Chapter III

VS Naipaul: The Unchallenged Genius

Sir Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul is the most prominent expatriate today. He won the Nobel Prize for Literature, carrying forward the legacy of Rabindranath Tagore. He is among the most eminent writers of the commonwealth countries, and has made significant contribution to postcolonial literature.

He is deeply concerned with the cultures of the colonized countries, the socio-political economic-cultural history of India. He records the transition period of India, from colonial dominion to independence. His early works place the society of Trinidad on the world literary map. The works also project him as a journalist, a successful novelist, a keen travelogue writer, and a nonfiction writer. He has a brilliant command of the English language and fascinating narrative techniques.

Naipaul’s self-consciousness manifests itself in his writing. His early works cover his family history and the history of Caribbean Trinidad of 1930 and 1940. The history of his Indo – Trinidadian family, the cultural adjustment is explored within colonialism. During the process of self - realization, he gazes at other cultures, through England as a point of reference. The impact of the colonial regime gifted him his identity. Naipaul looks at India through his major works. He refers to West Indian, South American and African countries, Iran, Indonesia, Malaysia, Pakistan, and the United States in his writings.

Naipaul attests to a universal response to literature. It is impossible to study a writer’s work without an understanding of the writer as a man. The character traits of a great writer are a prominent part of his literary heritage. Would the literature of any
country be the same, if one were left only with the works and knew nothing of the
men behind them? Though the biographical approach has been criticised, the writer’s
life offers a key to a deeper understanding of his or her work.

VS Naipaul was born in Chaguanas, Trinidad on August 17, 1932. Trinidad is
one among many islands which are called the West Indies. Trinidad and Tobago are
the southernmost islands of the Caribbean archipelago. Geologically, they are an
extension of the South American continent. Trinidad is separated from Venezuela by
11 Kms (seven miles). The indigenous Caribs and Arawaks inhabit the island.
Christopher Columbus discovered the West Indies in 1498; it was in the Spanish
regime from the 15th century till the British Empire captured it in 1797. It became
independent in 1962.

Naipaul is the eldest son of a second-generation Indian, his Hindu grandfather
having emigrated there from West India as an indentured servant. Naipaul’s
grandfather had migrated from Benares in India to teach the Indian cane-workers of
Trinidad. His father, Seepersad (1906-53), was a journalist and a good literary writer.
He served as a reporter in the Trinidad Guardian and also published a collection of
short stories under the title Gurudeva and other Indian Tales in 1943. His literary
aspirations were inherited by Vidiadhar and his brother, Shiva Naipaul. Shiva, highly
talented, achieved great heights in popularity. Unfortunately, he passed away in his
thirties in an accident. He had published a collection of short stories and a novel
entitled Fireflies.

Naipaul’s family moved to Port of Spain, where Naipaul attended Queen’s
Royal College, Trinidad. He was awarded the Trinidad government scholarship in
1948. With the help of the same, he studied literature in England at University
College, Oxford in 1950. He also did his Honours at Oxford University, graduating in 1953. Naipaul initially worked for the BBC. As a writer, he hosted the 'Caribbean Voices' programme between 1954 and 1956 and later on he worked as its editor. He worked with The New Statesman between 1956 and 1960.

He married an English woman, Patricia Ann Hale, in 1955. Unfortunately, she died in 1996, and Naipaul then married Nadira, a Pakistani woman. He lives in Wiltshire, England. He travels extensively and has written many successful and internationally acclaimed novels, short stories, and essays.

Naipaul has won many Awards and accolades for his works. He was knighted in 1989 / 1990 by the Royal family. His literary brilliance has won him a number of awards: John Llewelyn Rhys Memorial Prize; Somerset Maugham Award; Hawthornden Prize; W. H. Smith Prize; Booker Prize; and the most coveted, the Nobel Prize for Literature. The details:

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Award</th>
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<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Man Booker International Prize (Shortlisted)</td>
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<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>Nobel Prize for Literature</td>
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<td>1993</td>
<td>David Cohen British Literature Prize</td>
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<td>1989</td>
<td>KBE</td>
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<td>1971</td>
<td>Booker Prize for Fiction for <em>In a Free State</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>1968</td>
<td>WH Smith Literary Award for <em>The Mimic Men</em></td>
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<td>1964</td>
<td>Hawthornden Prize for Mr Stone and the Knights Companion</td>
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1961      Somerset Maugham Award for *Miguel Street*

1958       Mail on Sunday/John Llewellyn Rhys Memorial Prize for *The Mystic Masseur*

He has been given honorary doctorates from Cambridge University and Columbia University in New York, and honorary degrees from the universities of Cambridge, London and Oxford. When he was awarded with the Bennett Award (1980), he himself expressed his heartfelt satisfaction as he felt he had won recognition for his vision and art. After the Nobel Prize, he has been hailed as the greatest living writer in the English Language.

V S Naipaul is primarily considered to be a writer of diaspora. He expresses the themes of identity crisis and rootlessness. He is best known for it in the literary world. All his writings have very close parallels with his own personal life. Between *The Mystic Masseur* (1957), his first work and *The Masque of Africa* (2010) he has produced a huge corpus of writing that includes novels, short stories, non-fictional novels, travelogues, fictional biographies, fictional autobiographies, journalistic writings and works on history. He is known for the following major works:

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Year of Publication</th>
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<tr>
<td><em>The Mystic Masseur</em></td>
<td>1957</td>
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<td><em>The Suffrage of Elvira</em></td>
<td>1958</td>
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<td><em>Miguel Street</em></td>
<td>1959</td>
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<td><em>A House for Mr Biswas</em></td>
<td>1961</td>
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<td><em>The Middle Passage:</em></td>
<td>1962</td>
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<td><em>Impressions of Five Societies:</em></td>
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British, French and Dutch in the
West Indies and South America

Mr Stone and the Knights 1963

Companion

An Area of Darkness 1964

A Flag on the Island 1967

The Mimic Men 1967

The Loss of El Dorado: A 1969

History

In a Free State 1971

The Overcrowded Barracoon and Other Articles 1972

Guerrillas 1975

India: A Wounded Civilization 1977

The Perfect Tenants; and The Mourners 1977

A Bend in the River 1979

A Congo Diary 1980

The Return of Eva Peron; and The Killings in Trinidad 1980

Among the Believers: An Islamic Journey 1981

Finding the Centre 1984

The Enigma of Arrival 1987

A Turn in the South 1989
Naipaul’s works are collections of short stories, novels, non-fiction novels, political works, biographies, autobiographies and travelogues. He has two collections of short stories to his credit. *Miguel Street* (1959) is a collection of short stories and it won the Somerset Maugham Award. His other collection of short stories is entitled *A Flag on the Island* (1967). Both the collections are very different from each other. In *Miguel Street*, the society is highlighted, whereas, in *A Flag on the Island*, individuals are the focus. The first one contains simple homogeneous stories of the people of West Indies. An attempt has been made to recreate the society through allegories. He
tries to create the society he has come from. Miguel Street stands for the multi-racial, multi-coloured, and multi-cultural society he lived in. The strengths and weaknesses of the people are traced without ridicule. The qualities of tolerance, innocence and simplicity are highlighted. The seventeen stories present seventeen persons representing the society. The second collection of the short stories presents heterogeneous themes and characters through attractive narrative techniques. The individuals represented in this work are not simple, tolerant and cooperative but they are actively conscious of their identity and rights.

Naipaul is known for his non-fiction. They include his journalist writings, novels in the new form, travelogues, and history. He has written about the Caribbean in *The Middle Passage: Impressions of Five Societies - British, French and Dutch in the West Indies and South America* (1962) and *The Loss of El Dorado: A History* (1969). He describes these islands and gives reasons as to why they have been neglected.

His travel to Islamic countries resulted in two major books: *Among the Believers: An Islamic Journey* (1981) and *Beyond Belief: Islamic Excursions* (1998). His visits to Pakistan, Afghanistan, Malaysia and Iran are the content of these books. Politically weak, these countries are very significant culturally and commercially. He projects the strengths and weaknesses of the Islamic fundamentalists.

Naipaul’s visits to India produced three books about India: *An Area of Darkness* (1964), *India: A Wounded Civilization* (1977), *India: A Million Mutinies Now* (1990). In the first two books, Naipaul is quite critical about India, but in the third one his tone and perception of India changes. The reason is that during his first two visits, in 1962-63 and 1975-76, he failed to find his roots in India and thus he
rejected his own land. He discovers that India cannot be his ancestors land and escapes. In the second visit, his criticism of India outraged a lot of Indians. In his third attempt, in 1988-89, he comes to understand India to some extent. He likes and appreciates the country and the people. He also writes in the third work as to why he had failed to grasp India in the past. He talks of awakening and liberation in India. Naipaul’s journalistic portrayals of buildings, temples, markets, and cities make it a handbook of India. *A Turn in the South* (1989) gives a penetrative account of his visit to Latin American nations and his journey in the South of the USA.

His novels develop the other political themes about the colonial and post-colonial societies in the process of decolonization.

*The Loss of El Dorado* (1969) deals with the history of colonization of Trinidad in particular and Third World countries in general.

*Guerrillas* (1975) is a fictional history of Trinidad in crisis. The outline and backdrop of the novel are based on real events and incidents, but the story is fictional. Through the creative use of history, fictional history is created to show how directionless individuals and societies behave.

*In a Free State* (1971) won the Booker Prize for Fiction for Naipaul. It depicts rootlessness and a quest for identity as a world phenomenon. It has its characters residing in Africa, India and America.

One of the most sophisticated of his early novels is *The Suffrage of Elvira* (1958). The story of a village election aptly portrays the political scenario particularly of the Caribbean islands. It is also a satiric examination of the consequences of
political change. Since people are completely unaware about the democracy and do not know the value of their vote, they are driven by everything other than democracy.

*A Bend in the River* (1979) is about people who are nostalgic about their past and live life in despair. The meaningless struggle against the orthodox ideas is presented through the character of Salim.

Apart from these travelogues, history writing, novels and short stories, Naipaul has also attempted biographies and autobiographies through the use of fictional characters and incidents which matching many times with his own life. His biographical writings include *The Mystic Masseur* (1957), *Mr. Stone and the Knights Companion* (1963) and *A House for Mr. Biswas* (1961); whereas his autobiographical novels are: *The Mimic Men* (1967), *Enigma of Arrival* (1987), and *A Way in the World* (1994).

*The Mystic Masseur* (1957) won the *Mail on Sunday/John Llewellyn Rhys Prize* in 1958. It was also adapted as a film with a screenplay by Caryl Phillips in 2001. It tells the story of a man called Ganesh Ramsumair, one who belongs to Trinidad. An imaginary confrontation between the Creole and Indian Society and the sophisticated and civilized wife of the governor is described in it.

His first novel, *Mr Stone and the Knights Companion* (1963), won the Hawthornden Prize. It is a purely English novel, dealing with psychological problems.

His acclaimed novel *A House for Mr Biswas* (1961) is based on his father's life in Trinidad. It presents a picture of three generations of immigrant Indian community in Trinidad. The journey, quest for house of Mr. Biswas from his birth to the last breath has been presented in a biographical way.
The Mimic Men is an autobiography of the Third World and deals with the intricacies in the life of a fallen politician, through the eyes of a politician.


Half a Life (2001) follows the adventures of Indian Willie Chandran in post-war Britain, a new life initiated by a chance encounter between his father and the novelist W. Somerset Maugham.


V S Naipaul has carved out a niche for himself for all times to come. His works present a deeply understood reality of postcolonial countries. He is blessed with a keen insight and his narrative is charmingly perfect. His works are both an aesthetic and intellectual delight.