Naipaul: Life and Achievement

V.S. Naipaul is one of the eminent Caribbean writers in English. He has been a great novelist and travel writer. He is a novelist of distinction, an international figure and exceptional in that matter. No other writer in the third world can excel him in quality and quantity. **V.S. Pritchett** calls him, “the greatest living writer in the English languages”, (Kamra, 9) whereas **Ian Buruma** proclaims,” he has written literature, of the very highest order.” (Biswas, Introduction)

Naipaul’s career and achievement can be seen as part of the worldwide cultural changes. He was part of a generation that had to face the problems that resulted from the withdrawal of imperial order and the resulting cultural confusion. For his first twenty years in England he never felt at home and is still aware of himself as an outsider.
Sir Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul was born in August 17, 1932. His father Seepersad Naipaul and mother Dropatia Capildeo Naipaul were of Indian extraction. We came to know through Naipaul that his grandfather was brought from India to Trinidad as an indentured labourer in the 1880’s. Trinidad, a small island in the mouth of the great Orinoco river of Venezuela, was developed as a New World plantation colony consisting of Indians, Hindus and Muslims, nearly all of peasant origin.

Although Naipaul’s grandfather bid farewell to his mother - land in acute poverty, he left no stone unturned to carry with him the cultural ethos in which he was groomed, in a sense he “carried his village with him.” he meticulously ensured the observance of Hindu rituals in the family with utmost devotion as they were the first generation of Indian immigrant in Trinidad. Naipaul writes:
Half of us (Indians) on this land of Cagunes (in Trinidad) were pretending perhaps not – perhaps only feeling, never formulating it as an idea that we brought a kind of India with us, which we could, as it were unroll like a carpet on the flat land.

(Nobel Lecture)

Seepersad was a sensitive man, though born in alien soil did conform to his father’s religious and cultural predilections. He brought up Vidiadhar and Shiva, his sons very carefully. Naipaul thus grew upon an extended Hindu family of India bound by customs and conventions, rites and rituals and always and always trying to jealously guard the Indianness against the possible contamination of an alien culture. It was a ritualized life. But with every generation, India became more a legendary country than a real one, “a resting place for imagination.”

Seepersad Naipaul was a journalist and contributed occasional articles to Trinidad Guardian.
It was from his father that Naipaul imbibed the ambition to become a writer. When at the age of 18 Vidia wrote his first novel and was rejected by the publisher, it was his father who continued to encourage his writing aspirations. During a nervous breakdown, Vidia tried to commit suicide, but fortunately the gas meter ran out. Naipaul was a bright student, and after his secondary school examination at Queen’s Royal College he went to Oxford on Government Scholarship in 1950 at the age of eighteen. After leaving Oxford in 1954 he had a stint in the catalogue department of the National Portrait Gallery of London and then secured a position with the BBC writing and editing for the programme called Caribbean Voices. It was during this period that he started writing stories drawing on his Trinidad memories which were later published as Miguel Street (1959), a collection of seventeen
sketches. It may be regarded as the young Naipaul’s tribute to the Trinidad he left behind in 1950. He married his classmate Patricia Hale in 1955 and settled down in Wiltshire, England. His current wife is former Pakistani journalist, Nadira Khanum Alvi, whom he married in 1996, just after the death of his first wife.

Mean while Shiva Naipaul, his brother who too became a novelist continued his career in Trinidad. Since then Naipaul has been continuously writing fictions and travelogues. His works both Fictional and Non – Fictional are characterized by fastidiousness, clarity, subtlety and a detached irony of tone.

Being from the Asian Indian minority in black – dominated Trinidad his perspective on decolonization, imperialism, black - white relations and other themes of post – colonial literatures is
more complicated than that of nationalists and their foreign sympathizers. He regards himself as a former colonial who has become a homeless cosmopolitan. His experience is representative of the major social, psychological, political and cultural changes of our time.

For someone of East Indian descent in Trinidad to have decided early in life that he wanted to become a writer and to have kept to such a decision, although there was and still is no market for serious literature capable of supporting a writer in the Caribbean is quixotic and brave. Few authors from the colonies had previously supported themselves as serious writers. Naipaul lived for many years the hand – to – mouth existence of an aspiring writer in London, where there was a literary market, but before ‘post – colonial’ and ‘multi – cultural’ were fashionable terms.
As a result of his enormous literary product, he has received many distinguished awards. He received John Llewelyn Rhyn Memorial Prize for The Mystic Masseur, his first novel in 1957. His next two novels brought him Somerest Maugham Award. He bagged the prestigious Hawthornden Prize for Knights Companion and W.H. Smith Award for the next novel The Mimic Men in 1967. For his novel In a Free State in 1971, he received Booker Prize. As a reputed writer he has received the Knighthood in 1990. He won the first David Cohen British Literature Prize for life – time achievement in 1993. He got the most prestigious Nobel Prize in 2001 for literature. No doubt, he is the most admired contemporary novelist today.

After he had become highly regarded by literary critics and a winner of many literary prizes, his royalties from books remained small and he had
few North American readers. Eventually he found an additional source of income in traveling to and reporting on the social and cultural problems of other parts of the world, especially the newly independent nations.

Naipaul for thirty years has crossed and recrossed the globe from Surinam to Srinagar, from Buenos Aires to the Ivory Coast. Accounts of these journeys dazzle in seven remarkable volumes – travel books in the sense that the Odyssey is a travel book. They dramatize how a foreign culture fits together to form a distinct whole; they investigate – and judge – what kind of men and ideas it nurtures. This global understanding, this thirst to see a culture in the round and in its relation to world history, illuminates his eleven novels, too, from his Dickensianly funny and satirical early novels, mostly set in Trinidad, to his towering later, dark novels, set
in other marginal nations of the world, African or Caribbean.

He is not so much concerned with geographical details or the museums and cultural artefacts or institutions as with the lives of the people living in a particular country and how their lives are shaped or ruined by the forces of history. It is operation of the historical forces as reflected in the lives of the people of a country that interests him most. Naipaul’s travelogues may be faulted on many counts but they possess redeeming features. First, Naipaul seems to owe allegiance to no institution, to no doctrine and to no religion. He spares none. His commitment is to his own vision of life whatever it may be. Secondly, his magnificent prose, the lucidity of language and felicity of expression hold one’s breathe. It is the language that enchants the readers
even when they differ from Naipaul on his observations on India.

Few writers can match his literary skill. The simplicity, grace and dignity of his prose, the eye for concrete detail, the humour and charm of his earlier works, lodger there. It can be said in all fairness to Naipaul that he never distorted the Indian philosophical content despite his overt prejudice against India.

What makes Naipaul’s novels so unique is the novelist’s attempt at showing his characters make a desperate bid to arrive at the meaning and purpose of life, as rootless individuals, who yearn for a way of life, a kind of experience, both sexual and emotional, for which they have not been physically and mentally developed or prepared, since there is a hiatus between their yearnings and their native disposition, which is very much conditioned by their
colonial moorings that generate a sense of vacuum and helplessness. Naipaul’s perception of and anguish at his own displacement and rootlessness is central to his creative talent.

The colonial set-up had a great deal to do with his making as a novelist. Though he looked back for inspiration to the great nineteenth century novelists and early twentieth century writers of European fiction, the disorganized or less organized societies of the colonial composition could hardly provide him with a world or society with which the great novelists dealt with. Hence, Naipaul avers: “It came to me that the great novelists wrote about highly organized societies. I had no such society; I couldn’t share the assumptions of the writers; I didn’t see my world reflected in theirs. My colonial world was more mixed and second hand and more restricted.”
Naipaul’s earliest novels were adept comedies about racially complex and culturally insecure communities in Trinidad having to learn to live and work with the increasing political and administrative demands of modern western society. The unease of these books and the criticism that they have attracted arises partly out of what they reveal about Naipaul’s ambivalent attitude to his own roots. With his encyclopedic range of reading and exposure to world – wide influences, he has achieved a distinction both in idiom and intention rarely found in contemporary writers. As a great writer he has transcended the limitation of place and time and had achieved universality. He is a Global Persona, who wrote novel which is for all time. A creation of the Diaspora, he experimented with several new techniques, especially in the blending of genres in a new style. In his exposition in the role played by
history, in his awareness of pluralism and the existential nihilism and the nature of the abused in life, in the observation of the crumbling of barriers, Naipaul fully voice the present – day scenario.

To assert that Naipaul is among the two or three most important living English novelists is almost a critical commonplace. It is more than thirty years since Anthony Powell spoke of him as ‘this country’s most talented and promising writer.’ Since then Naipaul has won almost every major literary award in England.

From the time he became aware of himself and his place in the world about him, Naipaul has never thought of his future except as a writer – one may note the faint but unmistakable assertiveness of the last sentence in the biographical note which he contributed to the Penguin Edition of his works:
V. S. Naipaul was born in Trinidad in 1932. He came to England in 1950 to do a University course and began to write, in London, in 1954. He has followed no other profession.

His ambition to be a writer and its realization define not only the course of his development but provide the themes and raw material of much of his work. It is inextricably involved with literary and education, the principle avenues of escape in the mid-century from the provincial culture of Trinidad, as they were for another scholarship boy, D. H. Lawrence, from a very different culture at the beginning of the century. Up to and including The Mimic Men (1967) every one of Naipaul’s heroes is an actual or aspiring writer for whom writing is a central act of self-definition. And it is to the writer as hero that Naipaul returns in some of his later works.
Naipaul is the last writer of whom an alert reader can feel that each work is written with a definite and pre–conceived notion of exactly where it is going and how it is going to get there. As Naipaul himself has noted:

The novelist works towards conclusion of which he is often unaware; it is better that he should. To analyze and decide before writing would rob the writer of the excitement which supports him during his solitude, and would be the opposite of my method as a novelist.

(Forward to the Middle Passage, 1962 Page no. 5)

In awarding Naipaul the Nobel Prize for literature in 2001, the Swedish Academy praised his work "for having united perspective narrative and incorruptible scrutiny in works that compel us to see the presence of suppressed histories." The committee added, "Naipaul’s a modern philosopher,
carrying on the tradition that started originally with “letters persanes” and “candide”. In a vigilant style, which has been deservedly admired, he transforms rage into precision and allows events to speak with their own inherent irony.” The committee also noted Naipaul’s affinity with the Polish – born British author of Heart of darkness, Joseph Conrad:

“Naipaul is Conrad’s heir as the annalist of the destinies of empires in the moral sense: what they do to human beings. His authority as a narrator is grounded in the memory of what others have forgotten, the history of the vanquished.”

The award was a shock for him as he had long assumed his work to be unpalatable to the academic fraternity, as a result there had been no prior hint of the honour. His immediate reaction was one of “extreme exhaustion.” Later, he issued a statement that the award was “a great tribute to both
England, my home, and to India, home of my ancestors.” Trinidad was ignored but Naipaul was unrepentant despite the fact that he was brought up there until the age of 18 and that Trinidad is the setting for his early books, including his most moving work, A House of Mr. Biswas, which had established him as a leading young novelist by the early 1960’s.

“A billion people and a little island, which has done nothing for me …..We mentioned in the citation that I was born in Trinidad. I thought it was enough.” As for being “British”, Naipaul avers: “I could not have done this writing in any other country. To that extent, I am a British writer. I’ve been supported by this country in many ways.”

Nobelled, or not, Naipaul’s is a wide ranging and original oeuvre, some two dozen books in all, that should gratify any writer. What a genuine tribute
to its readability that all of his books remain in print, unlike the works of some Nobel laureates. Naipaul is himself aware of the fact that the prize means “a good strong second wind.”

His fiction and especially his travel writing have been criticized for their allegedly unsympathetic portrayal of the Third World. Edward Said, for example, has argued that he “allowed himself quite consciously to be turned into a witness for the Western prosecution”, promoting “colonial mythologies about wogs and darkies.” This perspective is most salient in “The Middle Passage”, which Naipaul composed after returning to the Caribbean after ten years of self – exile in England and “An Area of Darkness,” a stark condemnation of his ancestral homeland of India. Those who support him are of the view that he is actually an advocate for a more realistic
development of the Third World, that he is motivated by a passionate desire for the improvement of the countries which he writes about.

V. S. Naipaul continued to live in London but he also traveled widely throughout Asia, Africa and America. He wrote many novels, short stories, essays and documentaries. He often writes about rootlessness and the human impulse for destruction, often drawing from his own experience, including his unhappiness with the cultural and spiritual poverty of Trinidad, his feeling of alienation from his ancestral homeland (India), and his inability to identify with the traditional values of what was once a colonial power (Britain).

Writing about Naipaul, Joan Didion said: The actual world has for Naipaul a radiance that diminishes all ideas of it. The pink haze of the bauxite dust on the first page of “Guerrillas” tells us
what we need to know about the history and social organization of the unnamed island on which the action takes place, tells us in one image who runs the island and for whose profit the island is run and at what cost to the life of the island this profit has historically been obtained but all of this implicit information pales in the presence of the physical fact, the dust itself … The world Naipaul sees is of course no void at all: it is a world dense with physical and social phenomena, brutally alive with the complications and contradictions of actual human endeavor … This world of Naipaul’s is in fact charged with what can only be described as a romantic view of reality, an almost unbearable tension between the idea and the physical fact…

In the aftermath of the Nobel award, his status as a writer is frequently seen as polemical and
controversial. Despite this his work continues to enjoy popularity.
Works Cited


Naipaul, V.S. Forward to The Middle Passage, 1962.


