. See Desmond Collins and John Onians. “The Origins of Art.” *Art History* 1.1 (1978): 1-25.

112 “Prior to the French Revolution,” writes Hayden White, “historiography was conventionally regarded as a literary art. More specifically, it was regarded as a branch of rhetoric and its “fictive” nature generally recognized” (*Tropics of Discourse* 123).

113 See *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing* (242-59).
proliferation of (European) non-fictional travel writing throughout the Renaissance to a more or less generalized desire for useful information—a trend that can be seen as a precursor to the romantic idealization of authenticity in modern and postmodern cultures. One of the implications of this is the emergence and intensification of the perception that travel writing as a literary form is naturally committed to objectivism or realism and that, in this respect, its representative value derives from its conscious (or unconscious) attempts to de-fictionalize or demythologize that which it claims to represent. However, such a view is as susceptible to short-sightedness as was that of the nineteenth century historians who obstinately clung to the position that facticity alone was sufficient to produce authentic knowledge about peoples and civilizations. As the purpose of this section is also to examine the extent to which travel writing and history correspond with and inform each other, it consequently discusses Naipaul’s *The Loss of El Dorado* (1969) and *A Way in the World* (1994) with the objective of assessing the extent to which narratives of travel interact with and, in a sense, generate the histories of places they seek to describe, (de)fictionalize or represent differently. This, most certainly, transports one to the domain of historical travel writing—to the dialogic relationship between the travel writer and the history of the place he writes about—to the cultural processes that dictate the imagining and conceptualization of the Other as an epistemic category—to the travel writer/historian’s treatment of history as a function of his perception of strangeness and alterity. It is in relation to these ideas and, most importantly, to the cultural encrustations that inform Naipaul’s (travel) writings that this study seeks to analyse the complexities of historical consciousness of the traveller’s “I”. Just like historical discourse, the discourse of travel writing is a verbal structure—organized in the form of prose narrative—that seeks to enunciate and re-present past events (this is, strictly speaking, not applicable for fictional writing) from a certain ideological orientation. In
his 2001 Nobel Lecture (“Two Worlds”), Naipaul emphasised the complexity inherent in representing the past by acknowledging that “[m]y background is at once exceedingly simple and exceedingly confused” ("Two Worlds;" emphases added) describing it thus:

I was born in a small country town called Chaguanas, two or three miles inland from the Gulf of Paria. Chaguanas was a strange name, in spelling and pronunciation, and many of the Indian people—they were in the majority in the area—preferred to call it by the Indian caste name of Chauhan. I was 34 when I found out about the name of my birthplace. I was living in London, had been living in England for 16 years. I was writing my ninth book. This was a history of Trinidad, a human history, trying to re-create people and their stories. I used to go to the British Museum to read the Spanish documents about the region. ("Two Worlds")

He found out about the Chaguanes—the aboriginal tribe that once lived on both sides of the Gulf of Paria—from archival documents in the British Museum. The Chaguanes were (most likely) obliterated by Spanish colonisers for resisting Spanish hegemony and colluding with the British.\(^\text{114}\) It is, therefore, ironical that the memory of the Chaguanes and their history should be exhumed from colonial archives—with British government scholars having copied the documents from the Spanish archives in Seville. The reconstruction of pre-colonial history in \textit{The Loss of El Dorado} and \textit{A Way in the World} owes much to archival knowledge although the close connection between archives and power remains, for the most part, veiled. The fragmentariness of historical knowledge pertaining to the aboriginal Indians points towards a

\(^{114}\) In an official letter to the then governor of Trinidad (dated 12 Oct 1625), the king of Spain Philip IV ordered punitive action against the intractable Chaguanes. Naipaul quotes the English translation of this letter he discovered in the British Museum in his Nobel Lecture, “Two Worlds” (2001).
profound epistemological crisis in which the fragment is all that is possible to salvage from the ruins of time. Such crisis, it must be remembered, tends to mythologize any conception of totality. The resurfacing of the Chaguanes in the British Museum is particularly revealing—given that both “museum” and “archive” are heterotopias or non-places, existing outside of time (see “Of Other Spaces” 22-27). The role of the archive (as well as that of the museum) in the production of subjectivity is evident in Naipaul’s subsequent imagining of the Chaguanes:

There was a vague story when I was a child—and to me now it is an unbearably affecting story—that at certain times aboriginal people came across in canoes from the mainland, walked through the forest in the south of the island, and at a certain spot picked some kind of fruit or made some kind of offering, and then went back across the Gulf of Paria to the sodden estuary of the Orinoco. The rite must have been of enormous importance to survive the upheavals of 400 years, and the extinction of the aborigines in Trinidad. Or perhaps—though Trinidad and Venezuela have a common flora—they had come only to pick a particular kind of fruit. I don’t know. I can’t remember anyone inquiring. And now the memory is all lost; and that sacred site, if it existed, has become common ground. (“Two Worlds” 2001)

It affirms the function of the archive as a political and epistemological technology—a logical technique of power used to organize and categorize people both spatially as well as temporally. The extent to which archival knowledge is implicated in relations of power and the extent to which it mechanizes epistemological configurations (also assumptions) can be reasonably assessed from Naipaul’s rendition of the Caribs in The Loss of El Dorado. The Caribs, “reportedly” practitioners of cannibalism, are portrayed as “savages”—the very opposite of their
(civilized) Spanish colonisers. This position is reiterated in MP where the aboriginal Amerindians are thus described by Naipaul: “Everyone knows that Amerindians hunted down runaway slaves; it was something I heard again and again, from white and black; and on the Rupununi, and wherever one sees Amerindians, it is a chilling memory” (98). In her essay “V. S. Naipaul and the Interior Expeditions” (2007), Sandra Pouchet Paquet has pointed out that colonial administrators struck deals with local tribes with a view to easing administrative hassles. Whether one faults Naipaul’s description (of the Amerindians) on grounds of elision or epistemological assumption, it is clear that both epistemic ambivalence and the inadequacies of the archival apparatus are responsible for pushing the idea of history as absence: “(a) disappearance, and then the silence of centuries” (“Two Worlds” 2001). For Naipaul, as his philosophy of history would attest, history (or any systematic study of the past, for that matter) presents an impression not of progress but of decay. His dismissive attitude towards the Amerindian (in MP) is counterpointed by the elegiac tone with which he apprehends the history of Trinidad (in the Nobel lecture, for instance)—the mystery of the name “Chaguanas” where he was born and the uncertain genealogy of collective memory: “The people who had been dispossessed would have had their own kind of agriculture, their own calendar, their own codes, their own sacred sites. They would have understood the Orinoco-fed currents in the Gulf of Paria. Now all their skills and everything else about them had been obliterated” (“Two Worlds” 2001). This naturally brings us to the question of the conceptualization of history in the Naipaulian oeuvre. How, might one ask, does Naipaul conceptualize history? What idea of “historical consciousness” does his writing imply? What mode of explanation does he adopt in his (imaginative) reconstruction of the history of the Caribbean, for instance? In the section entitled “New Clothes: An Unwritten Story” in A Way in the World, Naipaul appraises the
problems of reconstructing the past: “The narrator is going up a highland river in an unnamed South American country. Who is this narrator? What can he be made of? This is often where fiction can simply become false” (45). But when it comes to the imaginative reconstruction of history, his tone is unmistakably tragic—as if in viewing the aboriginal land from the same vantage point as the travellers of yore, he is already aware of the fact that the (purportedly) accessible history which the archive affords is technically irretrievable—being just a “fragment” of the absent “whole.” The dispossession of the Amerindians and the Chaguanes (also, more generally, of the immigrant) as Naipaul informs, concomitantly, adds up to a cataclysmic commotion—an obliteration of the old, familiar world—which is, paradoxically enough, not wholly devastating as it is almost always (but hardly for the victims of such monumental disturbance) appended with a gain in consciousness.115

3.3. Rites of Initiation: The Theme of “Arrival” in the Travelogues of V. S. Naipaul

The key to Naipaul’s adoption of the travelogue as a significant literary trope can be found in the somewhat autobiographical book, EA. In this book, which is part meditation, part autobiography, and part literary monologue, Naipaul shuttles between the themes of arrival and departure and the journeys that he makes—both real and imaginative. The Enigma of Arrival is written in traditional English demonstrating little or no inclination towards linguistic experimentation. Its simple façade often belies the complexity of the writer’s ideas. In a somewhat surprising detour from the heart of the anxiety and chaos of postcolonial societies, EA

115 As to what the nature of this “gain” might be, Hayden White (1973) informs that it “is thought to consist in the epiphany of the law governing human existence which the protagonist’s exertions against the world have brought to pass” (9).
explores the English countryside in lento; it levitates into introspective ruminations with equal ease shunning sentimentality altogether.

Naipaul comes to Wiltshire in early middle age to live in a decaying country manor whose colonial pride would have certainly denied him access in the beginning of the century. In the beginning, he complains of his “raw nerves.” Surrounded by the ruinous English estate, a symbol of the crumbling Empire, he feels “unanchored and strange.” He observes the goings-on of the English countryside around him with a deliberate detachment, but with a growing understanding; this is also the beginning of his assimilation into the landscape—like Jack and his father-in-law, his first acquaintances in Wiltshire. The old blind race horse in the paddock never becomes the object of his pity, although he observes “the blind side of its head” with sympathy. He gives no encouragement to the distressed dairyman who approaches him with the idea of writing a book that would do justice to the animal who has seen its days of fame: “I gave him no encouragement. His sentimentality frightened me. It was the sentimentality of a man who could give himself the best of reasons for doing strange things” (EA 41). His perspective, in a rare combination of antitheses, takes on both the unassuming aloofness of the casual onlooker as well as the unsparing incisiveness of the conscientious insider, the man who had lived the life he sets out to describe. Like Borges’ keenly intellectual passages of intrigue, Naipaul’s travelogues are tickets to a layered world—that of the writer’s—and a complex development on the past. When read carefully, they are more unified than is generally assumed; the uniqueness of their respective themes merely indicating a stage, a movement, a passage in the writer’s inner world. In these books, the author’s intent is hinged on the relentless affinity to subvert the past, to get to the beginning of things, to witness history in the making. The sight of the cackling geese in front of Jack’s cottage moves him deep into the past, into classical antiquity, and so does each journey,
bespeaking an arrival to a classical city, an ancient ritual and the final departure—an idea inspired by De Chirico’s painting: *The Enigma of Arrival*.

This is also the single dominant motif that weaves itself into the texture of the much larger body of Naipaul’s travel writings. The travelling persona represents only a further development on the past, on what *has been*. The story behind the changing facades is the singularly irreversible enactment of De Chirico’s painting: the traveller arriving in a mysterious city, his subsequent embracing of its people and culture followed by the shattering realization of being “done in,” and the final flight. This is as much a story of self-discovery as that underlining the romance of travel, and the flotsam of panic and frustration marking its end.

The grandeur of that romantic arrival is subverted in the author’s arrival in Bombay by the Arabian Sea, by an ancient sea-route flagged by ancient cities, Cairo, Alexandria—a throwback image of the classical city of antiquity. But, Bombay turned out to be a disappointment, an ushering into disturbing discoveries that will eventually redeem the idea behind Naipaul’s travels to India. The chaos embodying post-Independence India, a nation rebuilding itself from the colonial stupor of British imperialism and a violent history of its own struggle for freedom implied a complex interplay of responses, urgent, tumultuous and hopelessly volatile.

Scenes of arrival are telling metaphors; they are richly evocative and are important precedents to the (travel) writer’s design. Standing in sharp contrast to Naipaul’s arrival in Bombay by the Arabian Sea, is Thomas Twining’s description of his arrival in Calcutta as a young Company servant: “The situation of the elegant garden houses, as the villas on the left bank were called, surrounded by verdant ground laid out in the English style, with the Ganges
flowing before them, covered with boats and shipping, struck me, as it does everybody, who sees it for the first time, as singularly delightful” (*Travels in India* 73). But behind the charming façade of the beautiful city, lurks a darker city of the “dreadful night,” echoing Kipling’s notorious epithet. Twining’s terror of the Black Hole tragedy, taps at the very heart of British helplessness, the incomprehension of the foreign, memories of pain and death that marked the foundation of the Empire in India.

Like the rupturing of an old wound, the dichotomies of the time—writ large across the country—persuaded out of vegetative dormancy Naipaul’s deepest insecurities, his greatest fears. As suggested by its strongly evocative title, *AD* speaks of a metaphorical darkness pervading the nation—as if what appeared to the child many years ago in faraway Trinidad, the India of obfuscated memories, had risen to meet its amorphous shadow—the “reality” being as disturbing as its image, eluding easy definition. Yet, this vision of India, albeit its pessimism (of which it has often been accused), preserves a fine objectivity. It manages a carefully-crafted detachment, an aloofness that is not only imperative, but also the prime driver of its artistry.

India is portrayed as a country with high aspirations in *IWC*. The arrival of India to a new periphery of the Arab world is an irony that Naipaul chooses to linger on, turning the Bombay airport into a microcosmic representation of the changed order of the world:

> Among the passengers were Indian businessmen in suits, awaiting especially careful search by the customs men; some Japanese; a few Arabs in the desert costumes which now, when seen in airports and foreign cities, are like the white gowns of a new and suddenly universal priesthood of pure money; and two
Naipaul’s years in England, beginning with the pre-Oxford days at Earls Court to the days of creative disquiet, of trying to realize his ambition as a writer had been a preparation of some sort, a waiting in the wings, as it were, for the drama of India. The section entitled “Traveller’s Prelude” in AD underlines the importance of the “guide,” the astute pathfinder, amidst the confusion and the cacophony of the unfamiliar, the _unheimlich_. The guide, Coelho, in Bombay and the Egyptian fixer in Alexandria are resourceful men, well-versed in the local customs and endowed with the effortless charisma to manoeuvre successfully. Arrival in AD is a slow awakening to the idea of the East—an East removed from the fashionable cultural magazines churned out by the Western press or the books formulated around a charming, esoteric delirium. The East, for Naipaul, begins in Alexandria: “And it was clear that here, and not in Greece, the East began: in the chaos of uneconomical movement, the self-stimulated din, the sudden feeling of insecurity, the conviction that all men were not brothers and that luggage was in danger” (AD 3).

The narrative of the East in Naipaul’s descriptive prose shows signs of acquired sensibilities, ricocheting to a series of revelation that has the capacity to enthral the traveller. Thus, there is an ushering of the East that is spontaneous (notwithstanding the shadows of imperialism), a bewildering paraphernalia of new revelations juxtaposed against the stupendous banality of literary clichés. This is a long, arduous arrival—the East unfolding all along the journey like a cinematic narrative to the traveller on the ship, the traveller with Western sensibilities waiting to be initiated by Coelho, the fixer, to the panoptic ambiguities of Bombay.
On the other hand, the chapter on Trinidad in *MP* is a study on cynicism, an idea embodying non-doing and the eventual fatalities to which it led. To the traveller, it revealed a hint of terror, a glimpse into the abyss. But it is a familiar terror, at least to Naipaul, if not less unpleasant on account of its familiarity. As a young adult working in the Red House, an important government office, he had known the monotony embodied by clerical work; the slow but certain death of aspiration was to be seen everywhere. The passage from Thomas Mann\textsuperscript{116} with which the chapter begins, connects the hazards of displacement to the inevitable debasement of the human condition. Unlike the traveller in Italo Calvino’s *Invisible Cities* (originally published in Italian in 1972; in English, in 1974), he has returned to the place he had left behind, but perhaps, not in the same sense as did say, Clym Yeobright, in Hardy’s *The Return of the Native* (1878), who returned to Egdon heath—as a furze-cutter—to be surrounded by the creatures of nature. While Clym’s “return” can be taken literally (Kerridge 151-52)—for, he is the native who has returned home (to Nature)—Naipaul’s “return,” with its trenchant associations with the unheimlich, is spectacularly problematic. Likewise, it is not too difficult to see why his visits to the village of the Dubes (in *AD*)—the village of his ancestors—failed to generate the pathos that is naturally expected from someone in his situation. Instead, he turns back with a sense of “futility and impatience”—his last visit to the village confirming the impossibility of a return, both literal as well as figurative. The passage quoted from Mann’s *The Tables of the Law* (alluded to earlier) also marks the silent crumbling of securities, memories of the long impasse in the dead island threatening to reveal the fragility of composure. The island with its wooden houses, the L-shaped verandas and the projecting bedrooms seemed to be stuck in time; the only sign of progress was

\textsuperscript{116} This refers to the first of the two epigraphs (quoted from Mann and Tacitus respectively)—with which Naipaul opens the section titled “Trinidad” in *MP*. He quotes Mann’s *The Tables of the Law* (originally published in German as *Das Gesetz* in 1944) which is a retelling of the story of Moses from the Books of Exodus and Leviticus.
visible on the streets, in the multiplicity of cars and the roar of steel bands; a far cry from the idea of arrival founded on De Chirico’s painting and totally stripped of the romance and grandeur. Soon, with the fear it invoked, Trinidad becomes the occasion of a long-delayed introspection as Naipaul admits: “I had never examined this fear of Trinidad. I had never wished to. In my novels I had only expressed this fear; and it is only now, at the moment of writing, that I am able to attempt to examine it” (MP 34). It is a moment of great significance, an occasion that opens up a dialogue with the Self and the past it had discarded, and with it, a life of very different possibilities. Trinidad was a place marked by stories of failures, of an incurable stasis, that to those who were unable to incorporate it as the only natural condition, presented the cruelties of dissolution or displacement. It is the typical non-place of the Naipaulian imagination, a sham-civilization peopled by a race of “mimic men” or sullen clowns and bitter individuals making amends for the conceits of their youth. In articulating Trinidad, Naipaul—despite his dreary views that often tend to veer on the lurid—presents an interesting position: he is both a native and a traveller. It is this position of the insider and the outsider fused into one that endows the narrative with a rare quality: intimacy without the obsession to claim; detachment without a callous disavowal of the subject. Running parallel to the personal narrative that probes the void of displacement and degradation is one other that opens a door to the brutality and the violence of the picaroon society, the habit of mimicry and the depravity of easy acceptance. As Naipaul’s subsequent travels through the West Indian islands of British Guyana, Surinam, Martinique and Jamaica in MP go on to demonstrate, the travelling persona represents the convergence of the individual and the changing externalities of history and civilization. This is especially important in understanding the author as an individual addressing his subject and the subject’s fashioning of the author into the narrative he produces.
3.4. Ideas of “Home” and “Abroad” in Naipaul’s Travel Writing

This section closely examines the concepts of “home” and “abroad” in Naipaul’s travel writings with a special emphasis on the India trilogy. As Rob Nixon points out in his London Calling, Naipaul “reacts allergically to . . . any suggestion of his Britishness.” The subject of homelessness—one that Naipaul likes to posit as a condition central to his personal experience—is a recurring theme in the India trilogy. This section examines the ways in which Naipaul’s writings on India reflect their author’s separation from the various representations of home. Concurrently, this section also examines the relationship between Naipaul’s treatment of the concept of “abroad” and his explorations into states of alienation, primarily in the context of his travel writings.

The two ideas, “home” and “abroad,” as this section attempts to demonstrate, correspond respectively to the notions of the heimlich and the unheimlich. While I am deeply indebted to Sigmund Freud’s essay “The Uncanny” (1919), I have extended Freud’s original thesis to support my claim that the unheimlich as Naipaul imagines it in the India trilogy as a state of deep foreboding and alienation with respect to that which is unfamiliar, uncanny or fearfully strange is, in fact, closer than anticipated to the meaning of its opposite. It might be noted that the relation between the (German) words heimlich meaning familiar, homely, tame etc. and unheimlich (the prefix un- indicating inversion) meaning unfamiliar, strange, uncanny etc. is not

---

117 While quoting Martin Amis who earnestly placed Naipaul within the tradition of the British literary canon, Nixon recalls Naipaul’s apathy for such inclusiveness (London Calling 44).

free from ambiguity; they do and do not—well, at the same time—seem to suggest the same conventional relationship as that shared by two unequivocally antithetical terms. As Freud writes, “Heimlich thus becomes increasingly ambivalent, until it finally merges with its antonym unheimlich. The uncanny (“das Unheimliche,” “the unhomely”) is in some way a species of the familiar (“das Heimliche,” “the homely”) (The Uncanny 134). How this is obtained in the India trilogy forms the focal point of my investigation in this section.

The title of the first book in the India trilogy—AD—alludes to the atavistic Conradian darkness, the afflictive presentiments haunting the traveller as he faces the unfamiliar foreign shore. But India, as the reader might be rather quick in pointing out, is Naipaul’s ancestral land, a space to which the meaning and essence of “home” as a place marking one’s origin can be easily attributed. Yet, ambivalences remain. Naipaul has variously articulated his “distance” from India by asserting that the journey that his forefathers made from the country to Trinidad “had been final” (AD 24; emphasis added), that “it (India) isn’t (his) home and cannot be (his) home” (IWC x; emphases added) and that (he) “was not an insider, even after many months of travel” (IMMN vii). However, he subsequently goes on to admit in the same sentence, “nor could I consider myself an outsider: India and the idea of India had always been important to me. So I was always divided about India, and found it hard to say a final word” (IMMN vii). It is this equivocation—implicit in the awkward vacillation between familiarity and strangeness; normality and foreignness; domesticity and esotericism—that leads to the merging of the heimlich with its opposite. But before examining the effects of this ambivalence and its aesthetic instantiation, it would be worthwhile to deliberate the semantic field of opposition represented by the concepts heimlich and unheimlich. Since Naipaul’s travel writing in general, and his India trilogy in particular, encapsulate complex permutations and combinations of these two terms (and their
many variants), it is both contextual as well as imperative to gain a fuller understanding of the semantic interplay between them. Travel writing legitimizes the study of the uncanny\textsuperscript{119} or the \textit{unheimlich}. According to Freud: “\textit{Unheimlich} is clearly the opposite of \textit{heimlich}, \textit{heimich}, \textit{vertraut}, and it seems obvious that something should be frightening precisely because it is unknown and unfamiliar. But of course the converse is not true: not everything new and unfamiliar is frightening. . . . Something must be added to the novel and the unfamiliar if it is to become uncanny” (\textit{The Uncanny} 124-25). In his study of the uncanny, Freud seems to align with Ernst Anton Jentsch—who equated the uncanny with “intellectual uncertainty”—in supposing that the environment and one’s orientation (or the absence of it) to it determined the likelihood of one’s experiencing the uncanny or the \textit{unheimlich}.\textsuperscript{120} It is precisely this idea that informs our current analysis of the effects and the aesthetic instantiation of the uncanny in the context of Naipaul’s India trilogy. What must be noted here is the fact that as far as Naipaul’s orientation to his environment is concerned, it is not too difficult to detect a reigning uncertainty—one that veritably undermines his status as a purported insider besides rendering, most bafflingly, any claim to the contrary as deeply problematic. This relation with or orientation to one’s

\textsuperscript{119} The discourse of travel writing has, since its conception as a distinct literary form, drawn on the “strange,” the “uncanny” and the “unfamiliar.” Adventurers and explorers of yore were motivated by the possibility of the discovery of that which might come by as “strange” or “uncanny” to their countrymen back home. Henry Timberlake’s \textit{True and Strange Discourse of the Travels of Two English Pilgrims} (1603) came up with nine more editions before the turn of the century. Furthermore, the title of Eddy L. Harris’ \textit{Native Stranger: A Black American’s Journey into the Heart of Africa} (1992) exploits the notion of strangeness to accentuate the perversity of new Africa. But perhaps, it is Emma Roberts’ Gothic description of basement entrance to the Government House in Calcutta in her \textit{Scenes and Characteristics of Hindostan} (1835) that stamped onto the notion of strangeness an attendant morbidity. The stranger approaching the entrance to the basement of the grand building could barely, in Roberts’ words, “escape the notion that, instead of being the guest of a palace, he is on the point of being conducted to some hideous dungeon, as a prisoner of state” (Roberts 70-71; for more on this, see Emma Roberts, \textit{Scenes and Characteristics of Hindostan with Sketches of Anglo-Indian Society}, 3 vols. London: Allen, 1835, vol. iii).

\textsuperscript{120} According to Jentsch, Freud writes, “the essential condition for the emergence of a sense of the uncanny is intellectual uncertainty. One would suppose, then, that the uncanny would always be an area in which a person was unsure of his way around: the better oriented he was in the world around him, the less likely he would be to find the objects and occurrences in it uncanny” (\textit{The Uncanny} 125).
environment is further complicated with the consideration that we cannot (and perhaps ought not to) produce a fixed category to make amends for the (intellectual) uncertainty that Jentsch alludes to. What is familiar to the one at home is always unfamiliar to the one outside—the stranger. This proposition, understandably, introduces greater complexities—especially if the position of the subject with respect to his environment is uncertain or fraught with ambiguity.

Freud’s analysis of the two German words *heimlich* and *unheimlich* yields two distinct sets of results. The first set (predictably) defines the word *heimlich* as belonging to the home, familiar, domestic, hospitable etc. and the word *unheimlich* as its direct negative, meaning strange, unfamiliar, eerie etc. The second set—the one that is most relevant to our purpose here—defines the word *heimlich* as secretive (from the German word das *Geheimnis* meaning secret), privy, clandestine and that which is concealed or hidden from sight. The word *unheimlich*, according to the second set—albeit, less formulaically—can be taken to mean familiar, revealed etc. Thus, Freud’s thesis that the *unheimlich* (or the uncanny) is actually and counter-intuitively something familiar and repressed that recurs, follows directly from the less conventional implication of the word (as derived from the second set). This can be further illustrated with the help of an example from *MP*:

When one arrives for the first time at a city, and especially if one arrives at night, the people in the streets have, just for that moment, a special quality: they are adepts in a ritual the traveller doesn’t know; they are moving from one mystery to another. But driving now through Port of Spain... I missed the thrill and was distressed, not so much by the familiarity, as by the feeling of continuation. (34)

In the passage above, Naipaul is talking about his “native land,” Trinidad—the island-nation where he had spent the first eighteen years of his life. The first sentence beginning “When one
arrives . . .” presumes a certain degree of knowledge on the part of its writer—a certain degree of familiarity with (Port of Spain) street scenes; the ubiquitous groups lounging in street corners; the carts and the stalls. Interestingly, the occurrence of the word “mystery” in the same sentence indicates the presence of that which is obscure or inaccessible to knowledge; this coincides exactly with the meaning of the word heimlich according to Freud’s second set. Furthermore, in the following sentence, the reader is informed that the traveller/author’s distress stems from “a feeling of continuation” or the reemergence of the repressed arousing feelings of discomfort and dread. This situation is analogous to the uncanny or the unheimlich which is in reality nothing strange or new but familiar and old—a description coinciding with the less conventional meaning of the word. It is in this twilight zone of dissolution that the meanings of the two words, the heimlich and its opposite, the unheimlich merge and become one.

As Freud notes, a sense of the uncanny—as an offshoot of intellectual uncertainty (a point emphasised by Jentsch)—is more likely to emerge when one’s orientation to one’s environment is warped and/or unstable. For instance, of his particular discomfort and his “old fear of Trinidad” Naipaul further elaborates: “I could not be sure which was the reality in my life: the first eighteen years in Trinidad or the later years in England” (MP 34). Or, consider this: “[F]or many years afterwards in England, falling asleep in bedsitters with the electric fire on, I had been awakened by the nightmare that I was back in tropical Trinidad” (MP 34). Both instances betray a certain degree of uncertainty and a warped orientation of the subject to his (immediate) environment leading to the experience of the uncanny or the unheimlich.

Turning back to the India trilogy, one needs to remember that just like Trinidad—but for very different reasons—India, for Naipaul, is evocative of a complex web of emotions, memories and perspectives. Possibly, this is why one fails to detect a single unifying perspective, a “final
word” recompensing for the fractious vacillations characterizing his early travel accounts about the country. He lays claim to the positions of both the insider and the outsider, with results that are sometimes baffling and at others, uncomfortably acerbic. As stated earlier, this section of the thesis concerns itself—among other things—with examining the various ways in which Naipaul’s India trilogy reflects its author’s separation from the various representations of “home”—a concept that has profound implications as far as Naipaul’s literary oeuvre is concerned. In *AD*, India is very much the subject of the stranger’s gaze—suspended precariously between the seer and the seen—never quite allowing the seer to define himself in relation to it. As Naipaul writes, “(t)o define is to begin to separate oneself, to assure oneself of one’s position . . . ” (*AD* 44). The uncertainty plaguing the stranger in a foreign land is further instantiated with the description of Ramon’s funeral—an occasion that raises important questions about the nature of home or the *heimlich*. The writer concedes that, unlike the traveller who is “soon to hurry back to a warm, familiar land,” the closest that he (or Ramon—a migrant in England, for that matter) can get to the idea of home is not a “familiar” land but the ancient security of “old rites.” What is remarkable in this idea is the notional separation of home from geography—from land that has, since time immemorial, been emblematic of and synonymous to one’s Heimat121 or homeland. However, the word may or may not refer to one’s country of origin since it is almost exclusively defined in terms of the emotional attachment one develops for a specific region where one feels at home. This schism between the notion of home and geography/land is further evident from Naipaul’s remarks on the engravings of the Afridi and Baluchi horsemen that he

---

121 The German word *Heimat* (f.; die Heimat) has no exact semantic equivalent in English. Duden Online describes *Heimat* as: “Land, Landesteil oder Ort, in dem man [geboren und] aufgewachsen ist oder sich durch ständigen Aufenthalt zu Hause fühlt (oft als gefühlsbetont Ausdruck enger Verbundenheit gegenüber einer bestimmten Gegend). [This is roughly translated as: “Country, region or place in which one (is born and) grows up or feels at home by virtue of long-term/permanent dwelling or residence (often referred to as an emotional expression suggesting close ties to a specific region).”]. See "Heimat, die." *Duden Online*. Duden Inc., n.d. Web. 22 Nov 2014.
encountered in the derelict billiard rooms of (Indian) district clubs: “Indians could walk among these relics with ease; the romance had always been partly theirs and now they had inherited it fully. I was not English or Indian; I was denied the victories of both” (AD102). These ubiquitous emblems of national identity are culturally significant “objects” or artefacts linked to the idea of having a history—a history different from that of the “seer” and one that the author does not and cannot share. It is a rather automatic exclusion, for that matter. The engravings of the horsemen evoke a sense of locality that is historically and culturally specific and therefore inaccessible to the “outsider.” Concomitantly, they fail to “move” their “seer” (Naipaul, in this instance) into identifying with their “romance,” their symbolism or their cultural-political positioning.122 Similarly, if the engravings of the horsemen are taken to be the “relics” of the British Raj—as reminders of the successful expansionist strategies of the British Empire in the East—they nonetheless fail to evoke feelings of nationalism in the “seer” (here, Naipaul again), the longing for the Heimat that the stranger sometimes experiences in foreign lands. Naipaul’s response to Trinidad—the land where he was born and had spent his boyhood—remains, at best, ambivalent, vacillating between the conflicting impressions of “home” and “abroad.” While in India (near Agra), he seemingly longs for the comforting, heimlich equivalent of an Indian Trinidad, the Heimat of his forebears yields little other than a stupefying incongruity (AD 149): the Indian Trinidad—one must eventually concede—rests at the far end of an evolutionary trajectory that can, at the present, be only understood as a spatially distant “reality” belonging to the past—to a far less advanced time.

122 One may, in the current context, recall Erwin Panofsky who was of the opinion that images cannot be read in isolation because they are part of a culture and therefore specific to it. Therefore, in order to understand culturally specific images, one must have sufficient grounding in that culture. See Erwin Panofsky. Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance. New York: Oxford UP, 1939.
The notion of the family—typically linked to the idea of “home” or of *having* one—as the primordial source of security and contentment is inexorably, if not unexpectedly, inverted in the India trilogy. Biographical information reveal that Naipaul’s father, Seepersad—a man who had to depend financially on his wife’s family—was brutalized by his mother-in-law Soogie Capildeo, the formidable matriarch of the Capildeo clan and her two sons—a matter that left deep scars on both father and son. As a result, family in the Naipaulian oeuvre is held more as a butt of ridicule—a contemptible, degrading social institution keen on exploiting the weak and the vulnerable—than as the more inclusive and integrative sociological category characterized by a deep-rooted value system. The cynicism is apparent in the following excerpt from *IMMN*: “‘It all comes down to double standards, a lack of sensitivity, a touch of cruelty’” (208). In this particular instance, Naipaul is interviewing Kala, an educated and intelligent girl in her twenties of Tamil-Brahmin origins. The interview is mildly but unmistakably evocative of *A House for Mr Biswas* where Kala’s words may as well be taken for Anand’s speaking of his father, the eponymous Mr Biswas (or for Naipaul’s, for that matter, speaking of his): “‘My father was a quiet, easygoing, peaceable sort of person. His family was ruled by the older women in it’” (*IMMN* 208). The cruelty of the family (and the clan) is extended to society in general in Dipanjan’s account: “Society is so structured that the toiling people can never find their own voice, their own view of the world, their own identity” (*IMMN* 382-83). The symbolic rejection of both family as well as society is analogous to the symbolic rejection of the idea of the *heimlich* that has come to be normatively associated with such social formations.

---

123 With regard to Naipaul’s representation of family in his literary work, Rob Nixon notes in *London Calling*: “In his negative construal of his woman-dominated family, Naipaul represents the family as an autocratic political institution: in one version it is a “totalitarian organization”; in another, a “microcosm of the authoritarian state”’’ (10).
3.5. Means of Looking and Thinking: Naipaul’s Use of Images as Metaphors in An Area of Darkness and India: A Wounded Civilization

“[I]t is in vain that we say what we see; what we see never resides in what we say. And it is in vain that we attempt to show, by use of images, metaphors, or similes, what we are saying; the space where they achieve their splendor is not that deployed by our eyes but that defined by the sequential elements of syntax” (Foucault, The Order of Things 10).

In The Order of Things (1970), Michel Foucault aims at enunciating the relationship between language and representation. Foucault takes Las Meninas (The Maids of Honor, 1656), a painting by the Spanish artist Diego Rodriguez de Silva y Velázquez (1599-1660), to present his readers with the absent figure of representation—the sovereign subject, who although invisible, makes the very act of representation both possible and plausible. The painter in Velázquez’s Las Meninas is painting King Philip IV and his wife—the sovereign subject—visibly absent in the painting, apart from the obscure reflections in a mirror behind the painter. A superimposition of gaze occurs in the painting at exactly three levels: that of the sovereign subject’s in the act of being represented on the painter’s canvas; that of the painter’s as he composes his painting on the canvas unseen to the spectators as well as the sovereign subject; and that of the spectator’s as he contemplates the spectacle he observes from outside the frame of the painting. In the first chapter of The Order of Things also titled “Las Meninas,” Foucault states that there is no common form to seeing and speaking, and that this absence of isomorphism between the visible and the articulable does not necessarily obstruct meaning but generates it.

---

The use of images as metaphors in *AD* and *IWC* is an important aspect of Naipaul’s discourse. As a travel writer, he aggregates the act of seeing and speaking, the visible and the articulable, into a spectacle of representation that generates meaning through the spontaneity and determinability of language on the one hand, and the primacy of the visible form on the other. The importance of icons as signs is therefore undeniable in the process of studying the various aspects of narration in Naipaul’s travel writing and his enunciation of India as a nation. But can the meanings of images be rendered into words? Can the relation of language to visual form enhance the determinability of *parole*? Can discourse cut into the form of things influence and be influenced by the reciprocity of representation? This section attempts to trace the relation of language, as enunciated by the written word, to images or visual forms—the various artifices of seeing—as evident in Naipaul’s travelogues, *AD* and *IWC*.

The first book of the India trilogy (*AD*) is an impressionistic account of Naipaul’s first visit to India. It begins as an almost surreal quest for “a country never physically described and therefore never real . . .” (21). The title of the book (*An Area of Darkness*) with its unmistakable affiliation to Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1899) sums up Naipaul’s idea of India as a nation embodying the primordial darkness and a plethora of contradictions. This nervous anxiety of *AD* is replaced in *IWC* by a genuine ethnographic zeal, an insistent effort to deconstruct the social/cultural/political nuances of post-Independence India and an attempt to initiate an insightful dialogue between the past and the present.

The ideological construction of *Otherness* in *AD* occurs through a process of subjectification grounded in the praxis stereotyping. The East is “revealed” in the bazaar and in the stereotype of the Oriental craftsman, the cobbler “[w]ith white skullcap, lined face, steel-rimmed spectacles and white beard, he might have posed for a photograph in the National
Geographic Magazine: the skilled and patient Oriental craftsman” (4). The fixity of the image of
the cobbler (and the manners associated with him) as a sign of cultural/racial difference is
indicative of a form of knowledge that is *always already* present and “in place” and that must be
endlessly repeated in order to obviate the necessity of evidence (Bhabha, *The Location of
Culture* 94-95). Images such as this underline the quaintness of the East and its fixity, which,
according to Bhabha, is “a paradoxical mode of representation: it connotes rigidity and an
unchanging order, as well as disorder, degeneracy and daemonic repetition” (*The Location of
Culture* 94). This mode of representation is likely to find affinity with the tourist who in his
obsessive quest for the authentic and the real, often unknowingly, participates in the ritual of
repetition that gives currency to the cultural stereotype.

In AD, Naipaul makes an interesting observation: “[m]ore than in people, India lay about
us in things . . .” (23). Growing up as a Hindu in multicultural Trinidad, the abstractions of
religion and culture meant very little; severed from context, the impression of India for Naipaul
was preserved in artefacts rather than in the immigrant population of the country adopted by his
forebears. The brightly-coloured pictures of Hindu deities embodied the essence of India just as
the innumerable brass vessels and all the paraphernalia of the prayer room resurrected the
country left behind, but still alive in the migrants’ imagination. This pre-iconographical
description of the deities wholly concerns itself with the “natural meaning”\(^\text{125}\) of the artefact; that
the subsequent levels of iconographical analysis concerned with the “conventional” and
“intrinsic” meanings are elided, emphasise the travel writer’s historical/cultural/sociological
differentness and distance from the subject he has set out to explore. In his *Studies in Iconology*

\(^{125}\) For more on this, see Erwin Panofsky. *Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Art of the
(1939), Erwin Panofsky (1892–1968) summed up the Hamburg group’s approach to images and icons by distinguishing three pictorial levels of interpretation that corresponded to the three literary levels of textual interpretation distinguished by Friedrich Ast (1778-1841). Panofsky maintained that since images are part of an entire culture, they cannot be read in isolation; knowledge about a culture is imperative if one is to understand the images that belong to or represent it. This is particularly true of religious imagery that cannot be understood without an adequate knowledge of cultural codes. The Hindu idols that Naipaul mentions in IWC (3-4) symbolize the ancientness of the culture they represent. They stand for the antiquity of India but are also, at the same time, paradoxical modes of representation connoting both stasis and change—the latter particularly evident in their increasing likeness to human forms and their decreasing affinity for abstraction. As a visitor in Bombay, Naipaul meets a journalist of the post-Independence generation whose inability to identify either the conventional or the intrinsic meanings of religious imagery insinuates a symbolical dislocation from the past: “His grandmother, visiting Khajuraho or some other famous temple, would immediately be in tune with what she saw; she wouldn’t need to be told about the significance of the carvings. He was like a tourist; he saw only an architectural monument. He had lost the key to a whole world of belief and feeling, and was cut off from his past” (IWC 59-60).

But, India is also home to Bunty, the box-wallah, Naipaul’s caricature of India’s emerging social elite—educated, emancipated and committed to the romantic ideal of a finely-

---

126 A famous group of iconographers based in Hamburg from the late nineteenth through the twentieth century. This group included Aby Warburg (1866–1929), Erwin Panofsky (1892–1968), Edgar Wind (1900–1971) and Fritz Saxl (1890-1948).

127 Friedrich Ast (1778-1841) distinguished three literary levels of textual interpretation, viz., the literal level, the historical level and the cultural level.

128 For more on this, see ch. 3 of Peter Burke’s Eyewitnessing: The Uses of Images as Historical Evidence.
blended East and West—emblematic of the contemporaneity of post-Imperial India. His lifestyle reflects this curious admixture of the East and the West, evident in the music ("difficult classical Indian and European chamber music" (The Writer and the World 13)) and the art ("North Indian miniatures, Ganymed reproductions of Van Gogh" (The Writer and the World 13)) he patronizes. His drawing-room reveals his cultural affinities: beside the odd sketch from Kangra or Rajasthan, or the art of Jamini Roy, stands a Sisley reproduction or a Picasso lithograph. This careful juxtaposition of the East and the West, while pretending to mollify the clash of civilizations, shields a pretence of colonial attitudes. Bunty and his ilk can never be wholly Indian or European; their aspirations for cosmopolitanism shall forever be strained by a symbolic withdrawal from India and a rigid adherence to its ancientness. The iconographical significance of the art in Bunty’s drawing-room derives from its being indicative of the basic attitudes of a class or a period, which, if stripped off context and visual syntax, would become neutral—motley embellishments devoid of any metaphoricity.

Naipaul’s India, the country that he surveys in a bid to recover the old India of his memories, seems to exist in limbo: Bombay is, on the one hand, reluctant to admit the realities of the post-Independence era—expressing its frenzy and helplessness in impractical public policies of keeping the poor off city limits and checking new arrivals of immigrants—while on the other, insistent on preserving the relics of the British Raj as in the portrait of Queen Victoria “as a youngish Widow of Windsor” (IWC 49) still hanging in the secretary’s office in the Ripon Club. The portrait of the Queen is to a great extent emblematic; although no longer relevant as a symbolic trope for proclaiming the hegemony of the English in India, its iconographic significance is no less apparent in the romantic craving for the old world order dominated by Victorian values and the ancillary elitist abhorrence for philistinism. The differentness of the
travel writer, neither Indian nor European, is accentuated by his strangeness—he is a spectator of “relics” artefacts whose intrinsic meaning is irrevocably lost to the ones who are spatially and temporally dislocated from the Indian past.

In her essay “Naipaul’s Arrival,” Sara Suleri has remarked “[t]he landscape of AD is littered with bodies” (160). The mute, labored bodies of the colonised (or once-colonised) peoples occur recurrently in Naipaul’s enunciation of postcolonial societies. They constitute a familiar visual trope in the Naipaulian discourse—a subject of conquest and control by the State or the colonial machinery. In the section titled “The House of Grain” in IWC, the imagery of brute labour—a farmer digging a trench along with his wife and son in the unyielding wasteland of the Deccan plateau—evoke the paintings of Jean-François Millet. Weighted down to the earth, these figures of the farmer, his wife and child, work the wasteland in a seemingly endless repetitive act—an ancient scene of labour and pain. Naipaul, however, does not specify the exact title of Millet’s painting that the scene evoked, nor does he overly glorify labour; but he does draw our attention to the impending change—of the new among the old, the progression from an ancient way of life to the new—with perhaps, the same force of antithesis as that effected by Millet himself, who against a foreground of backbreaking work, positioned a background signifying order and plenty.

The obsession with Oriental physicality is central to the Naipaulian discourse in which the distressingly seeable (colonial) body eventually ceases to exist on account of its very ubiquity and repetitiveness. In AD, Naipaul compares the squatting, defecating figures to Rodin’s Thinker—“as eternal and emblematic” (71). The squatters are like a permanent presence—so

integral to the scene that their presence, commonplace as it is, seems to be aptly and immediately overlooked. Interestingly, when it was first conceived in 1880 as the crowning piece of *The Gates of Hell*, Rodin’s *The Thinker* was titled *The Poet*. “Indians were a poetic people” (AD 71), said the young Muslim student while explaining the Indian habit of defecating in the open. The irony is bitter, especially as the “emblematic figures” are not even spoken of or written about, but seem to exist in limbo—in a kind of collective blindness characterized by a perpetual refusal to see. Disinclined to describe the typical Indian “refusal to see,” as “a form of censorship due to modesty,” Julia Kristeva identifies in this specific act of abnegation a “blunt foreclosure that voids those acts and objects [for example, the act of defecating in the open] from conscious representation” (74). It might as well be said that Naipaul’s choice of Rodin’s *The Thinker* as a rhetorical device at the linguistic level conjures an idea of the absurd as voiced through the Trinidadian Calypso. The complexity of this icon partly derives from the reaction it provokes within context and partly from its deliberate association with the overly repugnant. The force of the emblem is ineffable; its incongruity merely superficial, especially if one remembers the many contradictions of post-Independence India it subsumes.

Strictly speaking, the meaning of images cannot be translated adequately into words; the literality of visual forms being different from that of language. However, the metaphoricity of images is capable of augmenting the meaning potential of language. This is apparent in Naipaul's use of images and visual forms in *AD* and *IWC* where he exploits the meaning potential of

---

130 A sculptural artwork by French artist Auguste Rodin (1840-1917) depicting a scene from “The Inferno” of Dante Alighieri’s *Divine Comedy*.

131 Calypso is a traditional form of music that originated in Trinidad and Tobago. It was originally sung in French patois but was eventually anglicized with the dominance of English in the Caribbean. Picong, or a lyrical battle between singers and satire are some of the characteristic features of Calypso music as practiced in the Caribbean.
images to expand the scope of narration. Furthermore, the interplay of meanings between two different modes of representation viz., the text and the picture, insinuates a dialogic exchange and calls for a more radical questioning of the institutional foundations of literary competence and the established modes of textual interpretation. Visual forms or imagery can be interpreted as potential discourse and for that matter are, despite their muteness, profoundly articulable.

Through his use of images as metaphors in *AD* and *IWC*, Naipaul strikes a fine balance between the apparently disparate forms of seeing and speaking—where one’s not residing in the other does not limit the possibilities of narration but only enhances them.